

I wish I could have packed the entire Lakota community into the East High School gymnasium on August 11 to be a part of our opening day convocation for staff. Between the Marching Thunderhawks' grand entrance and the special staff shout-out video messages from students to close out the program, the energy in the room was nothing short of electric.

Since then, we've had the honor of welcoming back all 16,500 or so of our students. This past Wednesday was the day I've been waiting for since I started in my new role as superintendent in mid-June. For the second time since joining the Lakota community, I found my way to all 22 of our schools to witness firsthand the energy, passion and enthusiasm that first attracted me to this community.

From the first schools in this year's line-up of community fanfares to the opening of a new space for our Career Readiness Academy – where we've literally quadrupled our capacity to serve students seeking an alternative high school experience – it is obvious that our schools value student opportunity and community building. I can't wait to continue building upon that momentum.

I'm not alone when I say that it's been a busy and exciting couple of months leading up to the start of the new school year. The dedication of our maintenance team showed in the cleanliness of our 2.4 million square feet of building space. The orderliness of our front offices, cafeteria lines, and arrival and dismissal procedures was a sign of the countless hours of planning and preparation by our administrators and support staff. The warmth of our classrooms was a signal of the quality educators we have on our team and the time so many of them put in this summer preparing for the year ahead.

If you've met me or follow me on social media even, I hope you can see that one of my top priorities now and for the next several months is to get out and listen. I cannot emphasize enough the value I find in getting to know as many students, staff members, parents, residents and community and business leaders as possible. Real conversations are the only way to learn more about this community's priorities for education. I've had a lot of them already – with still plenty more to be had.

From coffee chats and community conversations to "State of the Schools" addresses and this very column, I hope you'll take advantage of the many different ways I'm planning to engage this community in our work.

This year's theme around Lakota can be summed up in a hashtag you'll find attached to almost any Lakota social media post and even on a banner you'll see when entering any one of our schools: #WEareLakota. Especially given our size, there is so much opportunity to do great things when we come together as one Lakota. I can't wait to share examples of how we're living that phrase all year long.

Thank you, in advance, for your support and belief in our schools. I am looking forward to this school year and many more to come.

*Matt Miller is the superintendent of Lakota Local Schools. Follow @LakotaSuper on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for daily updates about our schools.*