

A SEASON *of* GRATITUDE

By Tom Simpson, ISBA President



As the calendar year comes to a close, those of us in the “business” of public education mark the halfway point of the school year. Maybe it’s me, and the fact I am a few years north of 60, but it seems like school just started last week! But here we are, and I hope you are as grateful as I am for what was a fairly normal first semester. I’m not a fan of status quo when it comes to education, but normal sounds pretty good!

Speaking of normal, I am grateful that our students and teachers have enjoyed in-person learning and all of the typical field trips and extracurricular activities that we took for

granted just a few short years ago. As a child of the sixties, it brings to mind the lyrics from Joni Mitchell’s iconic song Big Yellow Taxi, “Don’t it always seem to go, that you don’t know what you’ve got til it’s gone.” Not exactly a grammar lesson but a life lesson nonetheless given the recent past.

I’m also grateful that the dramatic uptick in technology (one-to-one devices) in many of our school districts has provided students so much more at their literal fingertips to further their education. This falls under the “silver-lining” department.

Here's the rest of my laundry list of gratitude that I hope you also share in this season of thanks:

Uncommon School Leaders: There is no substitute for an outstanding superintendent and a strong administrative team in your district. One thing I've learned in almost 20 years on the Yorktown school board is that your ability to be an effective school board member multiplies exponentially if this is true, and I'm grateful for ours! Here's a little secret ... your district success has much more to do with these folks than your board! The paradox is without a good school board, you'll never find or keep great administrators. Keep up the good work folks!

Hungry Teachers: Not the folks monitoring the lunchroom but rather the kind of educators who are curious, challenging, innovative and passionate about making a difference every day. Like public education in general, teachers get a bum rap from some policymakers who don't like the union, but the majority of teachers I know work harder and smarter to improve their skills than ever before.

Engaged Guardians: I changed this from parents to guardians because the faces who raise and nurture our students are more diverse than ever. It's no secret that an engaged adult who bears a sense of responsibility to prioritize education in their kids' lives is invaluable to those whose livelihood is educating said kids. Supportive parents who partner alongside us to help their children learn are a tremendous gift.

The School Village: It's become a clichéd phrase, but only because it is true. In addition to our teachers and guardians, we have a whole host of people, ranging from bus drivers to custodians to food service staff, not to mention coaches and school secretaries, who watch over our students like they were their own! Grateful isn't a big enough word to cover these people so let's throw in EXTREMELY.

Caring Students: As a school board member, I hope you get to see up close the hearts of our students in action. I know they are kids, and they will have their moments and make mistakes, but to see kids embrace their classmates who are different or come together to raise money for local charities or buy gifts for families during the holidays who are in need is truly inspiring. This generation of Instagrammers and Tik Tokkers can be puzzling at times, but thankfully, kindness and love are still going strong.

Community Partners: In our small town, we are blessed with some very generous and willing businesses and organizations who believe (like we do) that public education and local schools are the foundation of our community and society. These wonderful people, including some who have no children in our schools, often approach us before we even have a chance to ask for help with vocational, financial and volunteer support. Without them, we cannot achieve our full potential.

Citizen Lawmakers: For most of my time as a school board member, it's been popular to bash legislators for not doing their part to fund or support public schools. There's not enough room in this column to discuss the pros and cons of this debate, but I believe the majority of our representatives in the statehouse attended a public school and their children or grandchildren do too. I'm grateful that ISBA as an organization has encouraged meaningful dialogue and advanced legislation that educates our fellow citizens – and citizen lawmakers – on what we are doing to improve public education and the successes we are achieving together. There's still much to be done, but we are moving the needle!

Well-Trained Boards: Not all boards are created equal, although all have the opportunity to avail themselves of the same resources to improve. I have tunnel vision at times because our local school board has been so effective, thanks in large part to the education and training we've received from ISBA. It takes a while to become truly good at this job and to understand how to put personal interest aside for the betterment of the whole. Some boards never get there and even the best don't always get it right. But for those who do take the time to train, educate, and align themselves to the appropriate role, THANK YOU! You are the epitome of a public servant, and your calling to help kids – all kids – is inspiring.

I know by the time you read this that the New Year will have begun, and I'll likely be apologizing to someone who I left off of my Grateful List. Just know that I truly am grateful for everyone who makes public education their vocation or is dedicated to helping kids succeed. You are appreciated and valued! 🍀

Tom Simpson is president of the Indiana School Boards Association and a member of the Yorktown Community Schools Board of School Trustees.