

One of the many great benefits in our district is the diversity that can be found in our schools. Our students have the opportunity to get to know other students who may be from different countries, practice different religions or have different cultural backgrounds. We work hard to encourage acceptance and tolerance in our schools. Beyond the differences that one can see, our students may have vastly different life experiences that may not be quite as evident.

In addition to teaching and modeling acceptance and tolerance, we also teach empathy. Not only is this a daily practice by our teachers, we have programs in place to teach these life skills to our students.

“Be the Difference Day” is a program for our sophomores at both Lakota East and West high schools. Through our partnership with Changepoint Learning, our students learn throughout a day-long program that includes both small and large group activities designed to promote peer understanding and self-reflection.

Each of the group activities encourages our kids to be open to new perspectives about their classmates, to get rid of preconceived notions and to realize that their fellow classmates may be going through a difficult time or challenges that haven’t been shared. Students may also learn that they are not alone with what they may be dealing with in their lives. Empathy is a lesson that is woven throughout the day.

A similar experience is brought to our junior and elementary schools. Seventh graders participate in the ID Project, while elementary students experience FUSE. Both of these programs focus on empathy and kindness for others through Changepoint Learning and align with the “Be the Difference” high school program. Facilitated by volunteers from our community, these are just a few examples of programs we have in place for the social and emotional health of our students.

Recently, our high school parents, students and staff were invited to attend a program at our Central Office to hear from Dr. Gregory A. Hudnall, the founder of Hope Squad. This peer-to-peer suicide prevention program will be introduced at our high schools in the fall, tapping into our student body to build our own Hope Squads. Dr. Hudnall will return to Lakota later this spring as our schools prepare to launch the program. If you would like to learn more about this new initiative, I encourage you to visit [www.hopesquad.com](http://www.hopesquad.com).

Another message that is carried through all of our grade bands is the concept that “E+R=O.” You may have seen our students and staff wearing bracelets with this equation. If you’re unfamiliar with “E+R=O,” it stands for “Event + Response = Outcome.” This program teaches our students, and staff, that while they may not be able to control an event, they can control how they respond. It also teaches that we should “press pause” before responding. This gives yourself a chance to think about the situation and, perhaps get yourself into a positive mindset.

These are just a few examples of how students and staff come together to support one another and show that WE are Lakota.

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