

This year has seen a shift in thinking around Lakota. Although we will always enjoy the friendly rivalry that exists between our East and West high schools, in the grand scheme of things, we are one district - one Lakota - and this has been demonstrated over and over again this year.

Last summer, in our quest to launch a new district hashtag for social media, we asked our community for their input. The overwhelming majority voted for #WEareLakota. The 'W' and 'E' are capitalized to symbolize 'West' and 'East' because, together, WE are Lakota.

Our staff, all 1,700 of them, began the school year by coming together for an opening day convocation. Staff members were asked to sign large '#WEareLakota' banners, which are now hanging throughout the district. Signatures from east side and west side staff members are mixed together and on display in all of our buildings. This theme has carried on during our professional development sessions this year, also known as Lakota Learning Days. Collaboration across grade bands and buildings has been encouraged throughout the year. We are breaking down the silos because a great education is student-centered. For that to happen, we need to look to the content experts...our teachers. Great things are happening in all of our buildings and that information needs to be shared out among our staff so that our students may benefit.

In the past, our annual district-wide food drive for Reach Out Lakota has been a competition between the east and west sides of our district. This year, we challenged the Hamilton and Mason school districts to a friendly competition to see who could collect the most donations for their local food pantries. Together, our district and community filled three school buses during our "Stuff the Bus" campaign, which yielded around 27,000 pounds of food for Reach Out Lakota. That's a 50 percent increase over last year!

Another example of our district coming together took place earlier this month when we held our first annual Military Commitment Ceremony. School districts traditionally celebrate athletic and academic signing days, Lakota included. This year, we honored our 33 seniors from both Lakota East and Lakota West who have committed to serve their country after graduation, whether they have chosen to enlist in a branch of the armed services or attend a military academy.

On April 22, Earth Day will be celebrated around the globe. In our corner of the world, Angie Brown, who spearheads our parent engagement and community outreach efforts, and her dedicated group of volunteers are planning an afternoon of family friendly events geared towards building community among our Lakota families. Please plan to join us between 2 - 4 p.m. at the Square at Union Centre for live music, games, face painting and more. A complimentary light meal will be provided by Lakota Local Schools in partnership with area businesses. Follow #WEarePlantingRelationships on social media to join the conversation. I hope to see you there.

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