



Dr. Duane K. Sheldon

by Kristine Harrington

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Dr. Duane Sheldon spent his entire career in education embracing school choice, building schools and opportunities for students to learn in their own way, and thrive. He and his wife graduated from Michigan State University with teaching degrees and served in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, for 17 years. He taught high school history and helped develop a multi-age, three-year program, essentially a school within a school.

“I believe strongly that kids learn differently. So, we went through a whole study with a local college of learning styles, and, in fact, that ended with a full day out at the college and kids going through various kinds of tactile tests and written tests, and stuff like that,” said Sheldon. That helped drive the development of four different learning options for students: one was a traditional, 5-day school week, a second offered core content three days a week and electives the other two days, the third included collegiate-style seminars two days a week, and the fourth was independent study.

“It was a choice. I had to make a presentation to teachers, parents, and the kids, and then they would decide what makes the most sense to them,” said Sheldon. “It was neat to see students be so in control and excited about learning.”

While in Bloomfield Hills, he participated in the district’s administrative internship program and spent a year as an assistant principal while earning his doctorate at Michigan State.

“I was an assistant principal at a junior high school for a year. And the idea of the internship is they wanted to prepare people to be in administration. And their thing was, if we have a position in the district when you finish, we want to be able to hire you. But we also want you to know that you're going to be prepared to go any place, and so anyway, that's how I got it. That's how I got my doctorate. I mean, it took more than that year to get it, but the district paid the whole way.”

He went on to be a high school principal and the director of curriculum for the entire K-12 school district. But he and his wife always liked Scottsdale and yearned to live out west. So when he saw two assistant superintendent positions posted, he jumped.

“I talked to my wife, and our kids were in middle school, and the rationale was if we were ever going to move, we want to move before they get into high school, so I wrote a letter, got invited out and got the job.”

Dr. Sheldon started in Scottsdale Unified as an assistant superintendent during the summer of 1983.

“You know, I think, I think that the people that are superintendents now, and especially during COVID, are just dealing with things that I'd never dream of,” said Sheldon. “My career was at a

great time in education, as far as I'm concerned. And every job I had was great, but there were some issues then. I mean, there was a divided community. There was a lot of, a lot of angst going around closing Scottsdale High School.”

The community was divided, as were the teachers, according to Sheldon.

“There was the FT, the Federation of Teachers had a group in Scottsdale, and the EA, Scottsdale Education Association and the National Education Association, that was another group, and every year they had an election who was going to represent them at meet-and-confer.”

“I took a pay cut coming out here to be an assistant superintendent, from being a principal back in Michigan, but cost of living was a little different, too, at that time, but it was just a different time and teachers were just not paid. I think it's gotten a little bit better.”

Negotiations were tough, but Sheldon says being a part of the process provided him the opportunity to build great relationships with teachers and the Governing Board. When Superintendent Philip Gates left after three years, the Board offered Sheldon the job.

“I'm number 14,” said Sheldon. “There were 13 ahead of me and 13 since me. But I have the longest tenure, 10 years. I had great boards. They were not political. They were more interested in the community, and some of them, you know, would get elected because of their own kids. But no one ever focused on their own. They wanted good things for the community.”

“When they asked me to be superintendent, I said, ‘Well, I have to think about that.’ I really cared about my family. My kids were just starting high school then, basically. Anyway, we had a great discussion, and I said there were a couple of things: Number one, that I had heard that previous superintendents were called a lot at home by Board members. And I said I'll give you a full time, but when I'm home, it's family time. If there's a fire in school, call the fire department – they'll get a hold of me. But you know, I never had a call. And 10 years, I never had one call from a Board member.”

“The other thing I said, you know, we've had a lot of short-timers, whether they were acting (superintendent) or not. And I've got a family. I don't want to, I'm not worried about going someplace else eventually, but when my kids are in school, I'd like to know that I've got a job.” With that, Duane Sheldon signed his first, three-year contract.

During his tenure, Scottsdale experienced growth to the north and increased choice across the district.

“I've always been for choice. I've always been for parents and younger kids and older kids, as well, to have a choice of schools they wanted to attend,” said Sheldon. “The first school of choice that we had in my tenure started with an elementary teacher at Tavan who started a multi-age class, and she came to me and kept pestering me to expand it, and it turned out that we had enough parent support to move that program to the old Kaibab, which had been closed several years earlier.”

Each year, they added another grade, and soon the program grew to become a K-8 offering and its own school: the Arcadia Neighborhood Learning Center (ANLC), now known as Echo Canyon School.

“It was a total parent choice. It didn't have a geographic area: parents chose it. It was a different kind of program. They had to understand what the program was. We didn't call this school a

school; we didn't call the principal, the principal: we called her director. We wanted everything to be different, but we never really had any serious problem because it was a choice. People chose that or they didn't choose it.”

Dr. Sheldon always chose Scottsdale Unified for his children. His son and daughter attended Pima Elementary (previously a K-8) and graduated from Saguaro High School. His six granddaughters all attended Navajo or Kiva Elementary schools and Mohave Middle School, and have graduated or will graduate, too, from Saguaro High School.

“Back then, we were into giving principals and school leadership and parents of the school more say about their budget. We would give them budget. I remember Aztec chose not to have a full-time librarian because they wanted to lower class sizes, and so they would use the money to contract with the YMCA for physical ed that saved money, that you could put into teaching staff,” said Sheldon.

Rapid growth and school choice provided opportunity for the district to think differently and empower schools to approach learning differently.

“You know, the psychology of growth is different than the psychology of decline,” said Sheldon. “During my 10 years as superintendent, we built 10 or had under construction 10 schools.”

Anasazi Elementary was built in 1986, Laguna Elementary in 1987, Sequoya Elementary in 1988, Zuni Elementary in 1989, ANLC in 1991, Mountainside Middle School in 1991, Aztec Elementary in 1993, Desert Mountain High School in 1995, Desert Canyon Elementary in 1996, and Cheyenne was under construction and opened in 1997.

“The Board agreed to a \$49.9 million bond, which caused us to build Anasazi as a relocatable, pod school, basically. And my first encounter as superintendent with a group of parents was at that school. And the first week of school, we had over 1,000 kids crammed into that school, and they were demanding they needed another school, and I, as a rookie superintendent, I said, ‘You'll have another school next year and it will be a brick and mortar school.’ And literally, the next year, it was Laguna, and if you know Laguna, it has open halls, hallways that are covered, but the people that were building it were sweeping the halls that first day. One way is kids coming in, and the other is people still sweeping. I learned not to be so reckless with my promises.”

Sheldon said, “We were we were passing bonds left and right during that time, and they weren't even close. We were booming. And at the same time, we had to close schools. We closed the school across from Coronado, and so there was this north-south split kind of a thing, and so the parents in the south would say, ‘The north gets everything and you're closing our schools,’ but the same year, we closed a school, we opened a new school.”

Growth and enrollment influenced the tough decisions made across the district. As such, the district collaborated closely with the City of Scottsdale at that time.

“It was always my concern that school libraries were only open when kids were in class and they couldn't use it unless a teacher took them down there, so I said, we need to have a city library, so if we're going to build this new high school (Desert Mountain High School) in a new area, we need a city library in that facility,” said Sheldon. “The neat thing is the library was opened as a city library, so kids did have access, as well as citizens had access to that library.”

It is a major point of pride for Sheldon to this day and a highlight of his legacy.

“Some of the residents in the area objected to that library at first, but I took great pride when the city, over time in the 2000s, for economic reasons, were thinking about closing it, and it was the neighborhood that said, ‘No, you can’t close this.’ I thought that was pretty cool.”

Dr. Sheldon was masterful at building partnerships in the community, not to duplicate efforts, but to make sure programs existed to support all students. One such organization was called Links. It was comprised of city, business, non-profit and district leaders.

“We met on a monthly basis and again, city council was involved in that. We had great representation from Boys and Girls Club and YMCA, and all of the groups, really.”

He also started SUSD learning complexes, better known today as learning communities. A learning complex consists of all of the schools that feed into an area’s high school. Each complex had its own assistant superintendent who oversaw its schools and worked with principals and the community to focus not just on one level (primary or secondary), but on a student’s entire learning trajectory.

After 10 years, Dr. Sheldon decided it was time to retire. “I figured that was two years longer than a President would serve, and I wasn’t shooting for a record for the district or anything else. It just happened.”

No sooner had he retired and returned to Michigan than he was offered a job in a small district in Grandville. “I thought I’d be done building schools, but I ended up building a high school and an elementary and an alternative school. And the elementary was a choice school.”

Five years later, Dr. Sheldon retired again and headed back to Scottsdale to serve Scottsdale students, six of them his very own grandchildren whom he picks up each day at dismissal, along with countless others he does not know by name, but supports tirelessly through his work on the Coronado Foundation for the Future.

As for his career and the time spent serving Scottsdale students: “This was, you know, I’d say the capstone.”

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