As we speed toward the end of the school year, wrap up budgeting and begin to let ourselves think about a brief but blissful summer vacation, it’s important to reflect on how far education has come in the last few years.

• Whatever you may think of ESSA, or federal education legislation in general, I haven’t met anyone who isn’t glad that NCLB is gone.

• The Oregon Department of Education, while still a compliance agency, generally seems more interested in helping districts and students than it did five years ago.

• The legislature continues to support K-12 education with increased funding. No, it isn’t enough, and we still have no guarantee of stability should we be hit with a recession, but many districts have been able to hire additional administrators, teachers or counselors with the goal of meeting the needs of all students.

As you lay on that beach or hike in the mountains or work on those myriad home projects this summer, I’d like you to think about what all of us can do to lock in those gains and why. The Great Recession started

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10 years ago; most of you remember, albeit more dimly now, the cuts in staff and services to students that not only made the work more difficult, but more importantly, reduced the quality of education in Oregon. None of us wants to experience those days again.

However, our funding is dependent on a tax system that cannot deliver stable funding to K-12. It remains the fundamental flaw in our system, it is something we must address. But how?

This summer, as you relax and recharge your batteries, I ask you to think of the connections you can make in your own community, among your peer group, with students and parents -- and how you can talk to them about this fatal flaw in our system. This doesn’t have to be a partisan conversation, in fact it should not be. Listening to our friends and neighbors about their concerns for children will confirm the fact that all of them are on our side, the side of children, the side of what’s best for them, the side of the importance of education.

As with the seasons, the new school year will inevitably arrive. Due to rest and reflection time, you may feel better about yourself and your profession this fall than you probably do now. Your emotional gas tank will be full. I hope you will use some of that energy to engage your communities about the importance of stable funding. You will have thought about how to do that all summer. As you have their support, I hope you will also engage your local and regional elected leaders about the critical importance of stable funding. With the strength of your students, parents and communities behind you, I hope you will be involved in changing our system, in changing the future for Oregon’s children. If we were to succeed in this, we would truly change Oregon for the better.

Think about it.

nothing but sweat and elbow grease. I’d rather work in a garage than a showroom floor.

My students see this attitude not only in my lessons but in my classroom and daily persona. I know they’re struggling every day simply to get to school on time, and I love that in a small school I have the ability to share in that struggle with my kids. They know we’re all expected to do a lot with a little, and they see that I view that as a challenge rather than an obstacle. Everyone wears 15 hats; when I want something it’s up to me to make it happen.

If I want an interactive whiteboard, we will build it out of Wii-motes and IR pens. When my desk speakers go out, I run the wiring for a new setup through my ceiling during lunch and after school, and I get the job done. I don’t walk slowly, I don’t sit at my desk, I’m constantly working to shape my environment, and it allows me to expect that same level of self-reliance from my kids. In a larger school if my principal walked in and my ceiling was torn apart with a ladder in the middle of the room because my project took longer than expected, I’d probably have a concerned meeting in my near future. In my building, it’s an example and reinforcement to my students that life is messy and you have to be flexible.

The ability to involve my students in this growth and show them I am in the same boat as them and dedicated to the cause has been incredibly powerful. I think this is unique to the small-school atmosphere. If I want to try something outside of the box, I have the ability to simply walk up to my principal or superintendent and throw it out there. They say either yes or no, but I have the ability to get answers and make choices very quickly, allowing students to see that rapid attempt/fail/assess/re-attempt cycle in real time.

Above all, I want my students to believe it is not a burden but a strength to be underestimated. When people don’t expect much from you, you have all the more power to surprise and impress them. I want students to take the challenge of adversity and turn it into an incredible asset. By helping them recognize this option, we empower our students to reach boldly and confidently for their goals. By practicing humility in their accomplishments, we allow them to speak for themselves. By empathizing with their failures and wearing our similar badges of honor as examples we’ve grown from, we teach them that all it takes to blow everyone else away is the willingness to take a risk and try something you know might fail. When it fails, you try again and again and you keep trying because eventually, one of these crazy ideas will stick. And by the time the rest of them catch on, you’ll be 10 miles down the road in that 65’ Shelby.
A long, long time ago, when I was in elementary school, we didn’t have computers. We wrote most everything on paper while the teacher used the chalkboard. If my teacher needed to contact my parents, they called our home phone (that was attached to the wall) or set up a face-to-face conference. My free time at home consisted of playing outside with the neighborhood kids, usually until the sun went down. My upbringing naturally forced me to communicate with a friend in person, solve problems and understand delayed gratification. Fast forward 30 years.

I’m approaching 20 years of working in education. All of the values and reasons people pursue education are the same, but technology has made things much different. Like many school districts, we strive to operate at a 1:1 student and technology ratio. School districts work to integrate technology so our learners have the appropriate skills to prepare them for post-graduation. We use Google Classrooms. We supplement instruction with online academic resources. We assess students electronically. We reach out to our families with apps like Class Dojo and Remind. We use these resources for communication, convenience and overall efficiency. When these tools are used in the educational setting, they are typically structured and have a purpose.

We also use these tools when we go home, take vacations and attend our kids’ after-school activities. Usually, when we use technology out of the school setting, the purpose isn’t instructional but rather as a hobby or for social communication. We personally try to find a healthy balance for our kids and their use of technology. We assume the families we serve are doing the same thing. The problem is, many of them are not.

This is my sixth year as an administrator, and I’ve experienced extremely different approaches to how families use technology in and out of a school setting. I hear that when students are at home, they’re allowed to play mature-themed video games or use technology with free reign and little oversight or restrictions. I watch kids pull out their technology the moment they’re dismissed from school and heading home. I’ve also observed parents handing their kids technology as a diversion or distraction while their focus is elsewhere. I see that screen time is taking over many of our families’ interactions, and kids are left to figure out situations on their own. Just last night at a restaurant, I watched a mom and her son sit and eat dinner without any verbal interaction and independently focused on their technology. I see the unintended outcomes that technology is having on kids. Many of our students are deficient with some social skills, struggling to even initiate or carry on a conversation. This is not the students’ fault. When the expectations aren’t there, kids won’t meet them.

We cannot control what our learners do when they walk out of our doors. I think if nothing else, school districts need to stop and ask themselves a few questions. What kind of modeling is our staff doing with technology to set expectations? What are we doing to provide families with best practice and technology recommendations, so they can help schools support their kids? How are we coaching and modeling social skills to students? How are we identifying our students who need more social-skills training?

Our next 30 years in education will require us to learn and grow with ever-changing communication devices, and we will need to adapt to the needs of our families. This is a reminder to all school districts to learn about families’ expectations with technology and continue to provide them with resources. It’s a reminder to families that we need their support to effectively educate their children — academically and socially/emotionally. It’s a reminder to students that it’s okay to unplug from their personal device, and that schools will continue to do what we need to support them for their future.
We live in an ever-changing world that requires us to constantly adapt and make adjustments. This world makes it difficult at times to be an effective school administrator. Change is a constant and it boils down to this: either we manage the change we are facing or allow the change to manage us. Change is an emotional process and in many cases it falls into two different categories, either good or bad.

As creatures of habit, we are uncomfortable with change, no matter what. It breaks our regular pattern, expectation or routine, causing unease. Our human brains are pattern-oriented, and we usually don’t like it when our established patterns are broken. As school administrators, the very nature of our jobs require us to cope and deal with many changing events and circumstances, especially since the majority of our job is working with individuals. Our students are constantly in a state of change and flux and so are the staff and communities we serve. As leaders we must learn to accept change and embrace it. It is a difficult “ask” and everyone agrees that change is good as long as someone else goes “first.” However, we must remember that when patterns are broken, new worlds emerge. Change should be an administrator’s ally as we perform our job, and we should look at change as a wonderful “gift” or opportunity for new growth and development.

On one of my trips about 20 years ago, I was making conversation with the bus driver, asking him my usual questions about how he came to live where he lived and about his chosen profession. Then I asked him a hypothetical question: “If you could live anywhere in the world and if money was no object, where would you live?” Without hesitating even for a second, he replied, “I live in my heart. So it really doesn’t matter where my body lives. If I am happy inside, then I live in paradise, no matter where my residence is.”

I felt humbled and a little foolish for my question. Of course he was right — happiness is an inside job. He had reminded me of something I already knew, but had truly forgotten. If you can’t find happiness inside yourself, you’ll never find it in the outside world, no matter where you move. When the world changes around us we need to adapt and remember that wherever you go, there you are. We always take ourselves with us. As we live our lives and deal with change, just like on a trip we have a huge choice to be either a tourist or a traveler.

Embracing change and learning from others is crucial, as well as remembering that as educational leaders we make choices that change the lives of others. In education, it can be a blessing to work in an environment filled with change, especially with the bright and eager young minds yearning to learn new things and grow. Education is a wonderful profession that builds the future and secures the basis for our great American society, a society built upon individual freedom, grounded in a free public education, something to which the majority of the world does not have access. We must lead change in order to lead our students, staff and the community we serve, to the bold new future of possibilities.

I hope you have a great summer and remember to be a traveler that embraces change and not a tourist who only endures it.
The Oregon Legislature’s short session came and went in a hurry! Once again, we were successful in passing the Dorm School legislation. Since we were given only a one-year extension from the 2017 Legislature, we once again requested extending the sunset date to continue offering this to our districts in Burnt River, Paisley, Mitchell, Spray and Ukiah.

We were able to extend the sunset for two years, but this will still require legislation in the 2019 session to give our districts some certainty around their budgets. I would like to extend a large thank you to superintendents Lorrie Andrews of Burnt River, Michael Carter of Rainier and Eric Milburn from Perrydale who all testified as a panel in front of the State Education Committee (see photo at right). As always, it is much more effective to have small school administrators testify versus me, your “hired gun”! Although I am in Salem every day advocating on behalf of OSSA, it is always an excellent opportunity to have our legislators hear from true professionals who are in schools every day, 24/7. Our panel did an amazing job answering a host of questions from the committee; their responses truly emphasized the unique nature of our small schools and why they are so critical to the fabric of our great state. Thanks again to Lorrie, Michael and Eric!

In 2019, we will again work on the dorm legislation and extension of the small high school grant, which has a sunset date of 2020.

Currently, early campaign season is upon us, and I have been attending legislative fundraisers and talking with both elected officials and colleagues about education and the upcoming session. As the election and 2019 session get closer, we will continue to have opportunities to inform our education committees and legislative leadership about our agenda and priorities.

I hope you all have a great summer. I look forward to utilizing the interim to keep pushing our OSSA values and ideas to benefit our students and our districts, which also benefit our communities and Oregon.
As a board member in a small school district in southern Oregon, my responsibility is to find ways to insure our school campus does not turn into a homicide crime scene. So I made a list of suggestions from personal conversations: carry a weapon yourself and arm teachers, “harden” campus security, hire retired police officers to guard the doors, banish all or some weapons, modernize the Second Amendment, support the NRA, legislate more thorough background checks and age restrictions, solve the problem of mental illness, levy steep gun and ammunition taxes, render longer prison sentences, vote for Republicans or Democrats, outfit every school child with helmet and bullet proof vest. I find these partial and inadequate, but I respect them all because serious concerned persons recommended them. Since I have no special wisdom or insight, it makes sense that attention is due each person’s recommendation.

I stand with the folks who elected me in feeling frightened and threatened, and I want to prevent this evil ever happening here or anywhere again. Whether we call it security, safety, salvation, deliverance or the right to life, we hunger for effective and legal protection for our children and neighbors. Who are these broken hearted and angry folks I’m talking about? NRA members, law enforcement, politicians, educators and students, coaches and mentors, medical and mental health care providers, employers, military and veterans, child services staff, fire and rescue crews, religious groups, social workers, neighborhood associations, charitable organizations, pro-life and women’s rights groups, and members of every family in rural, suburban and urban America despite race, ethnicity, gender or creed. This is not a “me” but a “we” issue.

If I can get my neighbors to agree on protection as our common goal, then the first obstacle is to cut out the squabbling over tactics. Many of us are entrenched in our preferred remedy and are at war against other suggestions. That approach has us stuck. Could we make progress if we agreed our hearts want to succeed at protecting our kids more than our egos need our fallible opinion to be adopted by everyone else?

Since we who work in school districts have as our primary responsibility the wellbeing of other peoples’ children, we are probably the best government unit to address this problem. What if your school board sponsored a Protection Convention? Say they invite one person from every interest group in the district who states that his or her motivation is safety and protection for kids.

Imagine a board member, administrator, teacher and a support staff member sitting in a circle with the citizen delegates and the whole group leaning in to consider this question: How can we succeed in our neck of the woods to meet our common protection goal? Then give each of the delegates three minutes to state their preferred approach. Don’t open the floor! Don’t argue! Just listen non judgmentally to the variety of options, thank each contributor and then ask everyone to go home and promise to think about what they heard.

Invite the group to come back in a couple of weeks and give each participant another three minutes to explain any good ideas they might have cooked up on cooperative protection. Listen intently, not only to the words, but to the values and feelings behind the words. Send folks home again to ponder.

The last meeting of the convention occurs a few weeks later, when anyone who wants to offers an idea or plan or action which serves the goal of protection that will satisfy more than one interest group and might be workable for a majority. Once again: three minutes. By this time creativity and brilliance could appear. Leaders and a plan to move forward might surface. This process will not offer a perfect solution. However, some positive plans might hit the strike zone which a coalition of neighbors may volunteer to work on for a safer community. If I am wrong and no humane, cooperative actions emerge, then it will be time to try a different approach.

When the earliest European settlers were under assault by an armed, authoritarian adversary, the Continental Congress and Constitutional Convention were created to forge a representative democracy. If it is not happening in Congress, maybe it will work in our towns in Southern Oregon.
In August 2017, an inferno raced toward Brookings-Harbor, bringing fear, excitement, long-term evacuations and many needed adjustments for our school district in the far southwest corner of Oregon.

Here are five lessons learned by our district leadership team during the Chetco Bar Fire, which burned approximately 300 square miles (nearly 200,000 acres) of land just outside of town — becoming one of the nation’s top priority megafires in the summer of 2017.

#1: Never Stop Communicating

From the moment the threat became eminent — when hot windy weather caused a simmering small fire to “blow up” and race across miles of rugged forest land in a matter of hours, we worked hard to get the word out about how it was impacting the students, teachers and staff in our district.

We covered the basics by focusing on our specific mission in the community, such as impact to school operations and use of school facilities; we coordinated with outside agencies; and we made our district’s website homepage and social media a hub for important fire and school-related information.

We also wrote and updated talking points to ensure that a consistent message was shared with community members and to respond to the high amount of news media attention. Our Public Information Officer took point on many of these projects. If your district doesn’t have a designated communicator, it’s paramount to designate someone on the team to fill these important spokesperson and communication roles in an emergency.

#2: Put Community First

When a disaster strikes, the urgency of normal school district priorities takes a backseat to ensuring safety of students and staff. The fact that nearly all of our teachers and students were living in or displaced by various levels of evacuation zones was a major factor in our decision to delay the first day of school. We couldn’t ensure adequate staffing, and suffocating smoke meant that many people left the area to escape poor air quality, stay with relatives, camp out or stay in shelters spread across the region while their homes were under threat.

Our district made its facilities and grounds available for both a Red Cross Shelter and a major Fire Incident Command encampment that covered our sports fields with the tents of up to 500 personnel and filled our parking lots with firetrucks. We also hosted numerous community information meetings and a press conference for Governor Kate Brown.

#3: Priorities For Politicians

As Superintendent, I was given more opportunities than usual to acquaint politicians with our community and schools — many of whom had never visited our district before the emergency.

Some of the community meetings held in our gymnasiums featured angry shouting and outbursts by locals who alleged mismanagement of the local forest by federal officials. People were stressed, and feelings were running high.

The bottom line is that fires are political. In fact, most emergencies of this type eventually are, as politicians weigh in and people search for the reasons that led to the disaster and look to hold the government or others accountable.

Politicians can help to secure resources, draw attention to the needs for those resources and potentially sponsor future legislation that may assist future events similar in nature.

How you engage with politicians is very important as a community leader. Every opportunity to secure leverage is important. Be appreciative, be thankful, clearly state your need, accurately represent your community and communicate the impact that the event has upon your organization.

#4: Transition From Crisis To Coordination

The decision to resume school was difficult after the immediate danger passed but the threat of the fire loomed on the horizon — and it was clear that it would continue to burn for months until extinguished by autumn rains. Air quality due to smoke was a constant concern for our community.

Ultimately, we welcomed students back to school after a delay to help restore some normalcy to our community and to resume our educational mission.
Our facilities team added smoke rated filters to fans in school buildings and we formed an air quality advisory team that included the superintendent, district nurse, transportation director, athletic director and public information officer to monitor conditions in partnership with government experts and local smoke monitors.

Advisories were sent out multiple times per day and included clear instructions on whether outside recess or after-school activities would proceed. We referenced the Oregon Health Authority’s School Wildfire Smoke Guidelines and the OSAA Smoke Memo outlining the “5-3-1 Guidelines” based on visibility when making decisions about which activities were appropriate.

Parents and students with questions about masks, asthma concerns or even concerns about additional anxiety or trauma their child was experiencing because of the fire were referred through the district nurse and counseling services.

#5: Get a Seat at the Decision-Makers Table

Looking back, if I could pick out one key decision that helped guide our schools through the scenario that unfolded, it was the opportunity to be part of daily unified command meetings about fire operations. I woke early and attended these briefings each morning, and was sometimes called to urgent or emergency briefings during the day.

I met with our leadership team immediately after most meetings to share updates and adjust strategy. This advance information helped us to make the right decisions as we grappled with a situation no textbook or staff training had prepared us for. It is amazing what a unified team with shared goals can accomplish together in the best interest of students and the community.

How would your organization react in a similar district-wide emergency? Take time to plan with your school community now about what you will do when disaster races toward you.