



# Lessons from Laina

## Wellpinit's First Native Female Principal Builds a Culture of Trust

### PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Improving Instruction, Engaging Families and Communities, Closing the Gap*

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“In Native cultures, wise elders will caution youth about providing the space to make time to understand, whereas in public schools, rarely is that incubating space allowed or allotted.”

When I visited Phillips, I noticed she had a puppy in her office. She said it was a stray and she was taking it home.

Many principals hope to positively affect the culture of the schools they lead through specific programs, relationship building, and professional development. Wellpinit Principal Laina Phillips lives her culture through her lifelong understanding of the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of the Spokane Tribe of Indians.

As a tribal member, Phillips is the first female Native member to come back to her reservation and serve as a principal in the very district she grew up in. It is uncharted territory for a tribal member to be in a school leadership position. She is cognizant of the monumental step she has taken.

#### MATRIARCHAL MENTORS

As Phillips grew up and developed goals in middle and high school, she sometimes felt like a square peg going into a round hole. American public education was primarily developed around different cultural norms than her own, and she struggled with the absence of space between listening and doing.

In Native cultures, wise elders will caution youth about providing the space to make time to understand, whereas in public schools, rarely is that incubating space allowed or allotted. One person who understood Phillip's reality was a valued teacher,



Phillips with her grandmother, one of the matriarchs who shaped her life.

Jane Swiatek, her English teacher and ASB advisor, who still works in the building where Phillips is principal. Swiatek was a key figure in preparing her to be ready for college; she was there when Phillips needed encouragement and self-belief when the initial struggles of college education set in; and she is still there today as other Wellpinit students travel their own educational journeys.

#### NATIVE CULTURE IMPACTS CURRENT WORK

From the time Phillips was a toddler, she was blessed by a strong matriarchal society. Her grandmother, mother, and numerous aunts taught Phillips to sit, and listen and take it all in before speaking. Today, she heeds that wisdom as a principal, saying, “I imagine myself as one of my aunties and I just take it all in. I listen and feel the person's passion. I ask questions to allow people to have their voice, always bringing it back to maintaining the relationship we have developed.”

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It is noteworthy that the wisdom Phillips gained from the matriarchs in her family is mirrored in current research on highly reliable organizations and leaders. Leaders who take the time to give space for understanding from the time they hear about a problem or an issue to reacting to it are considered to have a more highly reliable and successful organization.

## COLLABORATION DEVELOPS TRUST

Phillips implements the wisdom of listening and experiencing other's passion with the students, teachers, parents, and community members she serves. After initially serving as a teacher, she became a school improvement leader, working as a data instructional coach, before becoming a principal. Through an Indian demonstration grant, Phillips had the opportunity to participate in training through the University of Washington for a Native Education certificate. The program provided instruction and experience about Native-centered, tribal-centered, culturally relevant pedagogy. This two-year program brought participants together in a truly collaborative way; they learned not by being in a room together, but rather through encouragement to get out into the community and engage with its members. "I was already deeply



Principal Phillips treats every student with respect and feels it is her mission to help all students be successful.



Phillips in her middle/high school principal's office, now feeling at home.

“ Phillips views building a culture of trust and relationships as a primary priority on a daily basis. In her own past, she felt Native students did not always feel that trust.”

connected to my own community, but this helped me learn the importance of our teachers connecting with the community,” said Phillips.

Today, Phillips's strategy for teacher retention is to assure her teachers are so connected to the community that they feel they are a part of it. She laments how, in her district, for years teachers would come for a couple of years to get some type of loan forgiveness or certification and then leave. By more intentionally connecting teachers with the community to help them feel totally comfortable living there, knowing families, and tribal traditions, she explains how that helps the district keep teachers fully invested. Now, Wellpinit teachers do more than merely live in “teacherville” (housing available to teachers on the reservation), but actually become a part of the community. The Native education certificate program she completed helped her learn how to foster and support this reality.

Phillips views building a culture of trust and relationships as a primary priority on a daily basis. In her own past, she felt Native students did not always feel that trust. Her own educational journey taught her a teacher cannot come into the school and say, “I am your teacher; you need to trust and follow me.” She learned that the opportunity for teachers to connect with students, and to build a place of trust and understanding, can lead to instruction and learning occurring in a natural, even explosive way. She witnessed how students felt about teachers when they perceived their teachers were not there to stay, nor did they necessarily have their best interests at heart.

Today's Wellpinit students notice teachers are staying longer and want to understand how native students learn and gain understanding. Phillips explains this very critical relationship, articulating, “It is a back and forth — 10 steps forward in instruction and 900 steps back in trust and relationships. Teachers have to continually build relationships before instruction can be successful.”

As a principal, she continues to experience that students, staff and parents often have a need to “unload,” and that they each unload on something specific to their reality. When people do that, Phillips explains, “I always try to bring it (the conversation or issue) back to relationships.” She goes on to say, “Kids have stuff going on... it is not

“ Embracing the lessons of her own culture, she has developed resiliency and incredible wisdom and perseverance, helping students who are today the student she once was.”

anyone’s fault. We just have to listen and understand. We need to really listen and observe and understand before we do something.”

### LESSONS FROM LAINA

Phillips knows being a principal is about instructional coaching and leadership. She believes collaboration and teamwork are the characteristics that pull the organization together, and strives to never discount the power of either. Sagely, she notes, “The biggest thing I want for my profession and my community is

that leaders and teachers take the time, and build space, between listening and doing. Take the time for understanding and to demonstrate real compassion. Build an intentional space between listening and doing to have time to collaborate and talk. By doing this, we engage in culturally responsive pedagogy.”

Importantly, Phillips is clear that one of her goals is to make her grandmother, mom and aunties proud. In the uncharted territory of a tribal member serving in a public-school leadership position, Phillips is



Jane Swiatek is one of the influential Wellpinit teachers who helped her reach her dreams, and now Phillips is her principal.

doing just that. Embracing the lessons of her own culture, she has developed resiliency and incredible wisdom and perseverance, helping students who are today the student she once was. Hers is an example, a story, from which much is to be learned. ■





Will J., Class of 2023

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