

Our students and staff returned from winter break relaxed, recharged and ready to hit the ground running. January is the start of a new calendar year, a new semester and new opportunities for our students and staff members.

The WE are Empowered initiative is now fully operational. Students in grades nine through 11 received their district-owned Chromebooks upon their return to school. As you may recall, this program launched at the junior schools in the fall and has gone so smoothly that we were able to move the date up for our high school students. The monies used for this program come from our Permanent Improvement Fund, which require a five-year usage plan. When our students graduate, their devices will be rolled to our early childhood and elementary schools for use, thus extending the lifespan of the Chromebooks.

The one-to-one (1:1) program is a chance to further personalize learning for our students while empowering them to take charge of their education. They are no longer confined to the school day to collaborate with their peers or research a subject that interests them. With information available at your fingertips in today's world, it is our responsibility to incorporate the use of technology in our teaching methods to better prepare our students for life beyond high school.

In addition to the WE are Empowered initiative, the media centers at our junior, freshman and high school buildings have been transformed into innovation hubs. Students have access to virtual reality stations, green screen technology and more. At any given time, you are able to see students and staff using the space to collaborate with one another and accessing new learning tools to create a more personalized learning experience.

With the start of second semester, we are also looking towards not only next year, but the future. We continue to work on Lakota Next - reimagining the high school experience for our students. I am proud of the work our team of teachers and students have done with this project. I believe that it is imperative to empower teacher and student voice in any changes we are making at this magnitude. Teachers are the experts and should be able to share their thoughts and ideas to improve the educational experience, just as we must listen to the opinions of students because any changes we make will ultimately affect them.

Additionally, we are embarking on both an enrollment and a master facilities study. This year, every grade level, with the exception of eleventh and twelfth, saw an increase in enrollment. As our townships continue to grow, especially to the north, we must be prepared for how that may affect our schools, not only the classrooms, but also the facilities. Our operations department does an outstanding job keeping our buildings running, but we must be realistic about the age and of condition of them as we look to the future.

We will also continue to provide opportunities for stakeholder engagement through our Community Conversation program, monthly Coffee Chats and CommUnity University. I encourage you to visit our website www.lakotaonline.com to find an event that you may be interested in attending.

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