

Six years ago, the Lakota Board of Education embarked on an annual listening tour called “Community Conversations.” Through the years, the purpose of these meetings has remained constant: an opportunity for school board members to hear what our stakeholders, including parents, students, community members and staff, believe are important issues facing our school district. This year, community conversations, along with monthly coffee chats, have been an invaluable tool for me, as the new superintendent, to understand the district from our stakeholders’ perspectives.

Since the fall, three topics surrounding the educational experiences of our students have consistently surfaced: all-day kindergarten, increasing the number of specials for our primary grades and consistent access to technology in the classrooms, particularly for our secondary grade levels, seventh-through-twelfth. While other areas of interest and concern have been raised, these three were discussed at nearly all of the 30 conversations, as well as other opportunities we’ve had to engage with our stakeholders.

With the support of our school board members, I recently announced that the district is moving forward with plans to implement all-day kindergarten, daily specials (art, music, physical education, technology/STEAM²/media) and increased technology in the classroom for the 2018-19 school year. In addition, we will realign our building configurations so our educational model more closely meets our curriculum. Early childhood buildings will consist of kindergarten-through-second grade and elementary schools will be three-through-six.

These are exciting changes for our kids and will help to make us a district of choice in southwestern Ohio. Lakota Local Schools has a rich history of excellence in education. We will continue this tradition with added benefits:

- All-day kindergarten has been shown to improve student achievement, as well as social and emotional skills. Currently, first graders have had different kindergarten experiences: half-day, extended-day and all-day. All-day kindergarten will put the students on a more equal ground when they transition to first grade.
- Increased early intervention for our youngest learners.
- Teachers will have more opportunities to prepare our students for the state-mandated third grade reading guarantee.
- Offering our students five specials per week will help to develop more well-rounded individuals, as students excel in different areas of learning. Specials offer a break from core curriculum during the day, while still teaching our students needed skills.
- The increased use of technology in the classroom will complement the excellent teaching methods already in place. A pilot program will be introduced at our junior schools in the fall, with roll-out to our high school students following.

A high-quality education must always be student-centered. As with all of our decisions at Lakota, the implementation of these changes will have the best interest of our students in mind.

In order to accommodate all-day kindergarten, it has been determined that Heritage and Hopewell Elementary Schools will become early childhood buildings next year. These schools were chosen due to their size and location, and will allow us to move the district forward while being fiscally responsible. We are committed to using our current staff, adding additional staff members if necessary to maintain our current teacher-to-student ratios. We will also see a significant cost savings by eliminating the majority of our midday bus routes, as most students will attend all-day kindergarten. The cost of additional technology has been budgeted through our permanent improvement funds.

We are excited about the new opportunities we will be able to offer our students in the fall. I look forward to sharing more information about these changes as the details are finalized in the coming weeks and months.

Matthew Miller is the superintendent of Lakota Local Schools. Follow him on Twitter (@LakotaSuper), Facebook (Matt Miller – Lakota Local Schools Superintendent) and Instagram (lakotasuper).