Every superintendent has a story to tell about how their careers originated and evolved. While some determined early on they would pursue the position of superintendent, most came into the work not expecting that to be the case.

For me, it was the superintendent who hired me as a high school principal in Chase, Kan., in 1983 while announcing his 11th-hour departure for a new challenge. To my surprise, he recommended me for his post to oversee a 400-student school district. I remember my initial response being negative, but with the encouragement from my loving and supportive wife, we decided to give it a whirl. Thirty-seven years later I realize that was a pivotal decision in my journey, and it most certainly has been a journey.

Unsettled and Lonely
Like any organizational leader, I have experienced many challenges and opportunities. Those would include the normal hurdles of tight school budgets, bond referendums for capital projects, significant personnel issues and contentious school board elections. More recently, it also has included social media misinformation and attacks, negative politics associated with curriculum and plenty of rumors and innuendos that, sadly, required a response.

My parents taught me to view challenges as opportunities and to strive to make things better for myself and for those I am responsible for. Like most superintendents facing similar obstacles, any of these issues could have been a death blow to my career, and I found those days lonely and unsettling. Sadly, that has been the case for quite a few colleagues across our country.

There isn’t any question that each of us as superintendents will face the sharks circling our school districts at some point. These situations are not predictable, but we have to be prepared for them. The decisions we make during these times and the manner in which we represent ourselves will solidify our leadership or greatly weaken it. Remember, most of the negative experiences originate with small but vocal groups that
must be addressed, yet they are not the majority. The key to survival is to ensure the majority doesn’t lose confidence in your leadership.

**Children at the Center**

These are lonely times for superintendents, but fortunately we can do something about them. Here are my survival tips, based on experience in most cases.

First and foremost, always keep the focus of conversation on students by reminding constituents that students are the reason we exist. Say it often and say it loudly, when speaking to formal or informal media. Always respond to any question with children as the focus.

Making children the center of our messaging helped the community of Grand Island, Neb., embrace and support our students when federal immigration officials raided a local meatpacking operation in December 2006. During a contentious time surrounding illegal immigration, the raid seemed to have the support of city elected officials.

While our staff sprang into action to support our affected students, we started sharing information about what steps we were taking to help those students and what was still needed. We held press conferences and called community groups. We spoke with families and shared that schools were a safe place for all students.

It wasn’t long before my neighbor — a man who I often engaged with over the fence in heated political debates about illegal immigrants and the cost to taxpayers — barged into my office with a check for $500 to support our students. He said...
as a father he doesn’t condone something that hurts children or families, and he wanted to do anything he could to help.

The vast majority of community members — no matter what side they are on — will support your commitment to their most valuable asset, even if they disagree with your position.

**In the Public Eye**

Second, while it may seem counterintuitive, increase your visibility within the school district and community during times you feel under attack. When people see the superintendent standing tall despite overhead fire, their respect for leadership deepens.

When opening our schools back up at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, we were loudly criticized from both sides about our pandemic protocols. Some thought we were putting staff and students at risk by returning to in-person learning too soon. There’s nothing like a person dressed as the grim reaper showing up at protests to get your attention. Others thought we were restricting freedoms by implementing safety measures like masks. With misinformation being shared on social media, it was difficult to stay ahead of the latest concerns.

While it would have been easier to stay out of the public eye and just keep our heads down, the best course of action was to stand behind our plan. We increased the frequency we were communicating with staff and families, giving them the latest updates as soon as they were available. We participated in press conferences with the health department and city’s mayor or held our own media briefings. We went live on Facebook and answered tough questions. We put on our masks and visited schools, listened to staff and students. We did in-depth one-on-one interviews with reporters.

While you will never satisfy the extreme fringes, being visible helps reassure those in the middle that you stand behind your decisions and believe in your mission.

Third, rely on your personal and professional strengths and the strengths of others to develop strategies or interventions aimed at addressing the challenge. As much as we want to create the perfect solution because we are the ones being targeted, we have colleagues who will bring perspectives and ideas that we would not have considered. Throughout my career I have had several of these close friends who have helped me through difficult times. I also have greatly appreciated the leadership of AASA and the opportunities presented for networking.
Communicating support for children as the principal work of schooling contributes to the public’s trust during turbulent times, says veteran superintendent Stephen Joel.

Resist Pushback
Fourth, resist the urge to push back aggressively. This has always been tough for me as the son of a New York police officer who taught me how to deal with bullies. I have learned, however, that standing my ground and maintaining the high road is what the majority of stakeholders will see and respect. Anger is a weakness, so avoid showing it.

During fall 2014, the Lincoln Public Schools was thrust into the national and international spotlight when a staff member shared training material with a local conservative radio host that was taken out of context. The author of the material, in an attempt to promote inclusivity, suggested teachers use the school mascot name material, in an attempt to promote inclusivity, promoting “boys and girls.” The example used purple penguins. This resulted in news headlines around the world placing the school district at the center of moral decay by encouraging teachers to call all students purple penguins.

As we listened to hours of public comment and received phone calls and digital messages from all over the country that contained threats to the safety of myself and my staff, it was hard to remain calm and not respond in anger. The noise in my head was telling me to fight back and match their tone. Ultimately, the best thing we did was remain calm and respond in a thoughtful and factual manner. At the end of the day, we were holding to our mission of serving all students, and that is something I will always be proud of.

Fifth, nurture yourself and those around you to ensure they have confidence in your ability to lead through the challenge. While I have always exercised for health and sanity, I increase my intensity during challenging times. It helps me sleep better and is a great way to clear my head.

Standing Strong
All things shall and do pass. As a leader, you should never assume that unresolved issues will dissipate after the passage of time. Be proactive in addressing these issues and seek assistance and support when needed. But be sure to remind yourself that 90 percent of your community supports quality education and eventually will side with a solid leader who stands strong in the face of criticism and prioritizes the welfare of their most precious commodity — our children.

Undoubtedly, these are incredibly difficult times emotionally, politically and financially. While outside forces recently have called for the demise of public education, I strongly differ. We are in the business of supporting children and our young people are to flourish.

Hang in there. There are better days ahead. ■

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Stephen Joel’s Writing Contributions
Over the 30-plus years he’s served as a superintendent in three school districts in Kansas and Nebraska, Stephen Joel has contributed several important and memorable articles to School Administrator magazine. These include the following:


