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# From Darlington to Darlington: a history of trauma, resilience and allyship. Two interviews in Cheyenne-Arapaho country

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## **From Darlington to Darlington: a history of trauma, resilience and allyship**

### **Two interviews in Cheyenne-Arapaho country**

Tatiana Viallaneix

Darlington is a name pregnant with meaning on Cheyenne-Arapaho land<sup>1</sup> in Western Oklahoma. It echoes those of Darlington Indian Agency, named after the first federal agent appointed to run it, and of Darlington Indian School (1871-1908), one of the local schools which were the tools of the US government's assimilation policy, later succeeded notably by Concho Indian Boarding School (1932-1982).

Today's Darlington School is a wholly different story. It is a small pre-Kindergarten to eighth grade<sup>2</sup> public school formally located in the town of El Reno, about 50 kilometers northwest of the state capital Oklahoma City, but practically half way between El Reno<sup>3</sup> and the small town of Concho, headquarters of the Cheyenne-Arapaho nation. In a fringe rural area, this Title 1 school<sup>4</sup> has been welcoming an increasing share of Native students, mostly Cheyenne-Arapaho, over the past four decades, becoming a nearly all-Native school. Though dealing with the fallouts of transgenerational trauma, the school, currently headed by non-Native principal Gina Musae, is outstandingly successful in leading its students to welfare and success through its unique stance and educational vision initiated and still supported by former superintendent and board member of the Boys and Girls Club, Glenn Meriwether.

As a scholar and an ally myself, I felt compelled to learn about and expose both the gravity of this painful past and the exceptionality of this contemporary success in a local setting—the tribal territory of the Cheyenne-Arapaho—which caught my attention and my heart from the earliest moments of my research on Oklahoma's tribal nations.

The radical and dichotomic opposition between these educational postures from two different time periods leads me to propose here parallel interviews: one with Gordon Yellowman Sr., Director of the Culture and Language Programs for the Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribes and Peace Chief of the nation, about the history and legacy of local Indian Boarding Schools, and the other with Gina Musae and Glenn Meriwether about Darlington School. Through their words, my

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<sup>1</sup> The Cheyenne and Arapaho tribal jurisdiction encompasses ten counties in Western Oklahoma for a tribal enrollment of approximately 12,000 members, Tsistsistas | Hinono'ei, <https://www.cheyenneandrapaho-nsn.gov/government>.

<sup>2</sup> Students aged 4 to 14. Darlington Schools, <https://www.darlingtonps.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> El Reno has about 20,000 inhabitants, <https://www.elrenook.gov/>.

<sup>4</sup> Title 1 is a federally funded program which supports schools based on the percentage of students living near or in poverty. "Title 1 schools" host at least 40% of low-income/at risk students. That level at Darlington is nearly 100%, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html>.

aim is to highlight the shift from the realities of a mostly traumatic past to a successful educational vision and collaboration between allies and Natives within a school community, and between a public school and a tribe.

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### Interview 1

#### **Gordon Yellowman Sr. on Cheyenne and Arapaho assimilation schools**

**“There was no love in those schools”; “if you take time to listen, you will hear [the spirits of those children] cry”<sup>5</sup>**



Photograph of the Darlington Arapahoe School, Darlington, Oklahoma

Taken by Christopher C. Stotz, June 26, 1891. Courtesy of Oklahoma Historical Society

Photograph Collection

#### **Tatiana Viallaneix: Could you please introduce yourself?**

**Gordon Yellowman:** My name is Gordon Yellowman Sr. I’m currently serving as the Director of the Culture and Language Programs for the Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribes. My experience here has been an exciting journey and part of that journey began with education. It began when the tribes gave me an opportunity to work for them, and I’ve been working for them well over thirty years consecutively. So, I thank the Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribes for giving

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Gordon Yellowman Sr. recorded on April 24, 2023 in Concho.

me a job, skills and the opportunities to advance my education. We all, as tribal members, thank the tribes for all of the services they provide. And a lot of these services began with treaties.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: The name of the current Darlington School resonates locally as an echo of Darlington Indian School and Concho Indian School. Could you tell us about both these schools?**

**Gordon Yellowman:** It was promised that the United States government was going to provide education, welfare, social services, health services. And education was a key component in that treaty. And that's when they started building these agencies to administer these programs based on the treaties. Darlington was our very first agency here for the Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribes, located just a few miles northwest of El Reno, north of the Canadian River. And Brinton Darlington was our first agent there. He came in 1870 and started building our first agency. And they named the agency after him and it became Darlington Agency.<sup>6</sup> He was a Quaker, a missionary, and he also brought skills with him, as a carpenter, a craftsman.

At that time, the first school was an Arapaho Day school, and the second school he built was a Cheyenne Day school. And [Darlington] lived for only two years. And the second agent that came was Colonel Shell. And the Spanish translation for Shell is Concho. So, once they consolidated both schools, and it became Concho Indian Boarding School, which is located here. It was moved from Darlington three miles north near Caddo Springs, a natural spring that provided fresh water for everybody and that still exists today.<sup>7</sup> They built dormitories, girls' and boys', and school buildings. It was adjacent to the tracks; the train was a big service provider for our communities or the school. From there, Concho School ran to the 1960s.

And in 1970, they started building the new school and they moved it over here. And they closed in 1983, with an official transfer from the government to the tribes. But all of the students that were here at that time when they closed were transferred to Riverside Indian School.<sup>8</sup>

And so we, as tribes, inherited the buildings. But they were built with different hazardous materials: lead paint, asbestos. Little did we know we were inheriting the environmental

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<sup>6</sup> Brinton Darlington and the Cheyenne-Arapaho Agency, Canadian County Historical Society Museum, <https://canadiancountymuseum.com/brinton-darlington-and-the-cheyenne-arapaho-agency/>.

<sup>7</sup> The Caddo Springs were a stop for cattle herders, going from Texas to Kansas, on the widely-used Chisholm Trail.

<sup>8</sup> Riverside Indian School is one of the oldest Indian schools in the US. It is located in Anadarko, Oklahoma, and one of the four remaining Indian boarding schools run by the Bureau of Indian Education. It welcomes Native students (grades 4-12 so aged 10 to 18) from approximately 75 tribes across the US, <https://ris.bie.edu/>.

concern.<sup>9</sup> And we're going to build new buildings in place, hopefully new administration buildings, it might even be schools, because we built a brand-new Head Start school and a brand-new childcare facility, so there's going to be more educational buildings built.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: What about Darlington Indian School? The building is disused and all boarded-up. Are there any plans to destroy or reuse it?**

**Gordon Yellowman:** Darlington [Agency] was never transferred back to the tribes. It still remained with the state and eventually became state jurisdiction. It served as a mental institution, a game farm. Then they gave it to Redlands Community College to develop programs related to animal farming. And it was our hope that we could work with them as a partner to develop that campus at Darlington, but we have never been included in that kind of talks. So, will we ever get it back? It may or may not happen.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: How often could boarders go back home and be in contact with their families?**

**Gordon Yellowman:** They weren't allowed to go home until they completed their graduation. Eventually in the seventies, they were allowed to go home for the summer because they would shut down. And that's the way it is today. Riverside Indian School sends theirs home in the summer, and there's one or two that might want to stay throughout the year.

From the day school, they were allowed to go back to their families after school. When they moved to Caddo Springs, they stayed in dormitories. And when they moved over here in 1972, they stayed in dormitories as well. The students who were allowed to go to high school at El Reno High School would be busing back and forth.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: The days of Darlington Indian School are long gone since it stopped operating in 1908, but have you heard stories that you could share with us about those days?**

**Gordon Yellowman:** Historically there's a lot of stories associated with how Darlington day school was part of that cultural assimilation. That assimilation was more damaging than what they thought was going to be a good thing for us. It was a cultural genocide. They took away our language. As Henry Pratt said, "kill the Indian and save the man".<sup>10</sup> That was his mentality

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<sup>9</sup> The short documentary *Restoring Néške'emāne* (2021), directed and produced by Loren Kasey Waters, narrated by Gordon Yellowman, describes the work done by the tribe to remediate this polluted site. <https://lorenwaters.com/film>.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Henry Pratt, a former army officer shaped a model of Indian education at Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, the most famous boarding school from the assimilation era (1879-1918). It operated as a regimented structure, half of the day was dedicated to academic learning, the other half to learning a trade (often farm or construction work for boys, housekeeping for girls). The students also received religious teachings. Student had their cut, they had to wear uniforms and could

in that transition period of assimilation: take away their traditions and their life ways and then they can become better people. And he did not know at that time that he wasn't killing us, because we're still here today and we still speak our language

And we're seeing those negative results, but they didn't think about that. Not just physically; emotionally, socially, they took advantage of us as human beings. And they tried to change us. To me, that's the worst thing you can do if you want to educate a person. You're rich in culture because you're bilingual, you know? Did they think of that word back then? No. And discrimination is still here. Very much present.

African American, Alaska Native, it's still being dealt with today. And assimilation is a result of what I'm going to call this country's freedom. Dividing our nations, dividing our country, segregation; that was all based on race. And so, for us here as Native students, the treaty in a way did us positive things because it provided us with these schools, but they took away our innocence because a lot of children were sexually abused by these teachers, by these matrons of the dormitories, the staff. And those are things that are being uncovered and we didn't want to talk about it, but today we can. And we have to talk about it. And, we have to really understand what these missionaries and what these government officials did to us.

And it may not take away the pain, but at least it will comfort us to know that somebody needs to listen to us, to hear us for all of the pain and suffering they did to us as Native Nations.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Are you saying that these things happened here at Darlington Indian School? Was progress made later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?**

**Gordon Yellowman:** Not just Darlington. Concho. And progress wasn't made because the people here to supposedly educate us, did a lot of harm. They would whip you, they would put soap in your mouth if you spoke your language. And they would do things if you didn't wear their uniforms, cut your hair. All of that was traumatizing for that person, that Indian student. And for them it was just standard practice. And they got away with everything and they took advantage of that; sexually abusing the children, punishment. If they tried to run away, they would spend all their resources to capture that student to bring them back. And the student had every reason to run away to get back home to a place of protection, a place of comfort, a place of love. There was no love in those schools.

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not speak their language or practise any cultural feature. In those insitutions, corporal punishment was widely used; physical and psychological distress and sexual abuse were widespread. During a speech delivered in 1892 during the National Conference of Charities and Correction, held in Denver (Colorado), Pratt summarized his principles as follows: "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man". (<https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/teach/kill-indian-him-and-save-man-r-h-pratt-education-native-americans>)

And then here in the seventies, faculty were native, there was native faculty and you didn't hear of them abusing the children. It was the non-Native faculty that took advantage of that. My former mother-in-law served as a matron here at the Concho girls' dormitory for thirty-five years till she retired. All [the students] had was these patrons that were the color of their skin. And so, there was some change late in the seventies, but it went on, these nightmare stories.

The good and bad, the pros and cons of boarding school, you have both, and the question needs to be asked: which one outweighs the other? We often hear more about things that were not successes. But as a result, we had positive things. We had many graduates.

Those are the stories that we don't often hear, but when we do hear them, we understand that that's the reality of what happened. And so, when we can understand, we prevent it from happening in the future.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: In 2021, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, a Laguna Pueblo, launched the Federal Indian Boarding Schools Initiative<sup>11</sup> meant to reassess the legacy of these institutions. What are your expectations around this?**

**Gordon Yellowman:** Well, I think the initiative is sensitive in nature, but serious. And there does have to be an investigation into the past of that assimilation that did more harm to us than good. That's a given. But if you research and dig further back into the dark spaces, you're going to find a lot more and it will be uncovered. And when it's uncovered, it's going to bring more need to investigate. But it's also going to enlighten some of the fear and some of the darkness. It's going to lighten that up because it's now appearing that somebody has to be responsible. And is an apology good enough? No. So are we going to accept an apology? How are we going to resolve that? How are we going to come to a consensus among nations to accept that? And they continue to build boarding schools. We can put a moratorium on it. Don't build boarding schools, build institutions of greater learning that have language and have cultural traditions, cultural life ways reflective of our people, of what we lost back then. And that's going to enrich us more and, and help us heal from the past of what they've done to us. And so, she [referring to Deb Haaland being the first Native Secretary of the Interior] has leadership for a short time that can change this. And so, she's got a tremendous responsibility now listening to us as nations to make that happen. But she also has authority. And if we take advantage of that, we can come to a resolution that's going to help all of us to accept and prepare for better things

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<sup>11</sup> Launched in June 2021, this initiative aims to shed light on the legacy and transgenerational trauma due to the removal and forced assimilation of Indian children from 1819 to 1969 in federal Indian boarding schools; a preliminary report was published in May 2022 laying the ground work for a deeper investigation. Local investigation committees including tribal officials have been founded in various states. (<https://www.bia.gov/service/federal-indian-boarding-school-initiative>)

to happen in the future. And we, tribal nations, are very resilient. Those open wounds that were there, they're now scars. So how do you diminish the scar that was inflicted?

Those are questions that need to be asked. And it's not just the physical side of it, it's the spiritual side of it. Because we're now dealing with the spirits of those children that were never returned home for proper burial. They're crying right now and their tears are non-stop. And if you take time to listen, you will hear them cry. That's my part on it.

**Tatiana Viallaneix:** Thank you very much.

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## Interview 2

**Gina Musae (non-Indigenous school principal) and Glenn Meriwether  
(non-Indigenous former superintendent of schools)**

**Exploring healing and allyship at Darlington Public School<sup>12</sup>**

**“This school is an absolute miracle”,<sup>13</sup> “such a love story”<sup>14</sup>**



Darlington Public School. Drone view.  
Courtesy of Darlington Public School

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Gina Musae and Glenn Meriwether, recorded on April 28, 2023 at Darlington Public School.

<sup>13</sup> Glenn Meriwether, former superintendent of Darlington Public School. See Canadian County's district schools, <https://www.canadiancounty.org/899/Schools-and-Colleges>.

<sup>14</sup> Gina Musae, Pincipal of Darlington Public School, <https://www.darlingtonps.org/>.



**Tatiana Viallaneix: Could you introduce your school and explain, briefly for now, about your educational vision?**

**Gina Musae:** Absolutely. We are a Pre-K through eighth grade school in rural Oklahoma. We have about 250 students, 95% are Native American. Our educational vision is that we want every child to be prepared to be successful in not only their academic life, but their social life. We want them to be successful adults that are happy and in occupations that fit well for them.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Could you describe the school population in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic context?**

**Gina Musae:** We are a 100% free and reduced lunch.<sup>15</sup> We have some students that are living in foster care homes, some students whose parents are incarcerated. Addiction is an issue with some of our students' families. And so, sometimes school is their safe place and where they want to be. It's a better alternative sometimes than being at home.

**Glenn Meriwether:** We have a lot of grandmothers, grandparents that are raising kids.

**Gina Musae:** We're predominantly Cheyenne-Arapaho, we also have some Kiowa, some Navajo, some Choctaw, some Osage too. We have twelve students, White population, who live in the district, on farms, one African-American student, a Vietnamese, some Hispanic kids.

**Glenn Meriwether:** Our community consists of farmers that are older and don't have children or grandchildren that live in the district. Our board members live on farm land in our community and are very supportive of our school and students.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: What are the specific features (representations, expectations, strengths and challenges, etc.) of the student population you serve, and what is the specific educational vision which prevails here?**

**Gina Musae:** Well, almost none of these students live in our district. We have some that come from forty-five minutes away or more. They come to us by choice. And part of that is because here we accept and embrace the culture. Larger school districts are starting to evolve somewhat, but still struggle with understanding the culture. Students that move in learn quickly that this is a school like no other. For example, we've had a couple of new foster students this year, they come in with their head down because they're expecting to a) not fit in, and b) not be cared about, and just be invisible. And you can't do that here because everyone here is loved, everyone here is included in everything we do.

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<sup>15</sup> Getting free or reduced lunch indicates that a student is considered as economically in need. "The National School Lunch Program (NSLP)", Feeding America, <https://www.feedingamerica.org/take-action/advocate/federal-hunger-relief-programs/national-school-lunch-program>.

We build self-esteem through our students feeling understood about their culture; our staff goes through a lot of training to understand the culture. And I think that athletics is one of the ways that we reach our kids. They're exceptional, they have a lot of success and that success rolls over into other things. We play basketball and we have a lot of kids that are really great at basketball; but then we had some of our shy non-athletic kids that we needed to reach through something extra, where they can excel and people will see them. So, we've started archery, we had a Christmas program this year that was unbelievable, then we brought in an artist who did a long unit of art and art shows. We find ways for each kid to figure out "how can I shine"?

So, the expectations are that we're able to unlock and see their strengths and their potential regardless of their home situation or economic situation. And our challenges are, helping our staff to understand how to meet their needs and not just say, well, so-and-so's just not working for me. Let's find out why.

**Glenn Meriwether:** They come in with an inferiority complex. They have had a history of not fitting into the school setting. They have a different culture, and in a lot of ways they have a great culture. I mean, they have skills in different areas, a family tradition, with the elders teaching children, and the things that they believe in that are really important to them sometimes don't fit in with your typical school system, not in Oklahoma anyway, for sure.

We had quite a few kids come to us because of the ten-day absence rule, [the school] would take away their credits<sup>16</sup> and we stood up to the state superintendent with that. I said: "is it wise to take a girl's credits or boy's when they are making As"?

Self-confidence is the main thing that we have to accomplish for these kids because they're really talented. And the poverty thing is important too, because if you're going to school, you can't have class pictures because you can't afford them. You don't have shoes for athletics and so on. Why would you want to go to school? You have to go to school for something you like that you're good at, and you get a little recognition from. When our kids hit the basketball court, there's an audience there. And that's the most stimulating thing they can have. Do well in front of people, especially their relatives. They take great pride in that. They often think they're less and they were treated less for years.

And you must understand their culture. They're more spiritual. The spiritual things, the inner feelings, the emotions are more important to them than the science, math and so on. But they want their kids to get that too, to have good jobs. But basically, it's about overcoming this shyness and lack of self-confidence, because they have the talent.

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<sup>16</sup> The students' results could not be validated because they had missed more than ten days of class. See OK's "Chronic Absenteeism" policy, <https://sde.ok.gov/chronic-absenteeism>.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Could you introduce the Boys and Girls Club<sup>17</sup> and its area of intervention?**

**Glenn Meriwether:** The important thing about the Boys and Girls Club is that it gives kids a safe place to go after school. I started it over twenty years ago. I noticed I was taking kids home and they'd end up on the street because they didn't have parents at home. And also, a lot of our parents could not afford daycare, so the older daughters or sons were taking care of younger kids. So, we designed the Boys and Girls Club, and we take in the little ones [four-year-olds], while most clubs don't take them that young. But we wanted the older ones to have the freedom of coming in and take the burden off of having to watch younger kids. The little ones like to come and play and do some programs in tutoring too; but the older ones, they get tutoring, which keeps them caught up in school and they have a place where they can enjoy themselves and hang out with their peers. It's a normal, clean environment where they can be normal adolescents. And it's also important for the parents because they have practically free daycare. And we feed them a snack, we have activities and field trips. We have summer school.<sup>18</sup> They all show up for that. The kids are here because they want to be. And if someone needs a ride, we go get them, so they don't have a transportation problem.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Do you teach the regular state curriculum? Does the school provide space for an exploration, an expression or a teaching of Native American cultures and languages?**

**Gina Musae:** We have to teach state standards. And it's unbelievable what these kids have to learn in each grade. So, we really don't have time to bring in anything else. And legally we really can't. So we bring in a lot of culture in our afterschool program. Our Boys and Girls Club has the freedom to do whatever they want. It's a separate entity from school, even though it's on school ground. So, one of our favorite programs on which the tribe works with us is *Tradition Not Addiction*.<sup>19</sup> They come in after school and they teach traditional ways, and at the same time, they're teaching them about addiction and what can happen. And it's a beautiful thing. And then we bring in elders that teach our kids how to make things that they used to make, like basket weaving and beadwork and those kinds of things. Shawls... And we immerse them, we have white kids making shawls and then we perform in them <laugh>. So everyone's included

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<sup>17</sup> Boys and Girls Clubs of America is a national organization of local chapters which provide voluntary after-school programs for young people. It was founded in 1990 and succeeded the Boys Club of America founded in 1860, <https://www.bgca.org/>.

<sup>18</sup> Summer school is a program mixing tutoring and fun activities allowing students to catch up if needed.

<sup>19</sup> "Tradition not Addiction Award Video," Cheyenne and Arapaho Television, 1 hour 30 mn, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwbBY5BVU-o>.

in what we're doing. And it's also a great time for our elders to share with the kids things that they might not have been exposed to.

And, we have one thing that we do still, and we're going to do this until we get in trouble. In November, we have our Native American Heritage Week,<sup>20</sup> it's the one week that we go full out, with traditional things going on every single day, and then on Friday we have a huge powwow, where our families that are traditional come in and teach. We have an MC that will say what a dance is about and where it came from, so that all of our kids learn. Non-traditional families are learning about their culture and get invited to join in on all the dances. And we have *Wear Your Moccasins* day<sup>21</sup> and our kids learn about stickball.<sup>22</sup>

**Glenn Meriwether:** For languages, we have a long history of that here, but it's mostly a history of failure. There were elders that could speak Arapaho and more that could speak Cheyenne. And we'd start a session of that, and pretty soon it dwindled. So, it's been a hard thing. And now, most of the speakers are no longer with us. But the language is really important for the older kids as they feel like that you lose the culture without the language.

**Gina Musae:** Now I do know that their television station<sup>23</sup> is really neat and they do a lot of wonderful programs. Some of our kids take virtual classes. That's as far as it's gone, but, we're open to it.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Your students just finished taking state tests this week. What kind of academic results do you get here?**

**Gina Musae:** Well, the areas that you get graded on are growth [note: progress] points. So, we had a B in growth points. We had a B in our flat scores, just looking at their knowledge base. And then we get graded on absenteeism; we get a C for that. We have tardies and absences, and it's really down to just a few families now because the tribe has a requirement for them to get to work on time. So, our kids are getting here on time, which is wonderful because they'd miss out on so much. The reading time is in the morning, which is most valuable. But I feel like a C is pretty good compared to most places that have Native students.

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<sup>20</sup> Native American Heritage Month is held annually in November in the USA (in June in Canada), <https://nativeamericanheritagemonth.gov/>.

<sup>21</sup> The *Rock Your Mocs* initiative was introduced in 2011 during Native American Heritage Month. Individuals are encouraged to wear their moccasins, take and post pictures to create a sense of Native pride and virtual unity, <https://rockyourmocs.org/>.

<sup>22</sup> A very popular and widely-shared traditional Native game very similar to the game of lacrosse.

<sup>23</sup> Cheyenne-Arapaho Television (CATV) is a public educational channel, created in 2012, owned and operated by the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, the first one of its kind in Oklahoma, <http://www.catv35.com/>.

**Glenn Meriwether:** We're non-threatening on attendance and we have the best attendance of any school with Native American kids. They might go to powwow two weeks up in Wyoming. Others would say, too bad, you're too late, you don't get any credits. We catch them up. You don't give up on anybody because they missed a couple weeks. That's not their fault. They used to sneak in here, they just thought they were going to be hammered and I said, hello kids, come on in, let's get caught up.

**Gina Musae:** Obviously, there's no school just like our school but, if we compare ourselves to other schools that have free and reduced lunch, in every area we're above the state scores.

**Tatiana Viallaneix:** **To you, what are the school's greatest achievements? Or could you cite one success, past or recent, maybe an action or an individual case, of which you are particularly proud?**

**Glenn Meriwether:** To me, our greatest achievement is, that in May [2022] 100% of our kids who had graduated here in eighth grade graduated from high school either in El Reno or over at Calumet.<sup>24</sup> Over the last five years I think we had one that didn't graduate [note: from high school]. Now that's phenomenal. Most schools don't have that.

**Gina Musae:** I agree; And we've had three Gates Scholars<sup>25</sup> come from here, which is huge.

**Glenn Meriwether:** Natalie Young Bull was our first one to get her doctorate. She teaches down at OU<sup>26</sup> now. Also, we had an all sports banquet the other night and these girls got rewards and what amazed me is they took their pictures and they'd smile just like a movie actress. And normally they'd be like that [note: looking down], but they are gaining the confidence. I feel good about them because I know they're going to do well.

**Gina Musae:** An individual thing I would like to share with you is the love that our kids have for others. If we have a special needs child, that comes in or someone who's unique or different, they don't see them as different and they treat them the way they would want to be treated.

**Glenn Meriwether:** They had a special needs boy playing at Union City when we were playing them, of course we were better than they were. They put that boy on the floor and our boys let him shoot or make a bucket if he could. And we got letters from that school, from the parents; they were so amazed that our kids had that consideration, without anyone saying anything to them. They just recognized what they had there. We went to a lot of games where

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<sup>24</sup> Calumet is a small town (about 500 inhabitants) located about 25 kilometers northwest of El Reno, <http://www.townofcalumetok.com/>.

<sup>25</sup> The Gates Scholarship is a highly selective, full scholarship program for outstanding high school graduates from minority and low-income households, <https://www.thegatesscholarship.org/>.

<sup>26</sup> The University of Oklahoma (OU) is the main public university in the state, <https://www.ou.edu/>

we won and when we came out the other school would lower their bus windows and be talking about us. But our kids didn't even recognize hearing all that. They were used to it, I guess. It made me mad and I complained about it.

**Gina Musae:** We've been through this a lot. I would get defensive too...

**Tatiana Viallaneix:** **Delving more into the details of your approach, could you describe the different threads of the school's actions that you weave together to create this positive learning and living environment for the students?**

**Gina Musae:** Okay, so let me start with pre-K. So, the majority of our kids go to Head Start.<sup>27</sup> We are seeing a tremendous difference for school readiness. For the families that are struggling, that maybe there's addiction in the home, domestic violence, those kids don't make it to Head Start or they don't go regularly. Our families don't read in the home. It's not as much of a priority, especially if you're trying to keep food on the table or if you have an addiction problem or relationship issue. So, we find that in Pre-K these are behind but they're so bright. Our teachers don't give up. And we try to just make it our problem and not necessarily the family's problem. We involve them in the process and we have a lot of parents that are very much involved, but we have a lot of parents that don't have any idea how to help their kids. So, we don't put that on them, we do everything here. And that's why we have a paraprofessional in every single classroom. The para can take over the class. The teacher works with those that need extra help.

**Glenn Meriwether:** But the most important person in this school sits next door, Dara Franklin, I call her the force in the tribe. Our families trust her, they'll go to her when they won't come to us. If a shy parent comes up here, they feel more comfortable with her. She's Arapaho and Kiowa.

**Gina Musae:** Our Indian Education Director. She's very traditional, she's got the philosophy and the culture. She knows everybody from here to the state line. She can tell you about the history of their families. She looks at things in a different way. If they have a child with a problem or a problem with a parent, she knows how to handle it in her way to where they respect her. And she has perfect discipline with these kids; without getting angry or anything, she can say something to them to where they behave. She's just amazing. She's a very loyal

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<sup>27</sup> This preschool program is offered by the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes to children aged 3-5. Head Start's programs offer services centered around early learning and development and active parenting. "The federal government funds Head Start programs through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Across the country, school districts, nonprofit and for-profit groups, faith-based institutions, tribal councils, and other organizations qualify to become a Head Start recipient and receive federal funding." Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ohs/about/head-start>.

employee and person. A lot of these people in the tribe are the best friends I have. You can depend on them. There's a loyalty in them.

Another thing is that our students all want to be like everybody else. They want to be able to go to Homecoming. So, about the way they look, we always watch for that; we try to find out who doesn't have a dress. So, we make sure that we help them get the resources that they need. That's important.

**Glenn Meriwether:** It's also important for the kids to know that they can trust us and come to us. You know you've done something when they ask you for advice or if they're in trouble or have a problem in family and they come to you.

**Gina Musae:** The families are doing a lot better now... But I feel like here we have a different approach to discipline as well. And they've already been shamed in their lives just from the color of their skin in a community. So, we deal with discipline issues from a different perspective. I'm a counselor, an LPC,<sup>28</sup> and I told the board: when I take this job, I'm not going to be someone walking around with a paddle. That's not my approach. It's, get to the source of what's happening. And so, Dara and I will meet; if I have a teacher that has a child that's regularly misbehaving or having a hard time, we sit and talk about what might be going on.

**Glenn Meriwether:** The school is successful but our methods and what we do out here, it's not rocket science, it's just common sense and having a sincere care about those kids. We developed a relationship with [them and their parents] and made them successful. We go get them, we talk them up: hey, you're doing good. And they have a chance, an opportunity here. That's what we give them: an opportunity and care. The physical, the social, as well as the academic, in that order.

**Gina Musae:** I tell our teachers, if you know that what you've done that day was in the best interest of that child or your children, then you can sleep at night. Some of the things we do aren't orthodox, but if it's what is best, that's what we do. And then, if it's something we shouldn't have done that we'll get in trouble for later, we'll face that then. But in that moment, that's what was best for that child. So that's just how we approach things.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Tell us more about how you build a trusting relationship with the students' families.**

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<sup>28</sup> Licensed professional counselors are certified mental health professionals who hold at least a master's degree and are trained to treat mental, behavioral, and emotional problems and disorders. In most states, they need to have significant and supervised experience and to pass an exam in order to get a state license.

**Gina Musae:** When new teachers come in, our parents trust us that we are hiring people that are going to be good to their kids. But it's a slow evolution and you don't even know how much they're watching you and paying attention through the things their kids are saying when they come home and through what they see when you communicate with them. And here's the thing, if something goes wrong, once you've broken their trust, you usually can't fix it.

Another thing, we have a mother, she loves her kids. She just has a problem and she's trying. So, you don't write those people off, you try to encourage and help them. And I feel that it's this deep-seated grief from historical trauma that continues generationally. And I feel like that's what we try to break; we try to help them express their grief and begin that healing. And it starts with relationship and then it goes through success. And then it goes through having your people that you can count on. And, I don't make a practice of taking kids home with me, but I've done that a couple times; we've had teachers that have actually taken in kids and then ended up adopting them when parents lost rights.<sup>29</sup> I mean, this place is just such a love story to me. I feel good about my job and coming to work and the differences that we make here.

**Glenn Meriwether:** Almost all of [our students] start here in pre-K and go through eighth grade. They don't move as Indians often do. The kids made them stay here. We even had kids stay here when their parents left. They'd find somebody else they'd move in with.

**Gina Musae:** Also, when we're talking about building the relationship, I think one thing that helps us now is that we have kids' kids. So, our former students know and trust us. They never forget this place. No one has bad memories, they all remember the positive things and how they were cared for and loved, in spite of pretty sad situations. That's the whole thing for me, that is when I see a former student walk in with their kid, it just melts my heart because that is the biggest testimony of what we're doing here; that's a gift to us. They believe in us. We've developed this reputation with the tribe. Last year, we had probably fifty applicants that didn't get in because our capacity. So, it's a tough, tough call for us. Everything just blooms!

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Mr. Meriwether, you are the one who initiated this educational vision. When and how did it start? And how did it develop?**

**Glenn Meriwether:** Well, it's partly by accident. We had two kids here, their parents wanted them in kindergarten. They couldn't get in uptown [in El Reno]. It wasn't mandatory then. That was forty years ago. They've got grandchildren now! There were three kids and the family thought this was their school district. I said, if you go to town and get a transfer, we'd love to have you. So, they did; they came out here and we made them welcome. We were a really small

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<sup>29</sup> Note that the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act guarantees tribal jurisdiction over the placement of Native American children. The constitutionality of this law was reaffirmed by the US Supreme Court in May 2023. NICWA, <https://www.nicwa.org/about-icwa/>.



school then. Pretty soon, their cousins came and so they came in and we got a pretty good group, just word of mouth. Back then, we had eighty-five to one hundred students.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: How was it received within the community at large back then?**

**Glenn Meriwether:** Some people in the community didn't like that. They felt threatened. I'm not really sure how we were successful in dealing with that, but I have a pretty strong personality <laugh>. They didn't like it, but they accepted it. I never asked for any raise while I was here. <laugh> I was just happy.

**Gina Musae:** The people that stayed were the ones that were able to also embrace the culture. But the opposite happened and we had white people who brought their children out here on purpose because they were educated and they wanted their children to experience more. And we had a judge and his wife who brought their children out here and went all the way through school. Then we had a chiropractor in town who had his kids out here.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: How is Darlington School funded?**

**Gina :** It's largely Impact Aid,<sup>30</sup> which is based on the percentage of Native students. I think there's a misconception that we receive plenty from the tribe and we don't. A lot of people think we're a Native school and we're not. We're a public school.

**Glenn Meriwether:** Impact Aid has come close to being dominant lately. Now we get Title 1, free lunch determines how much Title 1 you get. But Impact Aid is really important to us and we couldn't do these things for the aids in every classroom if it wasn't for it.

**Gina Musae:** We're able to pay for a paraprofessional to be in each classroom and also training for our teachers and our staff to teach different methods because we find that a lot of our Native American students are kinesthetic learners rather than auditory learners. We use a lot of our funds for that, and then materials; we never want our teachers to say, I don't have what I need to help these kids be successful. So, that is an open book, really.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Tell me about your staff. How are they recruited? Is your staff mostly Native or non-Native? How do you involve them in the school's vision?**

**Gina Musae:** There is very little turnover. They usually retire out. I try to find out who's the best, who's the most compassionate, who has some experience that's a positive with Native

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<sup>30</sup> Impact Aid is a Federal grant program for local educational agencies (LEAs) which have lost local property tax revenue due to the presence of non-taxable Federal land. Most Indian-owned property is non-taxable locally, which means the school cannot receive the corresponding state funding and *in lieu* must apply for a federal grant based on its annual head count of Native students. Moreover, Impact Aid is overall more generous than state funding. Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-formula-grants/impact-aid-program/>.

Americans. It's not easy. Currently, we have three Native American teachers in key roles; one is a third-grade teacher. One teaches sixth, seventh, and eighth grade history and science. One teaches sixth, seventh and eighth grade English language/art. We prefer our teaching assistants to be Native American. So, if the teacher is not Native American, then at least they see another face in that room that looks like their face; that's helpful, especially when they're little...

And with that, I will say that we do have high expectations for them, but we help build scaffolding to get them there. They are required to take a multicultural training through the State Department.<sup>31</sup> But what we've been doing that works the best is, we bring in a panel of our people. We call them "our people". So, they're either our parents or they work at the tribe or they have a connection to us. And we bring in that panel and let them talk to our staff about what their thoughts and their visions are for their kids and their people, and how we might concern them better. And then we allow the teachers to ask questions. And then they talk about where they came from, the challenges they faced, about their dreams for their kids and what they want for them. And I think it really helps our teachers, especially our new ones. Everyone goes through it annually. And Dara also comes in and talks in a very good way with our teachers to help them understand, she's a key part of that.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Recently, a toddler's corner was created in the school library for families to come in with their little ones. Tell us more about this project.**

**Gina Musae:** They do come here occasionally. And we also have families coming in and checking our Native American section as well. And so, a lot of people come in and check out those books as well. For adults, mainly. But we're having our major dedication opening in June, and that's when we actually honor Dara, this building was named after her. And then that's where we're going to put out our plan that you don't have to have children already in school here to come in and utilize our toddler library. You can come in anytime and you can stay and play with your children, or you can check out the books. Trying to instill in them a love for reading with their children.

**Glenn Meriwether:** We've got a lot of books [in the Native American section] that are very enlightening. The state would take those away because of critical race theory.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Oklahoma State Department of Education, see for example the Professional Development page on "Racial & Ethnic Education" focusing on Teaching Tolerance and Culturally Responsive Teaching, <https://sde.ok.gov/professional-development>.

<sup>32</sup> For critical race theorists, race is not a natural, biological feature distinguishing subgroups of human beings but a social construct. To them systemic racism operates to create and maintain social, economic and political inequalities. The Oklahoma legislature banned critical race theory from public schools in 2021. The Inter-Tribal Council approved a resolution demanding the repeal of this law in October 2022.

**Gina Musae:** Our [State] Superintendent has a very large agenda and unfortunately, he and our governor are aligned. So practically right now, we're not supposed to teach any culture.<sup>33</sup> Same with the trainings for our staff on Native American culture, we're not supposed to do that, we're not supposed to have books about it, we're not supposed to talk about it.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Have you been asked to provide a list?**

**Gina Musae:** They are going to ask us to provide a list next year; we haven't so far. But I feel like we're going backwards. I feel like we're going back fifty years or just putting our head in the sand. There are differences, there are hurts and there are things that have happened that are unfair. They're just pretending those things didn't happen, and we'll never heal if we don't accept that these things happened. We'll repeat it if we don't learn and heal from it.

**Glenn Meriwether:** You won't see a teepee in front of a public school. We've got one. <laugh>. You see how rebel we are.

**Gina Musae:** Well, they aren't in any school. But we're not trying to, I don't know... Anyway, it's very much a political problem in Oklahoma right now. We are very polarized, and it's unfortunate and it's really affecting education.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Most students go to the El Reno High School afterwards. How do they transition to that school? Do you collaborate with the high school to facilitate their adaptation?**

**Gina Musae:** Most of them go to El Reno. We have certain families that prefer Calumet, but the majority go to El Reno. Typically, they try to stay together.

About El Reno and the transition, about five years ago El Reno finally came to us and they said, how are you having this success? So, we got together a group of our students that were freshmen there, and we brought them in and said, tell them what you loved about Darlington, tell them what's difficult about being here. And the biggest thing was they didn't fit in. They had obstacles that kept them from being a part of things. So, I knew a girl, I think she's Ponca, who had her drug and alcohol counseling license. They had a grant and they hired her. She came in and she started doing what we do here in developing those relationships with these kids, helping the staff to understand what's happening with these kids and why you have to

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ITC Resolution No. 22-19 - A Resolution Urging the Oklahoma Legislature to repeal House Bill 1775, <https://www.fivecivilizedtribes.org/Docs/Resolutions/2022/ITC%20R22-19.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> State Law HB 1775 prevents the teaching of CRT and provides for the suspension or revocation of all concerned staff (teacher, librarian, any instructor, principal, superintendent, etc.) and the accreditation downgrading of offending schools or school districts. See for example State of Oklahoma School Boards Association, "Guidance: HB 1755," updated Aug. 24, 2022, <https://www.ossba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HB-1775-Guidance.pdf>.

approach it differently. And we started seeing this change occur. Then at the same time, they hired coaches that did not care what your skin color was or where you went to school or who your mama was. They cared about who was going to win for them and who was putting in the work. And so, then our kids became successful through the athletics. So, the two of those combined, now we have Homecoming queens<sup>34</sup> up there, which is unbelievable. I mean, there's no greater honor as a young lady. We know what a change it means. So, we have seen that change occur to where our kids are now the leaders in El Reno. And even academically.

**Glenn Meriwether:** Here [in El Reno], the school is different now. About four years ago, a boy there had the beads around his graduation hat. His grandma was so proud he was graduating, he was from here. She beaded his cap they wear for graduation. They took it away from him, said we got a rule you can't have anything on your cap. Well, our parents accepted that, they didn't say much but Natives across the United States heard about it and it hit the media.

**Gina Musae:** There's actually a bill that our legislature has up right now about that.<sup>35</sup> Here, we have kids that want to graduate in regalia and we've been letting them do it for years.

**Glenn Meriwether:** We would sit out here [and say] "nice cap"! Grandma did that. She's so proud of him graduating. That's crazy.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Would you say that the percentage of your students going to college is higher than the average rate at El Reno High School?**

**Gina Musae:** Oh, yes! But the one obstacle we have is that for these kids that have never had money, if they work in the summer at the casino and they have money, then they're like, I think I'm going to work for a year, then go to college; and if they delay it, a lot of times they don't go.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Do you also collaborate with other schools located in the Cheyenne-Arapaho tribal region?**

**Gina Musae:** Absolutely. Recently, Geary<sup>36</sup> is a great example because Geary struggles with knowing what to do. And they had a new principal come in that just happened to be a friend of mine. She's very compassionate and caring. And so, she and I sat down for probably two hours

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<sup>34</sup> Homecoming is a traditional event, usually a dance which takes place in schools and colleges in the fall. During this event, a female and a male student are elected queen and king of the ball.

<sup>35</sup> Both chambers of the Oklahoma Legislature voted to override Gov. Kevin Stitt's veto of a bill designed to protect the rights of Native graduates to wear eagle feathers, beaded caps and other forms of tribal regalia. It is set to take effect July 1, 2023. Molly Young, "A vetoed bill to protect tribal regalia at graduations is now set to become law," *The Oklahoman*, May 25, 2023, <https://eu.oklahoman.com/story/news/politics/government/2023/05/25/tribal-regalia-graduation-protection-oklahoma-senate-overrides-stitt-veto/70257130007/>.

<sup>36</sup> Geary high school, <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/geary-high-school-profile>.

and talked about the Native Americans because she had never really been in schools where there were large populations of Native American students. And so, we spoke forever. And then she went back in with her staff and did training with them based on what we had talked about. And then she's called me throughout the year and asked different questions. And it was a beautiful thing. I mean, it did make changes; she's made a tremendous impact over there. And it's difficult; there's not a lot of resources in Geary.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Are you able to follow up on your students? How they tend do as young adults.**

**Gina Musae:** A recent trend is that our kids are going to Haskell<sup>37</sup> and they're being successful, even some of our kids that struggle academically. Haskell is meeting them where they are and they're helping them through; also, they're enjoying it and they're all there together. Now, some of ours that go to other schools don't always make it through. They'll come to an obstacle and it's difficult. And then we have those that drive straight through. We've had several go through OU lately who have done well. We have some with their doctorate.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Could you describe your collaboration with the Cheyenne-Arapaho tribe?**

**Gina Musae:** Our relationship with them is completely different from other schools around us. They come to us and they say, we're going out to Canton<sup>38</sup> and we are struggling because Western Oklahoma is still not evolved. So, they say: "what advice do you have for us? How can we duplicate what you do here out there?" And it really takes people coming into that school and starting to make change occur. And so, the education department [of the tribe] now has Native American tutors that go to these different schools and they get a list of kids that they work with and they try to figure out why they aren't successful and advocate for them.

I have to give credit to the tribe because here's what I have seen since casinos came in, which I was nervous about because of the gambling. But they have structured it in a way that has worked well. Because of the money that came in from the casinos, there are more programs with the tribe and more educated people running the programs with a broader vision for the success of their tribe and their students and their families. And with that, these communities like El Reno which has been very racially divided have started to have more respect for the tribe and relationships have been built. So, things are improving in that arena.

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<sup>37</sup> Haskell Indian Nations University is a famous public tribal university in Lawrence, Kansas. Founded in 1884, it is the oldest federal Indian education institution still in operation. Haskell Indian Nations University, <https://www.haskell.edu/>.

<sup>38</sup> A small rural town where a lot of Arapaho families reside.

So, we work together on successes. We're constantly working with them on things and we partner with them. For example, our gym is little, so they have built this nice new gym out there, and they said, why don't you have your ball games out here? So, we have our basketball games in their gymnasium because they're grateful that we take such great care of their kids. And then they have families that [need a] gym for different purposes. I said, ours is available. So, we build those relationships with parents that aren't even in our school.

There's another collaboration that we have; our kindergarten teacher is actually on their board at the Head Start. So, they utilize her as a consultant for curriculum. She's open to them at all times, she meets with them quarterly. And, then they also come here every year for a visit. As a matter of fact, it was yesterday. They bring their little bus up and the kids walk and go into kindergarten and see what kindergarten in a big school looks like. They get to walk down and do their trays in the lunch room and see big kids. So, it gives them a little bit of an idea of what school will be like. And we've done that for the past 15 years. So, we're happy to help them with anything, if sometimes they need supplies for something. And then they return things, like this year for Easter. They did some special thing for their kids, where they made up Easter baskets and they had a whole bunch of leftover baskets. So, they called and said: "Hey, would you like to have these?" And we took them.

So, we have a great relationship with the tribe.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Have the school's successes been recognized by education authorities at any level? Are you aware of other schools with similar practices?**

**Gina Musae:** Not really. Canadian County comes out and they're like, we hear all these things about Darlington and these are all white people, business people. But I think our school is pretty isolated. I truly do.

**Glenn Meriwether:** In Western Oklahoma, in Anadarko, we started a Boys and Girls Club at that school down there but it didn't make it. There were seven tribes in it. School wouldn't help them at all. The seven tribes didn't get along with each other.

**Tatiana Viallaneix: Any wishes or hopes for the future of your school?**

**Gina Musae:** This is what I feel. I feel that we have made so much progress at our school and it's rippled outward. So, a lot of beautiful things are happening in conjunction with what's happening at the tribe itself. Their leadership has become amazing and strong and good people that have a broad vision and not just a desperate vision, because that's what was wrong before. They were living in poverty and they had nothing to help their people. And so, every action was

based on meeting that lowest level of Maslow.<sup>39</sup> Well, now they have jobs, they have funding, and things have gotten so much better. They're able to look broader and I feel like that has made a big change.

I would like to see that our legislatures understand better. I don't think that they do. I think that they see their family and how their family operates and they think anything outside of that is not correct. And we know that's not true. I mean, we are a tapestry. We're not all one thread.

**Glenn Meriwether:** This school is an absolute miracle, because I don't know of any school that had an influx of minorities come in as we had here and pull it off to where we are. Because the rebellion in the community would be otherwise normally, that's what you've got in a lot of these rural areas.

**Gina Musae:** You know, it just takes having a love for children, that's it, and all children. And there's something about these kids that just draws your heart to them. The culture, the way they think, the way they feel and the things they've been through, it gets in your heart and it's just something you want to do.

**Tatiana Viallaneix:** Thank you very much, both of you.



Darlington 7th and 8th boys basketball team wins State Championship in 2023 -  
Courtesy of Darlington Public School

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<sup>39</sup> Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a motivational theory which includes five levels of needs: basic (physiological needs, safety and security), psychological or social (love and belonging, esteem) allowing to reach self-actualization. Abraham H. Maslow, "A theory of human motivation," *Psychological Review*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1943, p.370-396, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>