

2015 NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

Leo Reano Memorial Award

She Inspires Students and Creates Schools of Promise

◆ Denise Juneau ◆



When Denise Juneau visits a school on one of Montana's seven Indian reservations, she is mobbed by students and staff. Everyone wants to hug her. She is greeted like a celebrity, or a conquering hero. She is both.

Elected Montana's Superintendent of Public Instruction in 2008, Denise Juneau became the first American Indian woman elected to statewide office in Montana, and indeed in the nation. She was re-elected Superintendent of Public Instruction in 2012.

Her Schools of Promise program for improving the struggling schools on Indian reservations is bold and student-centered. It challenges all members of the school community to step outside their comfort zones to improve the life and education of Indian students. Never punitive, always forward looking, the Schools of Promise program involves parent outreach, health services and trustee trainings and coaching. It has become a national model for success.

Denise Juneau is a public education success story. She was a Head Start student when her parents were struggling college students. She attended Montana's public schools and universities, eventually earning her law degree. She taught English in high school. Her mother, Carol Juneau, was also a teacher, and Stan Juneau, her father, is a retired educator who worked on the Blackfeet Reservation.

Denise Juneau is a powerful advocate for public school education: "I see our public schools in Montana performing very well. We don't have charter schools. We have a few private schools. We have a group of people who want to privatize public education in our state, and we consistently fight it back. Our public education system does a great job. I don't think it's broken. We aren't interested in doing reform for reform's sake. I believe in public education; it did a great job for me. It deserves our support and encouragement."

When Denise Juneau stands up and tells Indian students that you can be anything, do anything, if you stay in school and study hard, it's more than an empty promise, and they listen.