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Taking time to reflect, refresh, renew

By Susan Salcido, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

“We do not learn from experience,” American philosopher John Dewey wrote. “We learn from reflecting on experience.”

With 2017 ending, many have shared with me that they often felt rushed and pressed for time, and find it hard to believe the year is already ending. With those observations in mind, it may be helpful to hit the “pause” button, if only for a moment.

A new year often brings an opportunity to reflect, refresh, and renew, so I appreciate this chance to look back, focus on important lessons learned this year, and apply those insights moving forward.

The final weeks of 2017 in Santa Barbara County were dominated by the Thomas Fire, with threatening flames or fire alerts, smoke, and ashes a presence nearly countywide. The effects of the fire impacted our children, families, and the community in ways both large and small. There are many perspectives regarding the fire’s impact, but one aspect that stands out is what our children learned as they observed what took place around them.

Our children saw an excellent example of how individuals come together to support the community: Teamwork. Expertise. Hard work. Dedication. Interdependence. Leadership. Successful execution of exceptional strategies. More than 8,000 firefighters from around our great country were here to fight fires on behalf of others. They toiled around the clock for all of us. While our children were witness to an unprecedented fire, they saw it matched by inspirational professionalism and selflessness.

Although the fire disrupted the lives of tens of thousands of children and families, businesses and organizations, schools and community centers, we can take some small solace in knowing that it may have also prompted us to reflect about ourselves and our community in ways that may not have

been as evident without it. As we look toward 2018, how do we take those lessons and apply them going forward?

We likely agree that we want our children to grow up to be supportive of one another, just as we saw our community members model in the past few weeks. We want our children to be able to be part of a team, sometimes giving direction, sometime taking direction, but always moving in the right direction, for the good of the community.

The response to the fire was filled with those examples — officials providing important directions, neighbors following those directions by respecting evacuation orders, volunteers helping with animals and shelters, among the myriad examples of a community coming together to move in the right direction and help everyone stay as safe as possible, all for the greater good.

It is said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. That concept is the best approach to big issues and problems, even those that may seem daunting. We confront our challenges, one step at a time, mindful of our goals.

In education, our goals are always focused on students. Our children deserve equitable opportunities to succeed in a diverse and complex world, access to meaningful ways to contribute to the greater good, and the skills to articulate their thoughts and opinions through respectful discourse.

As we start a new year, I hope you join me in approaching 2018 by taking the time to reflect on our families, our neighborhoods, our schools, and our larger community, the lessons we and our children learn from adversity, and a determination to move forward making positive change wherever we see that it is needed. I fervently believe the lessons of teamwork, expertise, hard work, dedication, and perseverance will serve us well.

In the new year, let's recommit to being ever mindful of the goals we set for our children. We do so because it matters, it's critical, and it's the right thing to do.

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