

An Educator *of* Heart & Courage

From budget cuts to tornadoes, OU's Keith Ballard has tackled nearly every obstacle an educator can face, including ALS.

BY GINNIE GRAHAM
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Keith Ballard's voice may be a bit slower when prompting his education graduate students into discussion, but it's no less decisive or astute.

He assigns readings of Abraham Lincoln to show leaders embracing differing opinions. He brings in lawmakers and journalists to talk about current issues. He guides projects around real-world problems.

Few educators in Oklahoma's history have the breadth and depth of experience as Ballard. Even fewer have his reach of influence spanning generations.

Over his five-decade professional career, Ballard served as superintendent of rural, suburban and urban school districts, led the statewide school boards association and was a leading voice to develop the doctorate in education program at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa campus. Since 2015, Ballard has been the George Kaiser Family Foundation Chair in Leadership and director of the Professional Development and Leadership Academy at OU-Tulsa. He teaches three courses and directs the doctoral internship program.

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Last year, Ballard was diagnosed with ALS, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease. He didn't stop teaching; instead he joined his peers at OU-Tulsa shifting to virtual instruction during the pandemic.

"They are telling me not to give up with health issues," Ballard says. "I went to work at a very young age and absolutely want to keep teaching for as long as I can. If I can work from home, get feedback from students and my voice doesn't leave, I want to make a difference. I really want to stay active."

As word spread about his diagnosis, so did the outpouring of well-wishes and gratitude. From newspaper columns to social media posts to personal letters received by Ballard, Oklahomans are making their appreciation known.

In March, Ballard was honored by the Oklahoma State Legislature with a standing ovation and resolutions passed by the Oklahoma House and Senate recognizing his career and contributions to education.

Tulsa Community College President Leigh Goodson served on the Tulsa Public Schools Board of Education when Ballard was superintendent. She says hundreds of Oklahoma education leaders serving at all levels have been mentored or educated by him.

"Thousands of students have been touched by his life's work in a positive way," Goodson says. "If you were to poll the many he has worked with over the years, overwhelmingly, the emerging themes would include his role as a mentor, trusted colleague and a student-centered leader always thinking of the entire community in his decisions."



Keith Ballard has long understood how important a solid reading foundation is for children. Here he joins students for Read Across America Day, the annual celebration of the beloved children's author Dr. Seuss. One of Ballard's first jobs as a teacher was working with struggling readers.



Keith Ballard with Lana Turner-Addison, longtime Tulsa Public Schools Board member and president. Ballard utilizes the connections he has built with public officials and educators to provide guest speakers for his graduate classes.



Keith Ballard led numerous improvements during his time at Tulsa Public Schools. Here he addresses the crowd at the ground-breaking for Memorial Veterans Arena at Memorial High School on Oct 11, 2012.

Ballard's knack for diplomacy takes root in relationship building and communication. These skills brought together communities in crisis and eased the way through difficult decisions.

Tulsans recall when Ballard faced historic education budget cuts, prompting school closures. Usually, that would be controversial. Instead, he created a decision-making initiative that included input from community members, resulting in peaceful changes.

These approaches demonstrate what Goodson calls his "heart and courage" style.

"I remember when Dr. Ballard had to make some tough decisions as superintendent of Tulsa Public Schools," Goodson says. "He prioritized students over what would have been the easy road to take. He remained focused on what is right for students despite the difficulties involved."

Ballard didn't consider education as a career until his junior year at Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kan., where he earned a bachelor's degree in psychology. When he realized that he did not want to pursue a career in his major, a counselor suggested working toward a teaching certificate.

"I thought back to my high school years," Ballard says. "I was a pretty good student and had a great experience all the way, K through 12."

Ballard grew up in Kiowa, Kan., a small town on the Oklahoma/Kansas border. There were only 31 students in his

graduating class, but they all had spectacular teachers, he says.

"When my adviser brought up education as a career, I immediately thought about my teachers and how much I liked them," Ballard says. "My classmates, too, were a big influence. We had an undefeated football team my senior year and we were a close-knit class. I told him teaching was a good suggestion."

The decision that day would not only change Ballard's life, but also the lives of thousands of students as his career took off in directions he could not have anticipated. Fortunately, he has had a worthy partner to offer advice and support throughout the past 50 years.

Ballard had been dating Christie Castle, an education student at Oklahoma State University and daughter of L.E. Castle, a noted Oklahoma agriculture educator. They married in 1971 and lived in Stillwater. Ballard worked unloading freights while applying for more than 100 teaching positions. Their break came from the Coweta Public Schools superintendent, who was interested in hiring Christie.

"I exaggerate not, when he came into the room, he acted overjoyed to see my wife," Ballard remembers. "Christie had a sterling academic record at OSU and is absolutely brilliant."

It was clear the two were a package deal. The only position available was in a new middle school program for struggling readers. Though it wasn't in his training, Ballard jumped at the chance.

"I felt very, very fortunate to get a teaching job," he says. "I really feel like it was divine intervention for much of my career. It wasn't planned but worked out perfectly."

As he taught those students, Ballard wanted to understand more about how their brains worked while they were learning to read. He discovered a program at Northwestern Oklahoma State University researching that very issue.

"I found it to be the most interesting topic and subject matter imaginable," Ballard says. "Reading is the absolute key. I have always been influenced by that."

While hauling hay in the summers for his in-laws, Ballard earned a master's degree as a reading specialist in 1974. He continued teaching and coaching at Coweta until he and Christie took positions at Oologah-Talala Public Schools north of Claremore.

They stayed for 18 years, raising their three children. Ballard earned a doctoral degree in educational administration from OSU and served as superintendent from 1986 to 1992.

A pivotal moment came on April 26, 1991, when a series of F-4 tornadoes tore through northeastern Oklahoma, killing four people and injuring at least 61. The Oologah-Talala district was hit hardest, wiping out the entire campus. At that time, it was the worst damage inflicted upon an Oklahoma school by a natural disaster, estimated at about \$10.5 million.

Ballard rallied the community, found an alternate graduation site and requested that the state reduce mandated school days and exempt competitive bidding for construction. A volunteer day for cleanup attracted more than 1,000 people. This experience became the central topic for his dissertation and earned him a reputation in education emergency management.

"That was a traumatic event," he says. "I went to churches, held public meetings and listened to people. It was a miracle we put that school back together in the amount of time we did."

Ballard takes no credit, instead pointing to other community leaders.

"Relationships are what it's all about," Ballard says. "I had built really good relationships, and we fell back on that on April 27. We figured out how to get that done. All this is what shaped me. I always believed in the power of relationships, listening to people and building people up."

In 1992, Claremore schools named him superintendent. When Bob Mooneyham retired as executive director from the Oklahoma State School Boards Association, he encouraged Ballard to take the job.

Between 2000 and 2008, the Ballards lived in Oklahoma City, where he worked with state lawmakers on education



Ballard has always gone above and beyond to give back to his community. Here he is participating in a Tulsa Area United Way fundraiser that involved rappelling down the side of a building to raise money for local nonprofits.

policy and laws; much of the time spent on budget issues.

In 2004, Ballard started teaching graduate education administration courses at OU-Tulsa, building on previous experiences at Oral Roberts University and Southern Nazarene University.

At OU, he developed a friendship with then-Rainbolt College of Education Dean Gregg Garn, currently OU's senior associate provost of online learning and executive director of the K20 Center for Educational and Community Renewal.

Ballard led the doctorate program in educational administration at OU-Tulsa, combining research and practice with input from OU faculty and educational leaders. The program started with a graduate-level leadership class that would expand once Ballard resigned his position at the state school boards association to join OU full time.

“Then, TPS happened,” Ballard says.

After a tumultuous period, the Tulsa Public Schools board offered to buy out the contract of its current superintendent to find a better fit. Ballard agreed to take the position.

“I still remember Christie and I having a conversation about it in our kitchen. She turned around and asked, ‘Why did you do that?’ Without giving a second thought, I said, ‘Because that’s who I am,’” Ballard says. “I saw myself as a superintendent.”

The night the board voted to end the contract, it hired Ballard—a job he held until 2015. He established groups of advisers across the city, from faith leaders to the teachers’ union. During Ballard’s time as superintendent, Tulsa voters passed a \$415 million school bond package—the largest in the city’s history.

“I absolutely loved being superintendent in Tulsa,” Ballard says. “I felt like we were making a difference that really mattered. It was much larger than anything I had seen before. I liked the community and everything about it.

“The only reason I left TPS was that I really wanted to go to OU full time and be a university professor. I felt like I needed to get started on that.”

While superintendent, Ballard had taught at least one class a semester at OU-Tulsa and worked with Garn and educational leadership faculty to fully implement a doctorate program.

“It provided a balance and kept me in touch with people who wanted to go into administration,” Ballard says.

“Dr. Ballard brought enormous vision to the graduate program and, at the same time, a passion for pragmatism,” says Ken Levit, executive director of the George Kaiser Family Foundation and former president of OU-Tulsa.

“In each lecture or classroom activity, Dr. Ballard would insist that there be something tangible that the educator could take back to benefit the students in the classroom. Yes, there was a strong dose of theory and big thinking, but there was a clear focus that the program had to make a difference in the real lives of educators and in meeting the everyday challenges of teaching young people how to be successful in their learning and life journeys.”

The doctorate program grew from input provided by Tulsa County school leaders, Garn says. Students in the program

are typically working educators who choose discussion topics and projects based on problems they are facing.

“The result is a powerful and relatable leadership program,” Garn says. “Over time as we built out the program, we were careful to pay attention to meeting the needs of school districts in the area. We wanted to make sure what we offered prepared education professionals for what they will experience.”

The curriculum shifts to meet the needs of a changing educational environment. Faculty focus on research around new ideas, and Ballard and other educational professionals offer the hands-on skills and networking students will need.

Ballard connected the OU-Tulsa program with area school districts to apply the best practices and latest data. “It’s a beautiful integration of top researchers and the community to improve the lives of students,” Garn says.

Garn describes Ballard as having intellectual humility: “He is always listening, so he’s always learning.”

Ballard emphasizes that executive titles do not equate to wisdom, but traits such as respect,

justice and empathy are crucial.

“If you are incapable of seeing what the world looks like through other people’s eyes, you will fail,” Ballard says. “Humility goes a long way. Leaders in education need to believe all voices matter. They need to believe everybody is important. They will face a divided public, and what they will need are communication skills, the ability to listen and the belief that all voices deserve to be heard.

“It’s not that you can make everybody happy or come to a decision everyone agrees upon, it’s that you listen carefully and treat everyone with respect.”

Ballard’s ALS battle isn’t slowing down his drive or dedication. He continues to serve on the dissertation committees for at least 20 students and is looking forward to the future.

“I read about ALS and that it was fatal 100 percent of the time, but I have a couple of goals,” he says. “I want Christie and me to celebrate our 50th anniversary on Aug. 6. I married well, and she was a great influence on me. The other goal is to live until my youngest grandkids can remember me and remember what I stood for.”

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Ginnie Graham is a writer and editor for the Tulsa World.