



## **Dr. John A. Kriekard**

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During the course of celebrating Scottsdale Unified School District's 125 years of excellence, we had the opportunity to sit down and visit with Dr. John Kriekard. While the interview was never published, what was gleaned seems more relevant than ever and truly honors the life of a man who cared deeply about students, parents, community and the importance of the public education system.

Thank you, Dr. Kriekard – your legacy lives on in the communities you served.

Drafted into the U.S. Army in 1968 at the height of the Vietnam War, John Kriekard found himself assigned to protect the U.S. Capitol from sometimes violent and often times peaceful protestors. He watched misinformed young people on both sides of the issue risk our nation's security, and thought to himself, "How did we get here and how do we prevent this from happening again?" It was then, while looking around at the Washington Mall and the crowds of people that he decided education was the key. This young man, originally from Wisconsin, returned to Michigan to get his start, teaching U.S. History and believing that if you can teach young people to learn from the past and be critical thinkers about the future, then maybe, just maybe, you can leave the world a better place than the way you found it.

Kriekard taught history and coached football, basketball and ski club for five years in Michigan before moving to southern Arizona. In 1979, Kriekard arrived in Scottsdale as assistant principal of Chaparral High School. Then-principal Tom Smith was a retired Marine lieutenant colonel, and Kriekard fondly remembers his first personnel evaluation in which Smith paid him what he believed was the highest compliment: "You would have made a hell of a Marine Corps officer." Likewise, Kriekard thought Smith would have done well in the Army. Suffice to say, the duo ran a tight ship at Chaparral.

In 1984, the state retirement system made an adjustment that led many educators to retire, creating many sudden vacancies. That's when the principal's post at Ingleside Middle School opened up mid-year, and Kriekard was hired. Two years later, in October 1986, there was a shakeup at the top of the school district when Duane Sheldon was named superintendent, vacating his assistant superintendent role. Kriekard jokes, "October is a bad hiring time for the district to find an assistant superintendent, but it was good for me because I might have been Duane's third choice."

Kriekard served as assistant superintendent over secondary education for five years. During this time, district leadership focused on feeder patterns and created learning complexes, or learning communities as they are known today, helping define a student's K-12 trajectory. At that time, there were just four complexes – Arcadia, Chaparral, Coronado and Saguaro. Scottsdale High School had closed in 1984 and Desert Mountain High School had not yet been built. Kriekard

was in charge of the Saguaro Complex, which then included what is now the Desert Mountain area.

This was a unique time during the district's history. The population was shifting dramatically: not only was the district frantically building and opening schools, it was closing them, too. In the north, Kriekard oversaw the opening of Anasazi, Laguna and Zuni Elementary schools (Zuni later became Redfield). In the south, the district closed Tonto Elementary School.

In 1988-89, the district purchased about 80 acres to build Desert Mountain High School and Mountainside Middle School. Both schools were designed as two-story buildings because the city required much of the land to remain in its native form, limiting it to further development. The initial plan was to open both schools at the same time, but the economy took a turn, and DMHS was delayed. With the focus turned solely on Mountainside, Kriekard visited other states and many middle schools. In seeking a principal for the new school that had become a labor of love, he realized *he* wanted the job. "I went to Duane (Sheldon) and said, "I found the principal for the new middle school: I'm going to appoint myself." The superintendent was understanding and, oddly, Kriekard was able to combine the titles of principal of Mountainside Middle School with president of the Arizona Interscholastic Association's (AIA) 5A conference. "Yeah, it was strange. I'm guessing that had never happened before, or since, either."

In 1995, Kriekard was called back to Chaparral, this time as principal, where he served for seven years. "That was the longest I've ever held any one job (in Scottsdale), and I'm pretty proud of the things that we did, maintaining a balance between the academics and the extracurricular. It was the little things, like televised morning announcements, and if a team won a championship, I would hold off presenting a trophy until there was a similar trophy from speech and debate to balance it."

In 2002, after much success driving academic achievement, opening more Honors classes and bringing the Chaparral community together, Kriekard left Scottsdale Schools for the Paradise Valley Unified School District as assistant superintendent of secondary for one year, then was named superintendent until he "theoretically" retired. At some point, he realized he wasn't *really* done, and returned to work two years later, in 2011, as interim superintendent of the Deer Valley district. He retired again, but consulted for Science Foundation Arizona before going full-time there for two years. He retired yet again, this time for three years, before returning to Scottsdale in May 2018 as SUSD's interim superintendent.

He was not interested in a full-time position, but to be fair, reports telling the Governing Board president, "If Scottsdale calls, I'll go, because that's my home district, and I would go, but I wasn't going to apply anywhere else or do anything else."

Being a superintendent is a big job under the best of circumstances, but Kriekard learned just *how* big upon his return to SUSD. The first thing he had to do was hire five Cabinet members, and there was no slowing down from there. The world wouldn't let him, throwing one thing after another his and Scottsdale's way. In his two years as superintendent, Kriekard dismantled broken systems and reestablished stronger, more successful ones; built transparency and trust back in the district; helped breathe life back into the Scottsdale Parent Council and Student Advisory Board; helped a community heal after a devastating overnight fire at Navajo Elementary School; helped pass an override; and managed the onset of a global pandemic.

"In fall of 2018, we conducted a survey that showed only 30% confidence in administration. A year later, it was 61%, and we passed an override with 60% approval," said Kriekard. "I tell

people all the time: it wasn't brain surgery. It's just treating people right and hiring competent people."

"I had three tenets: one, treat kids with respect; two, treat all staff as professionals; and three, treat parents as partners in education." That trust was important for passing the override, but it was critical to managing the coronavirus pandemic. "We remained focused on the mission," said Kriekard. "We were about education and taking care of kids, treating kids with respect, while being flexible, meeting individual needs."

It wasn't the way he envisioned rounding out his third return from retirement. Leading the district at the beginning of the pandemic was a challenge he tackled as he had others in his career, with students at the center of every decision made.

Retiring again in July 2020, this time "for real," Kriekard remained committed to the community, supporting the Coronado Foundation for the Future by serving alongside other forward-thinking community leaders who believe all kids should have the same opportunities, regardless of the advantages they were born with, to leave the world a better place than it was. John Kriekard most definitely did that.

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