

# OFFICE OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION STATE OF MONTANA

**Denise Juneau  
Superintendent**



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U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

Indian Education Series: Indian Students in Public Schools – Cultivating the Next Generation

April 9, 2014

**Testimony of:**

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Montana Office of Public Instruction

On behalf of State Superintendent Denise Juneau

**Submitted to:**

The Hon. Jon Tester, U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting the Montana Office of Public Instruction to participate in this hearing. My name is Mandy Smoker Broaddus and I am a member of the Fort Peck Sioux and Assiniboine tribes from north-eastern Montana. It is my privilege to work for Superintendent Denise Juneau and for an agency in a state that "recognizes the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indians and is committed in its educational goals to the preservation of our cultural integrity" (Montana constitution, Article X). It is an honor to speak before you all today. I am humbled by the spirit of my mother and all those who have gone before me— because a great deal of collective suffering, yet also undeniable resiliency among my family, and throughout Indian country, has allowed me to be here today. I have traveled from Montana with the next generation of my family in my heart – nieces and nephews, cousins and my own son who attend public schools back home. I would travel any distance if it might mean strengthening schools and communities so that they might have a better life. For so many of us across Indian country this work is deeply personal because we realize that it is our job to remove all the barriers our children face, both inside and outside of the school building. No stone should go unturned in our efforts to improve the educational systems so that our kids are prepared for whatever they choose next in life. This is the moral obligation of anyone who chooses to work in education. For American Indian students, it is even more necessary because times are urgent for our young people – in the face of suicide clusters, increasing domestic violence, and growing instances of self-harm and drug addiction, students show up at school every day, and deserve the best we can provide them.

The first thing I want to say to you today is that the work of improving educational outcomes for American Indian students cannot be the work of schools alone. The achievement gap in Montana and across this country is very real, and the solutions are multi-dimensional and complex. We need better approaches to realize stronger, healthier, more stable, and better educated families and communities. This means that HUD housing, USDA, Head Start, and DOJ must be at the table with Indian Health Service, tribal governments, and tribal colleges. Funding and policy must be reconsidered within a framework of support with the end goal of creating an environment where young people are valued and safe.

I will now talk about our efforts to create and coordinate innovative approaches in Montana. After many years' advocacy, the state provides funding - almost \$500,000 each year - to the Office of Public Instruction to improve educational outcomes for American Indian students in our public school systems. We have funded dropout prevention efforts, early childhood efforts, and elementary mathematics programs. We seek opportunities to support and educate the whole child because a collective effort is what is required. Over time we have honed and refined a holistic approach to this work and we use public as well as private funding to establish as many leverage points as possible.

In addition to state funding, the Office of Public Instruction has used federal School Improvement Grant dollars to create a unique collaborative effort with our state's most struggling public schools, all of which exist in Indian country. The Department of Education allowed us some flexibility in our SIG grant, and we created Montana Schools of Promise. As a result, the Office of Public Instruction has provided direct services such as job-embedded professional development on effective instructional strategies, support for students who live with trauma, and assistance with data informed decision making. In addition, our agency stretched its capacity and provided five onsite coaches to assist school leaders, teachers, school boards, students and community members. These OPI staff members either moved to these communities or were from there. They go to work in our schools every day and are able to push on these turbulent systems in ways that district staff are limited. Key results have been an increase in literacy rates, increased student engagement and an improvement in overall school climate and infrastructure. We have also been able to dramatically increase the efficacy of local boards of trustees and are supporting new school administrators who focus on the difficult work of improving their schools.

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, we have developed an innovative approach to better support the emotional and mental well-being of students through high fidelity Wraparound. We received a two year Montana Mental Health Trust grant for \$600,000 and a \$1.8 million SAMSHA Systems of Care Grant, and are partnering with the tribal governments from our Schools of Promise sites - Fort Peck, Crow and Northern Cheyenne – and with Indian Health Services, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the

state Department of Public Health and Human Services. With this support, we are implementing community-driven, culturally responsive school-based mental health “wrap round” supports for students and their families through trained staff who are tribal members. These staff access both county and state support services and natural and cultural supports to build on the positive supports and assets of youth who all too often face traumatic experiences and live with PTSD symptoms.

In closing, here are a few additional considerations – Title III administrators at the DOE must consider the uniqueness of historically impacted native languages and their differences from other world languages. Impact Aid funding, a vital and necessary funding stream for public reservation schools, should be restored to full levels again. And all federal and state entities who impact the lives of children must expand their efforts beyond the traditional scope of services and more fully realize important connections with local school entities. I applaud President Obama’s creation of the White House Council on Native American Affairs and hope that work results in better coordination and innovation in Indian country. A great need exists for comprehensive planning and funding to support this multi-faceted approach because we will not improve educational outcomes without addressing life outcomes overwhelmed by high unemployment rates and a lack of access to quality health care for American Indian families. Lastly, policy and regulations need to take in to consideration the unique relationship American Indian tribes have with the federal government as sovereign nations, and as such their children in public schools are impacted by policies and regulations that fail to be culturally responsive and culturally sensitive.

Again, thank you for allowing me this important opportunity to speak with you today.