

# STRONGER TOGETHER

## Give the gift of understanding

### Will Nelson

Director of Equity and Student Success,  
Arlington SD

### PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Ensuring School Safety; Engaging Families  
and Communities; Closing the Gap

“**O** ki niksokowa” or “Hello, all my relatives.” This is a traditional greeting of all Blackfoot people. It can be used in a pluralistic or singular sense. It is an acknowledgment that says that no matter who you are or where you are from, I recognize you are my relative, deserving of respect and kindness. It further implies that because we consider all things as part of us, we have as great a responsibility to maintain balance, harmony, and peacefulness with those whom we are greeting, as we do with ourselves.

### FINDING RESILIENCE

I am a proud Native American. I am an elder and enrolled member of the Blackfeet Tribe. To my people, the land and the sky, the water and the buffalo are all well respected. These are sacred to my people; storytellers and dancers honor our Earth through stories and traditional dances passed down generation after generation.

Our lives were forever changed and continuously challenged following the European settlers who brought disease and infection that killed many of my people. Those same settlers manipulated and forced our remaining people from the land they called home to a small reservation in northern Montana, north of Great Falls. The buffalo were hunted almost to extinction by the white settlers, leaving my people with no food to eat.

“ Like many others in our communities, trauma impacted my childhood years, creating opportunities for me to grow as a human. I am resilient, but not all of us are so lucky.”

Starvation killed many more.

That oppression continues today as Native Americans struggle to hold on to traditional values and culture. I grew up in poverty, and my immediate family saw their destruction from addiction and alcoholism. My siblings and I were raised by a single mother. That same oppression impacted my family. Like many others in our communities, trauma impacted my childhood years, creating opportunities for me to grow as a human. I am resilient, but not all of us are so lucky.

### THE GIFT OF UNDERSTANDING

I recently read a great contemporary book by Tommy Orange, called “There There.” This book speaks to the complex challenges young Natives experience in our modern world where they are trying to find their identities while maintaining their connections with their traditional culture. This really spoke to my existence as a Native American living off the reservation, my understanding of my own narrative, my awareness of my own identity, and my desire to engage in our contemporary society to sow seeds of compassion and curiosity for things unknown. The unknown, fear, lack of understanding,

unintentional bias, divisive rhetoric, falsehoods, and institutional and structural racism can all lead to marginalization, oppression, racism, and violence.

“Waking up White,” by Debby Irving, speaks about her gradual understanding, her self-awareness of what it means to be white. This awakening allowed her to see through her blind spot, to understand what challenges people of color encounter daily.

Experiences like Irving’s give us the gift of understanding so we can navigate through the complex world of institutional racism with care. Through this understanding, we celebrate and honor the diverse cultures in our communities, realizing how much richer we are because of all of our neighbors; our gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, kids and neighbors; our Jewish, African American, and Latinx kids and neighbors; our Native American and Pacific Island kids and neighbors; our Asian American kids and neighbors; our kids and neighbors from every culture and their unique identities.

However, some of our neighbors are living in poverty, some are experiencing chronic illness and death, some are experiencing addiction, some are experiencing

racism and hate, some are experiencing threats and seeking ways out like suicide.

For the past four years, I have been serving as principal of Weston High School, our alternative high school I like to refer to as a school of choice, in the Arlington School District. Our students, their families, my staff, and really, everyone around me has been gracious as I learned what it meant to truly engage with students who come with all kinds of trauma — the trauma that most of us can't even imagine, yet our students come to school with day after day. Building strong, intentional relationships with our students and their families is vital to students who are not as resilient as I was lucky to be, or are not yet in a safe place to even consider what it might be like to be resilient. They need a safe place to be, and school is that safe place.

“ Let’s honor the richness diversity brings and celebrate all of our wonderful unique gifts passed down within our own cultures.”

Our AWSP and District Office Leadership Frameworks clearly describe the criteria we must meet around Ensuring School Safety and Engaging Communities. By leaning



Description: Sacred bundles contain items that were given to the Blackfoot by the Naa-to-yi-ta-piiski (Spirit Beings) of the world. These are used in ceremonies to renew the connections with Naa-to-yi-at-piiski and Ihtsi-pai-tapi-yopa (Creator) and to ask for help. When not in use, these bundles were carefully hung along the west wall of the tipis, above the Nii-tsii-ta-piiski (Real People) as they sat or slept. Today, they are kept in quiet rooms in people's homes and are accorded the care one would give to a child. Artwork by Will Nelson.

in and adopting culturally responsive practices, engaging in trauma-informed practices, and ensuring students learn from experience through restorative practices instead of being simply offense-consequence driven, we build those strong relationships that last even when times may be tough.

The new discipline laws align directly with this philosophy of relationships first and require us to approach discipline through an equity lens, keeping kids in school and developing methods that provide learning opportunities for the behaviors. Dr. Ross Greene suggests that we shift our way of thinking from “kids do well if they want to” to “kids do well if they can.”

## TIME TO ENGAGE

I try to imagine the offenders in recent events, like the mass shooting in Gilroy, California and the African American man being led through town by white police on horseback, are our former students who did not have the opportunity to engage in critical learning and instead, acted with the skills they had at the time.

Educators can no longer be bystanders. We can no longer wait for others to act. We can no longer let acts like targeted mass shootings and public shaming occur without a call to action: Engage in conversations about what it means to be white, about racism, about microaggressions, about implicit bias. Respond when you hear someone say something derogatory, racist, and filled with hate. Act when high-powered people resort to divisive rhetoric. It is our moral imperative to promote

an environment where each and every student of ours lives free from hate-filled speech, free from racism, and free from fear. Let's honor the richness diversity brings and celebrate all of our wonderful unique gifts passed down within our own cultures.

Get involved in equity initiatives in your district, city, county, and state. Seek opportunities with AWSP and other educational organizations. And remember, we have as great a responsibility to maintain balance, harmony, and peacefulness with those we interact with, as we do with ourselves. ■