

*Always Challenging
Them'
Mission endures for those at
Pierre Indian Learning Center*



By **ABBY WARGO**
abby.wargo@capjournal.com

Many have seen the wooden sign across the road from the Pierre Solid Waste Facility, but few are familiar with the institution itself: the Pierre Indian Learning Center.

Founded in 1890, the center is one of seven boarding schools for Native American students that remains open in the United States.

While Native American boarding schools have a fraught history, today's PILC is much different than it was 30 years ago.

"So many people here don't know who we are," PILC Superintendent Veronica Morley said. "It's changed dramatically over the last 30 years. Folks remember what it used to be like — it looked very different and was a very different organization. Our kids are normal, good, loving kids who happen to have an alternative living and educational environ-

ment," she told the Capital Journal.

"It is not a psychiatric facility, nor is it a juvenile detention facility. It is a unique alternative school for children with limited educational opportunities who, because of social or family problems, language differences, undiagnosed learning disabilities, truancy and other factors, have not been successful in schools on the reservation or in the home environment," according to PILC's website.

The school serves students from kindergarten to eighth grade. Generally, parents don't enroll their children in boarding schools at such a young age, but according to Morley, the majority of children at the school were not successful in other learning environments. She said there is also a high percentage of homeless children who are under the custody of social services.

"This is home for those kids," she said, adding that that demographic has a good retention rate and remains at the school until graduation.

The school is open by application

only, while students must have a certified degree of Indian blood to attend. Funded through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, PILC serves Native American students from 15 different tribes in the Great Plains region, specifically North and South Dakota and Nebraska. Some children come from as far away as the Canadian border to the North and from as far south as southern Nebraska.

The long distances from home and not having a consistent family to live with are challenges, but Morley said the PILC becomes their "home away from home" and is a "safe alternative" to oftentimes unstable home environments.

Unstable environments can lead to disruptions in the learning process, such as truancy, that makes it difficult for students to get a good grasp on the content. Sometimes, a student will have attended six or seven schools before finally reaching PILC.

Morley said the school has to "walk in two worlds," because while PILC is federally funded through the Bureau of Indian Affairs and must meet federal

requirements, it is also a South Dakota state-accredited school and follows the state Board of Education regulations. Having to deal with two different education agencies "becomes cumbersome," Morley said.

In contrast to a regular school environment, PILC prioritizes individualized learning and data analysis. The school features a large population of special education students — 40-42% — who are on individualized education plans (IEPs), which naturally increases the need for a smaller student-to-teacher ratio. The programming allows children who have fallen behind to catch up on educational gaps. For children who aren't on IEPs, there is still a lot of mobility between grades because students may not necessarily be on their intended grade level.

"There's no one-size-fits-all programming," Morley said. "School is frustrating for a lot of them. We take our time... we do a lot of data analysis and a lot to meet the needs of all students. We're gathering information every single day

on kids.”

For example, PILC will collect data on students’ reading ability every week relating to time, fluency rate, comprehension. The reading groups are fluid so that students can move within the groups to best meet their educational needs. Data collection of student progress is important and “comes naturally” to PILC teachers because special education in general is very data driven, according to Morley.

Having small teacher-to-student ratios and living on campus allows students to form good relationships with other students and staff.

“Philosophically, forming relationships in a safe and comfortable environment makes [kids] receptive to starting to do things that are more challenging for them,” Morley said.

“We have smart kids here, the problem is they don’t have a good attitude about school. We make sure we’re always challenging them and giving them the opportunity to learn while they’re here. Failure is not an option. When they realize that, they can see things a little differently,” she said.

Because the students live at the school, staff members play a “pivotal role” in caretaking, Morley said, serving as parents, counselors, confidants, and friends.

“They do everything from putting Band-Aids on to giving guidance and having heart to heart conversations,” Morley said.

Having a “home away from home” can be difficult to adjust to, but Morley said this is a blessing because it provides stability and consistency for children who might otherwise have unstable living situations. At the beginning of the school year, some new students can be angry and resistant to being at PILC, which Morley said is sometimes due to anxiety about issues at home. Many students have heightened senses of responsibilities in their families, as some of them are tasked with caring for younger siblings.

“We have kids with a whole lot on their brains, and that’s hard baggage to have on their backs for their age. We gain their trust and help them process things and watch them become kids again, which is tremendous,” Morley said. “I’ve been here 25 years, and the kids that are the most resistant [when they first arrive at the PILC] are the ones shedding the most tears when it’s time to leave.”

But what is also the biggest blessing can be the most emotionally taxing. The philosophical underpinning of the



work of PILC staff is the sense that the students are their children.

“These are our children, our own family members. That can become emotionally exhausting for example, when they go home for the summer or for Christmas, we worry about them as we would a family member. It’s difficult to see them go through hard times, which can be a double-edged sword. It’s beautiful and wonderful [to have that sense of

family], but from a human nature perspective, it can be tiring,” Morley said.

The familial aspect of the school made it difficult to send everyone home when the COVID-19 pandemic hit last March. PILC was the last school in the state to send students home, and Morley said they were hesitant to do so because there were so many children whom social workers didn’t know where to send. As a result, some siblings had to be separated,

Photos provided

Opposite Page: Pierre Indian Learning Center students enjoy their Christmas party.

Left: Pierre Indian Learning Center students play in the fall leaves during recess.

Bottom Left: Pierre Indian Learning Center students enjoy bowling at Lariat Lanes.

Next Page: Pierre Indian Learning Center students head home for Christmas vacation.

which Morley said was “personally one of the most heart-wrenching [moments] of my administrative career.”

“It caused a greater sense of worry for everyone — kids were going to environments a lot of them were not familiar with, as well as the added pressures of a pandemic,” she said.

Staff members got to work in April on creating an “extremely restrictive” reopening plan that would get children to the school safely. They worked closely with the BOE, BIA, and the Department of Health/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, conducting training sessions, working with new technology, and reconfiguring physical spaces to prepare for the students’ arrival.

The PILC received grant money to purchase personal protective equipment (PPE) and gutted some old residential wings to use as an isolation wing using CARES Act funding. The school also doubled the amount of buses to allow for social distancing. Area businesses have also pitched in — All Around Graphix’s Dirk Campbell “went above and beyond” and helped install plexiglass dividers and other mitigation measures around campus.

When the students arrived on August 24, the campus was closed and Indian Health Services provided testing for all of the kids. There were a handful of positive cases, all asymptomatic — but PILC officials said they have not seen a single positive student case since Aug. 25.

Currently, the campus remains closed to outside visitors and there are no off-campus activities taking place. The PILC has stopped renting out its facilities to outside groups, and children cannot go home on the weekends to visit their families. The lockdown has been a “real challenge” for the kids’ mental health, but has been successful in keeping them safe, Morley said. After picking the students at the completion of Christmas break, youngsters were all tested and no one was positive.

“That’s been huge,” Morley said.

That’s also a testament to faculty and staff, who all had to sign social responsi-

bility contracts saying they would make personal social sacrifices to prevent COVID from spreading at their workplace.

“Since it’s a closed campus, the only danger we run is all of us coming and going — our kids are a captive audience,” Morley said.

She’s proud of the staff, school board, and parents — they have had positive cases and been close contacts, but they have taken the guidelines seriously and thus been able to manage and go about business as usual.

“It’ll spread like wildfire — the precautions have been extreme, but they have enabled us to continue with our work. To be honest, I’m extremely proud — we’re the only off-reservation board school in the nation that has opened on time and remained open,” Morley said.

She said she is “hopeful” about the future, as staff have all received the first dose of the vaccine from IHS.

To combat mental health issues, the PILC has brought in more counseling resources using CARES funding.

Additionally, the school has been working with some area businesses who have allowed students to come in and use their facilities — for example, the bowling alley opens exclusively for PILC on Sunday morning, and the YMCA has allowed the kids to use the ice skating rink.

“It’s wonderful how the community has responded, the kids can have some sense of normalcy and not be exposed to the general public,” Morley said. “It makes it tolerable for them — COVID has affected everybody,



and [in person schooling] is a challenge, but it can be done.”

Pandemic or not, the PILC continues its work mold-

ing and shaping Native American youth.

“It looks different this year, but in general, we’re just happy to be here,” Morley said.

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