

# Rooted in School Board LEADERSHIP

*By Kim Woodward, ISBA President*



I just returned a couple of weeks ago from Phoenix, Arizona. There's a lot that is memorable about Arizona, but on this trip, I was particularly fascinated by learning all I could about the saguaro cactus. I learned that it can live between 100 – 200 years and grow as high as 40 feet. Though not a tree, saguaro

cacti serve as bird hotels like deciduous trees. But it was the facts I read about the saguaro's root structure that caused me to reflect on board leadership. Well, the facts plus Michael Adamson telling me my article for *The Journal* was due for this volume!

I found out that the saguaro cactus employs two root systems: a tap root which grows straight down to anchor the plant and an intricate network of small roots, only a few inches from the surface, that feed and water it. The smaller roots web together and spread out wider in all directions than the height of the cactus itself. These roots grab and hold precious desert water and nutrients which it stores for use during dry spells.

So, what does this have to do with board leadership? In a word, adaptability. According to Paul Lutus, "The most successful people are those who accept and adapt to constant change. This adaptability requires a degree of flexibility and humility most people can't manage." Who is Paul Lutus, you might ask (I did)? Lutus was responsible for developing the electrical systems for the NASA Space Shuttle program and many systems for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. He also developed the Apple Writer word processor for the Apple II computer. He was also a leading

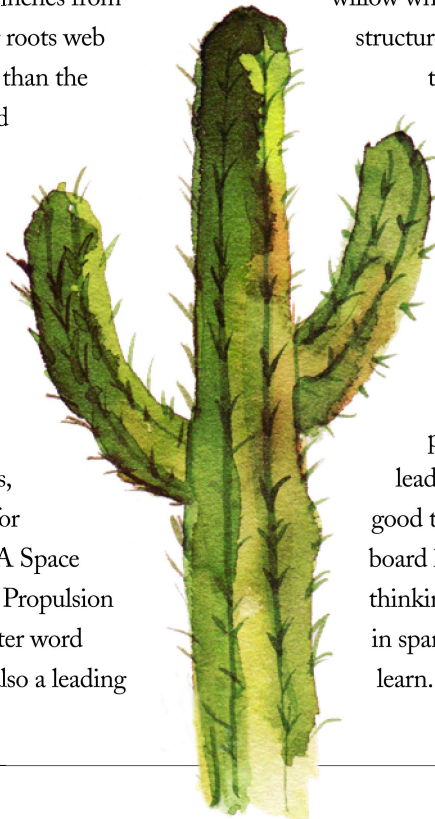
expert in photographing grizzly bears. Talk about adaptability!

School board leadership requires the roots of a saguaro. Our district's history and traditions are the taproot of our boardsmanship, helping to anchor and stabilize the school districts we serve. But our intricate web of water roots mesh with others in our community to make us able to take in a lot and hold it for just the right time and need to emerge.

Contrast the saguaro with deeply rooted trees: the white oak, hickory, and walnut. Like saguaros, these trees have strong and deep taproots for stability, but a network of equally strong and deep heart roots that add span stability (to allow the tree to grow outward) as well as nutrient and water collection. Boardsmanship also needs heart roots that can expand the reach of our schools in instructional and programs that meet students' academic as well as social/emotional needs.

Not all root systems are productive, however. Contrast both the saguaro and the white oak with the cottonwood or the weeping willow where root systems are invasive and weaken or crush structures near it. Board members need to guard against those in our ranks that would detract from the mission of strong schools, particularly for their own personal gain.

As a podcast listener, allow me to recommend the podcast "Roots of Leadership" available on iTunes (or wherever you get your podcasts). Hosted by Anthony C. Gruppo, he is described as a motivational speaker for anyone looking for professional growth. The podcast focuses on leaders who test the limits and look for ways to take good to better to best. This has a lot to do with school board leadership as we challenge processes and provoke thinking about how to improve our schools: in structure, in span, and in strength. I encourage you to listen and learn.



## IN SUMMARY:

### ► Be Adaptable

Strive to find ways to anchor and to nourish your students, teachers and administrators. At the same time, be a student of better ways and store ideas whose time has yet to come for your district.

### ► Remember that growth is both outward, as well as upward

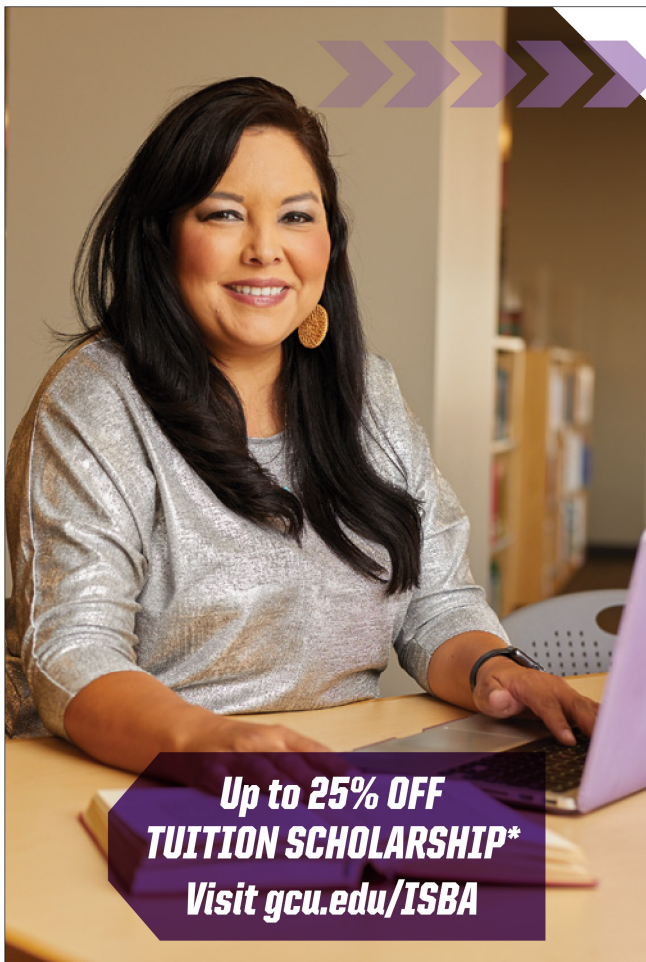
For many of us, the social/emotional well-being of students wasn't on our radar 10 years ago. It now is highly relevant in schools and the work of boards. Strong school districts are anchored not only for growth, but for span and reach as well. Make sure you don't become so fixated on the upward growth of your school districts that you leave behind the need to grow outwardly.

### ► Enable, don't invade

One of the worst mistakes a new board member can make is to jump in and try to make immediate decisions and changes without knowing the lay of the land. They can invade and crush, just like roots. You've hired a Superintendent and staff to run your school district. And, unless you are standing on a burning platform...let them run it. Wait and see what truly needs attention and what is already working. Offer gentle direction and advice. Make your mark in a series of inches instead of miles.

### ► Growth takes time

Finally, be patient with the process of rooted leadership. Like trees, it isn't grown in a season. Arborists describe new trees as sleeping, then creeping, and then leaping in the first three years of growth. Leadership, and effective boardsmanship, are like that. Allow roots to grow and you'll find yourself leaping to new leadership heights after a few short seasons. 🌱



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