

*Working together to help American Indian youth succeed*

# Big Sky Hope

A year ago, an uninviting, six-foot-tall, chain-link fence wrapped around Frazer School, its front gate padlocked to prevent vandals from gaining access. The fence had been erected, a community member explains, after the previous school building was burned to the ground by arsonists.

But last summer, in an effort to make the school more welcoming to students and the community, the chain-link fence was torn down and replaced by a decorative wrought iron version bearing the name and team mascot of the school: Frazer Bear Cubs. A trail of paw prints was painted on the sidewalk leading up to the school's entrance and a colorful mural was added to the lobby, all symbols of the positive changes taking place in this school on the Fort Peck Reservation.

As one of Montana's Schools of Promise, Frazer is on a path toward achievement.

The journey started when Denise Juneau, state superintendent of public instruction, took office in 2009 and started looking at ways to close the achievement gap that all too frequently has left Montana's American Indian students trailing behind their white peers. This issue is especially important to Juneau, a member of the Hidatsa and Mandan tribes, who grew up in Browning on the Blackfeet Reservation.

When, in 2010, the U.S. Department of Education offered School Improvement Grants (SIGs) for schools in the greatest need of increased student achievement, Juneau jumped at the opportunity to use those funds—\$11.4 million, to be exact—to support some of Montana's most struggling schools.



*Denise Juneau (third from left) with Plenty Coups High School students in Pryor.*

Story by JOYCE RIHA LINIK • Photos by MONTANA OFFICE OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

As it turned out, Montana's lowest achieving schools were all on American Indian reservations.

At Lodge Grass High School on the Crow Reservation, a mere 14.4 percent of students were at or above proficiency levels in the 2009–2010 school year. At Frazer High School on the Fort Peck Reservation (serving Assiniboine and Sioux tribes), only 15 percent met that mark. At Pryor's Plenty Coups High School on the Crow Reservation, the figure was 15.5 percent; and at Lame Deer High School on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, the rate was only slightly higher at 17.8 percent.\*

Graduation rates at these reservation schools were equally disturbing. At Pryor's Plenty Coups, only 74.1 percent of the class of 2009 graduated that spring, followed by 61.5 percent at Frazer, 52.1 percent at Lodge Grass, and a meager 39 percent at Lame Deer.

Another thing these schools share is that all are located in areas of extreme poverty—poverty classified as “deep, concentrated, generational, and isolated,” four factors that have the potential to lead to school failure anywhere.

Further, there is painful history here, where elders still recount the tales of their forebears being ripped away from families and communities to attend federal and religious Indian boarding schools. At these institutions, children

were forced to renounce their native language and culture, and learn the “civilized” ways of the white people. Though these injustices are now a sad chapter from the past, they have left deep scars and created a legacy in Native American communities of mistrust of the institution of education.

“As a result,” Juneau says, “we knew we had to approach improvement efforts in these four schools differently.”

If there was to be any hope of long-term, sustainable change for each school, it would require the involvement not only of administrators and teachers—of tentimes, outsiders who may or may not be around for the long haul—but of the entire community.

“We will certainly support their work,” says Juneau, “but they are the ones who will have to buy in and do the hard work necessary to change their school and boost the academic achievement of students. Without community support, sustainable change will not happen.”

### Taking the Data to the People

Juneau assembled a leadership team, starting with Mandy Smoker-Broadus, an Assiniboine/Sioux and director of Indian Education; Deborah Halliday, policy advisor for Community Learning Partnerships; and BJ Granberry, division administrator and Title I director in the Office of Public Instruction's

(OPI) division of Educational Opportunity and Equity. The group decided on the transformation model for improvement, one of the approaches required to receive federal SIG funds, and decided to take the data to the people. Their goal: to present the cold, hard truth of the numbers, clearly documenting how these schools and their communities were failing the children. Then, to show them—again, through the numbers—that it didn't have to be that way.

They called their presentation Communities Coming Together for Education, and they tailored it to each of the four locales. They spent days in each community presenting their research, multiple times, to school personnel, parents, health services staff members, representatives of tribal colleges and tribal governments, businesspeople, and elected officials.

“We cast the net far and wide,” says Smoker-Broadus, “because we need all of the people and all of the organizations on board if we are going to move achievement to higher levels.”

Each time they presented the data, it was gut wrenching.

“They are hard issues to look at,” says Juneau. “We had to go into these communities and tell them that, out of 820 schools in the state, they were the lowest performing. We showed them the data around the American Indian achievement gap—their data—and we had some really difficult discussions about what that meant to their communities and to their tribe and to the greater good of the state.”

Smoker-Broadus was responsible for putting a “face” on the data, helping folks make sense of the numbers. “People just couldn't understand what ‘not making AYP’ meant,” she explains. “Or a community member might not understand

\* One other reservation school, Hays-Lodge Pole was among the group of low-performing schools, but the school board could not reach the necessary agreement with the district's teachers' union to sign on to the partnership with the Office of Public Instruction. Thus, the school was not included in the SIG initiative.



SIG staff members (clockwise from left) Angie Collins (SIG Instructional Leader for Lame Deer), Corri Smith (SIG Transformational Leader for Lodge Grass), Don Wetzel (OPI Statewide Youth and Family Outreach Coordinator), and Forest Horn (SIG Community Liaison for Lodge Grass).

what a 34 percent reading proficiency rate means for their child. But if you can relate that to real live circumstances, like what it means for a child's future and for the community as a whole, it becomes tangible and real.”

“It was brutal and honest and hard,” adds Halliday. “We used the data to create a sense of urgency, and then we quickly pivoted to create a sense of hope. Superintendent Juneau would say, ‘Change is hard, but it has to happen at the local level. As a state agency, we are here to support you in any way that we can, but it's your kids, it's your community, it's your schools.’ She told them they had both the responsibility and the opportunity to make their schools better.”

The team intentionally avoided the structure of a town hall meeting, where the VIP comes in and community members take turns telling the leader what's wrong. Instead, at the end of each presentation, they asked the audience to join small groups to talk about how kids' lives can be improved through schools and community working together.

“Talking about trying to improve schools for kids helped community members tap into a love for their kids and their communities, and the belief

that their kids should get the very best educational opportunities,” observes Halliday. “The task for us is to take that broadly felt need to make things better and shepherd it into positive change.”

### Creating Sustainable Change

Montana OPI formed a partnership with the four schools, their teachers' unions, and their communities, to work collaboratively toward improving student achievement. This became part of Superintendent Juneau's Schools of Promise Initiative.

Instead of granting money to districts, OPI administers the funds, providing the experts and technical assistance to help districts adopt and carry out individual strategic plans. Eighteen employees were hired to oversee the effort, including transformational leaders, curriculum and instruction specialists, school board coaches, and community liaisons for each school.

“Sustainability is the overall goal,” says Calli Nicholson, a Fort Peck Assiniboine and curriculum and instruction leader for Pryor schools. The idea is for the specialists and leaders to work intensively

with the school and community to help them learn new approaches and strategies and, ultimately, to help them take ownership of the improvement process and drive it themselves.

Nicholson started the school year by guiding teachers through professional development workshops on new curriculum and instructional strategies.

All four of the schools adopted new core curricula for language arts and mathematics in grades 7–12. The new curricula are research-based and aligned to state and Common Core standards, and will be implemented consistently.

A new reading intervention program is being implemented, as well. “It's a more uniform intervention model,” explains Nicholson, “where there is placement data, as well as ongoing data, to guide them through continuing assessment.”

Educators are also being trained to use more successful instructional strategies, following the Charlotte Danielson framework for effective teaching.

The idea, says Nicholson, is to build professional learning communities at the school and district levels, as well as among the Promise communities.

“One of the things Pryor has done really well is build an advisory period into the schedule,” notes Nicholson. “Once a week, for 50 minutes, teachers gather to look at data and review what's working or what's not. The teachers like being able to work collaboratively on issues and immediate action steps.”

Another key element of the SIG initiative has been training through the Montana Behavioral Institute, an OPI program that works to create positive behavioral supports and a school culture that establishes social, emotional, and academic success for all students.

Students' mental and physical health is an essential piece of the puzzle, Juneau insists. Children can't learn if they are distracted by the traumas that often plague these poverty-stricken communities.

Nicholson explains, “There's a lot of alcoholism and drug abuse, not only among parents, but among students, a

Denise Juneau presents student performance data to the community to rally support for change.





Student representatives of the four SIG district leadership teams collaborate on plans for school improvement with Donnie Wetzel, Jr., Statewide Youth and Community Outreach Coordinator (in blue shirt).

lot of teen pregnancies and teen parents, and a lot of students drop out. There are schools that have struggled with suicides.”

Though change is hard and is progressing in inches, Nicholson says the district leadership team—comprising teachers, administrators, students, the school board, and community members—is beginning to see shifts.

“At the beginning of the year, the administration and board members were the sole talkers and decisionmakers,” observes Nicholson, “but now we’re starting to see everybody talk. People are starting to understand that they have a voice. It doesn’t matter if they are a student or the superintendent; they each have one vote.”

One issue that got everybody talking was the school calendar. In the past, the administration simply shifted the last year’s calendar onto the new grid.

“But this year,” says Nicholson, “they started calculating instructional hours, making sure there’s not just *enough* time, but *extra* time, in case of snow days or early dismissals. Plus, the community weighed in on the importance of the school’s basketball tournament; they wanted vacation time so they could go watch the kids play. And, they wanted to include things like American Indian Heritage Week and their Crow Clan Day.”

Observes Nicholson, “I think this

process helps them open up and realize these are *their* schools. Not anybody else’s.”

### Finding Their Voices

James DeHerrera, a Fort Peck resident and member of the Poplar school board, proudly presented a high school diploma to his eldest son at graduation last spring. DeHerrera, whose wife and children are Assiniboine, assisted his son in preparations for this year’s adventure: college. He is confident his other three children will follow suit.

Committed to helping other families’ children succeed in school and follow their dreams, he signed on as the community liaison for Frazer School. His task: to get community members to collaborate with the school team to boost achievement.

It’s not an easy feat. “Native parents are often afraid to go into the schools because of past mistreatment,” he explains. “Others have tried to participate in parent committees before, but felt the school didn’t listen to them.”

This time, though, DeHerrera says it’s different. Never before has the state superintendent come out personally to meet with the entire community and ask for their involvement. Never before have the school administrators and staff reached out for their support. Teachers in some of the schools are even conducting informal home visits, just to get to know students’ families better and open

channels for communication.

“I’m trying to help [parents] understand that they can have a voice in the school,” says DeHerrera. At the same time, he’s trying to raise the bar for parents’ expectations. “We’re trying to empower parents to want more for their students and to demand more from their students. Our parents need to be more accountable.”

For starters, parents have a big influence on truancy rates. “We have a hard time with attendance,” says DeHerrera, “especially with Montana weather. We had record snowfall this year—around 120 inches—and temperatures dropped down to 40 below.”

When standardized testing time came in March, with plenty of snow still on the ground, DeHerrera decided action was in order.

Long before testing time, DeHerrera had worked with the OPI team to develop and distribute community-friendly information on the testing process, explaining in everyday terms why it was important to the school and the students. Before- and afterschool tutoring sessions were offered in the weeks leading up to the test. And, as an incentive for the 10th-graders taking the test, he promised a pizza and bowling party for all those who showed up and gave it their all.

“We had 100 percent attendance for the 10th-graders that day,” DeHerrera reports. “So, our parents were

very helpful in making sure that their students made it to school.”

On testing day, DeHerrera took the 9th, 11th, and 12th grades to Fort Peck Community College, 40 miles away in Poplar. There, the students toured the campus and made their first visit to the tribal library. The juniors and seniors were offered the opportunity to take placement tests, while the freshmen worked on a research project. Everywhere around them, they saw college students studying hard, pursuing their dreams.

The visit opened a dialogue with students about their plans after graduation. Freshly inspired, several of the male students indicated interest in the community college’s mechanics and building trades coursework. With the right support, DeHerrera says, he suspects some of these boys might pursue engineering.

The exchange gave one senior, Sydney, the confidence to ask for help regarding a letter she’d received from a college in Kansas. Though the letter indicated that Sydney had qualified for a full-ride sports scholarship to the school, she hadn’t really considered it an option. Unsure of what to do, she had simply stuffed the letter in her locker, where it might have been forgotten.

Buoyed by hope, Sydney spoke up. And when she did, she found that one of her teachers was willing to help her with the necessary paperwork and that DeHerrera was willing to help her secure additional financial support. “You’re going to need books and clothes and dorm stuff,” he told her. “You write the letter and I will help you present it to the tribal council. I think we can get you the funds you need, so you can concentrate on your studies.”

Oftentimes, explains DeHerrera, American Indian students who are lucky enough to get accepted by a college away from home come back after the first semester or year because they simply don’t have the necessary support—financial and emotional—to make it in such a foreign environment.

### We Are the Ones We’ve Been Waiting For

On another community field trip, DeHerrera took Frazer students to see their tribal government in action. When the tribal board asked for the students’ thoughts on activities for their community, DeHerrera reports, “They were a bit shy. They didn’t want to be disrespectful. So I helped out, asking them questions so they could answer ‘yes’ or ‘no.’”

“But that was just the start,” says DeHerrera.

After they came out of the tribal chambers, students were bursting with ideas to share. They wanted more activities: baseball, movie nights, swimming. They wanted the community college to bring classes to Frazer so they wouldn’t have to worry about transportation.

DeHerrera told them, “That’s why we’ll continue to come back. That way, you show that you are interested and really want something—that you won’t just sit there and wait. You’ll go out and make sure you get it.”

He adds, “You know, the students are beginning to have hope about this. They’re starting to see they can make good things happen.”

As Superintendent Juneau told the students and community on her visit, “It has to be you to carry the torch and make changes.” ■

*“Talking about trying to improve schools for kids helped community members tap into a love for their kids and their communities, and the belief that their kids should get the very best educational opportunities.”*

—Deborah Halliday

