



Big Sky Hope: How Montana's SEA Supports Turnaround in American Indian Schools

from **The State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practices**

Denise Juneau, Mandy Smoker Broaddus, and Deborah Halliday

- ▶ [Jump to document](#)
- ▶ [View the full publication](#)
- ▶ [Browse the WestEd bookstore](#)
- ▶ [Visit WestEd.org](#)

RECOMMENDED CITATION:

Juneau, D., Smoker Broaddus, M., & Halliday, D. (2014). Big Sky hope: How Montana's SEA supports turnaround in American Indian schools. In L. M. Rhim & S. Redding (Eds.), *The state role in school turnaround: Emerging best practices* (pp. 239-247). San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

About WestEd

WestEd, a national nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency, works with education and other communities to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has 16 offices nationwide, from Washington and Boston to Arizona and California. Its corporate headquarters are in San Francisco.

Areas of Work

- Assessment, Standards, & Accountability
- Culture, Diversity, & Equity
- Early Childhood & Early Intervention
- English Learners
- Evaluation
- Healthy Kids, Schools, & Communities
- Leadership & Teacher Professional Development
- Literacy
- Mathematics
- Science
- Policy
- School & District Improvement
- Special Education
- Technology & Information Services

Limited Electronic Distribution Rights

This document is protected by copyright law as indicated in a notice appearing later in this work. This PDF is provided for non-commercial use only. Permission is required from WestEd to reproduce or reuse in any other form for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please see [WestEd Permissions](#).

Big Sky Hope: How Montana’s SEA Supports Turnaround in American Indian Schools

Denise Juneau, Mandy Smoker Broaddus, and Deborah Halliday

Six months before the U.S. Department of Education announced the School Improvement Grant program in 2010, newly elected Office of Public Instruction (OPI) State Superintendent Denise Juneau convened her cabinet to develop a new strategy for improving student achievement in the state’s lowest performing schools. Aware that most of the struggling schools were located on or adjacent to the seven Indian reservations in Montana, Juneau, a member of the Mandan and Hidatsa tribes, launched “Montana Schools of Promise” to turn these schools around.

The schools identified for attention through Montana Schools of Promise shared a common set of characteristics: all were very small and very rural—two of the schools’ districts lacked cell phone service and several struggled with internet connectivity—and all were located on an Indian reservation. School management was often chaotic, and staff turnover resulted in inconsistent and dysfunctional work environments. Graduation and attendance rates were the lowest in the state, and students suffered from an entrenched culture of low achievement and low expectations. As with many other reservation communities, local families struggled with high rates of unemployment, substance abuse, domestic violence, and suicide. However, these communities also presented unique opportunities, strengths, and resiliency factors that could be leveraged for positive turnaround efforts.

Juneau appointed a three-person team—consisting of the Title I Director, Director of Indian Education, and a Policy Advisor to the Superintendent experienced in community and family engagement—to develop an approach that would be research-based and have potential to be effective with schools serving

The State Role in School Turnaround

American Indian students. The team reviewed existing research, convened an interagency workgroup to share information and efforts of different programs working with the school systems, and hosted stakeholder meetings on-site at several reservations with tribal councils, elected officials, teachers and school staff, students, schools board trustees, community members, and families to review student achievement data and to seek local input.

OPI staff recognized that any approach to improving these schools needed to involve an “all hands on deck” approach to support improved instruction, better decision making at the administrative and board level, more engagement with students and their families, and a shared sense of responsibility from the school, the local community, and OPI. Staff adapted the High-Poverty High-Performing (HPHP) Readiness Model from Mass Insight, a Boston-based research organization (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007). The model seemed most promising because it recognized the importance of social supports and shared responsibility among stakeholders: Readiness to Teach (instructional practices), Readiness to Act (school board efficacy and community engagement), and Readiness to Learn (student social/emotional/behavioral supports; Calkins et al., 2007).

In 2010, the state received \$11.5 million through the SIG program which gave the Montana Schools of Promise initiative a much-needed boost. Montana became the only state in the country to use SIG funds to work solely with public schools on reservations: Frazer High School on the Fort Peck Reservation, Pryor K–12 on the Crow Reservation, and Lame Deer 7–12 on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. All three districts chose to use the Turnaround model, one of the four approaches to school turnaround available under the federal SIG program.

Early signs show the effort is working. Two years into the SIG grant, student performance outpaces the state: reading scores are up 15.5 points (state mean 1.6 points); math scores are up 3.6 points (state mean 0.7 points); science scores are up 2.3 points (state mean 1.6 points). The achievement gap is beginning to close.

Montana CRT Reading Means				
Percentage change from previous year in parentheses				
	2009	2010	2011	2012
Statewide	277.1 (+1.6%)	278.7 (+1.6%)	279.6 (+0.9)	280.3 (+0.7)
SIG Schools	239.6 (-0.3%)	239.1 (-0.5%)	245.6 (+6.5%)	254.6 (+9.0%)

Montana CRT Math Results				
	2009	2010	2011	2012
Statewide	262.5 (+1.4%)	264.6 (+2.1%)	264.9 (+0.3%)	265.3 (+0.4%)
SIG Schools	225.8 (+1.7%)	226.1 (+0.3%)	227.2 (+1.1%)	228.7 (+1.5%)

Montana CRT Science Results				
	2009	2010	2011	2012
Statewide	253.7 (+1.1%)	255.0 (+1.3%)	254.8 (-0.2%)	256.6 (+1.8%)
SIG Schools	218.6 (+2.4%)	222.0 (+3.4%)	220.2 (-1.8%)	224.3 (+4.1%)

There are other indications that the turnaround effort is bearing fruit. For instance, reflecting noticeable improvements in both expectations and quality of instruction, students told OPI staff that their “school now feels like a real school, where real learning happens.” The OPI’s work with school board trustees has won the respect and trust of school board members, who are now working with updated board policies and following meeting protocols that result in more efficient meetings that truly focus on student achievement.

Launching Montana Schools of Promise

Juneau introduced Montana Schools of Promise through a series of visits to local communities titled “Communities Coming Together for Education,” during which Juneau and her staff met with tribal councilors, key tribal program staff (e.g., health services, tribal colleges, etc.), school staff, students, and elected officials. In several of the communities Juneau visited, it was the first time a State Superintendent had ever visited the local school. The visits culminated in community dinners and discussion, during which parents, families, and community members were asked to discuss their hopes and dreams for their children’s education and to explore how schools and communities can work together to improve local schools.

To help guide the work between OPI and local schools and communities, OPI staff developed four core values: transparency, collaboration, vision, and capacity building. By developing these core values and sharing them with each school, OPI strove to establish a culture of open communication and trust.

This groundwork was critical to build the trust that was needed to implement the SIG grant, because OPI developed a strategy that required an unprecedented level of state agency engagement with locally controlled public schools. From the onset of planning, OPI staff knew that the local schools lacked capacity to implement the requirements of SIG. Instead of granting money to districts,

OPI developed a unique structure which was allowable within SIG guidelines, but which took time and effort to receive approval from the U.S. Department of Education: in Montana, OPI maintained control of the SIG funds, awarded SIG funds to participating districts, and staffed the effort with OPI employees.

To formalize local commitment to the work, the OPI developed implementation agreements and memorandums of understanding with each school district that required the school board and the local teachers' union to agree to work with OPI to implement the requirements of SIG. Because the SIG requirements included controversial elements such as teacher evaluation and innovative elements such as extended learning time for teachers and students, Juneau reached out to the leadership of the Montana Education Association– Montana Federation of Teachers to discuss both the requirements of SIG and the opportunity SIG represented for the state: an opportunity to truly help school districts that had been troubled for years. These early conversations, and a foundation of goodwill that existed between Juneau and the union, resulted in the union's support for the initiative and their participation in site visits to each school to discuss the agreements and to reach consensus on moving forward.

Strategic Approaches

The OPI structured the staffing of the SIG program along the lines of the HPHP Readiness Model. The *Readiness to Learn* component calls for student social/emotional/behavioral supports and increased parental and community engagement. OPI hired a Community Liaison for each school—someone who works on a daily basis with students, families, and community/tribal organizations to coordinate student supports and to engage families through home visits, community gatherings, and regular communications. Youth-driven programming has flourished as OPI staff work with students and community organizations to develop after school clubs, attendance incentives, and a statewide youth council.

To more directly impact the social and mental well-being of students and staff, the OPI brought in agency supports such as the Montana Behavioral Institute (positive behavioral supports) and contracted with the University of Montana's National Native Children's Trauma Center to work with adults and students on issues related to trauma, safe school climate, and respect.

In addition, the OPI secured a two-year, \$600,000 grant from the Montana Mental Health Trust to pilot school-based mental health wraparound services in the communities being served by SIG. The wraparound model OPI employed is a strengths-based, community-driven approach to providing supports for struggling youth. Local community members work with OPI to identify and prioritize students who are in need of intensive support and help to build a team of people who work with the youth and family to build strategies and approaches for the youth's well-being. This work is proving to be a critical component to supporting students' ability to learn and to stay in school.

The *Readiness to Teach* component specifies curriculum, instructional planning and delivery, and classroom management supports to help improve classroom instruction. For each school, OPI hired an Instructional Leader who works with teachers daily. After consulting with curriculum experts, OPI staff introduced new math and language arts curriculum and a literacy intervention in the SIG schools. OPI staff selected the programs based on a track record of demonstrated success in schools across the country, including schools that work with American Indian populations. The Instructional Leader assists in the implementation of the curriculum and works with all teachers on strategies to improve instructional practices. The on-site staff are supported by a Teaching and Learning Coordinator who works at the state level, planning, supporting, and coordinating the focus and the flow of professional development.

The *Readiness to Act* component includes support for administrative and board decision-making practices and structures, as well as support for school-based teams who help to plan and implement SIG requirements and other locally identified improvement priorities. OPI hired a Transformational Leader for each school, who coordinates the local OPI staff and works with school administrators to implement the SIG requirements and to integrate improvements into the school system. OPI also provided each school with a School Board Coach who attends every board meeting and who works with the trustees to revise school board policies and to support decision-making processes that are focused on student achievement.

The Instructional Leader and Transformational Leader work hand-in-hand with teaching staff and administrators to build local capacity to make data-driven decisions. All SIG Schools of Promise are trained in Response to Intervention (RtI) to assist school teams' use of data to inform instruction and to determine when and if to use interventions. OPI staff on-site guide the learning process with school staff and ensure schools participate in statewide RtI training to lessen discomfort with data. Now, the use of data to inform discussions is much more routine in the schools.

To build capacity for ongoing school improvement efforts, as well as to ensure local engagement with the work of SIG, each school develops an implementation plan called the District Action Plan (DAP), which is an annual process of identifying the year's goals and priorities for meeting SIG requirements. Each SIG school has a school improvement team consisting of teachers, staff, board members, and students. This team, assisted by on-site OPI staff, develop their DAP each year. The DAP is organized around the four recommendations from the Institute of Education Sciences, (Herman et al., 2008) practice guide on school turnaround: 1) signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership; 2) maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction; 3) provide visible improvements early in the turnaround process (quick wins); and 4) build a committed staff.

This on-the-ground staffing support has enabled the OPI to ensure that SIG requirements are implemented. Direct side-by-side coaching of teachers and staff has allowed for the implementation of professional development to be more tailored and responsive to staff needs. The OPI worked with the state's teachers' union and local school personnel to develop a teacher and staff evaluation system that is helping to guide ongoing professional development. School board policies and procedures have been brought up to date and board meetings made more functional and focused on increasing student achievement.

Ongoing Challenges

The SIG program has provided OPI staff with an unprecedented opportunity to learn more about what works—and what doesn't work—to dramatically improve struggling schools. There have been many components of the SIG work that have met with success, as outlined above.

Yet while student test scores are steadily improving, and students and adults in the schools and in the community comment on increased functionality, there are ongoing challenges. Student attendance continues to be a real challenge. Efforts ranging from student-led incentive programs to Community Liaisons working with school staff to contact students when they do not show up for school have had only modest impacts.

A core focus OPI staff have employed throughout the SIG implementation is motivational and team-building programming to keep school staff and community members engaged with the very difficult, demanding work of targeted school improvement. This has proved to be a constant challenge, and OPI has experienced mixed success in its efforts to turn around years of difficult relationships, poor communication, and a sense of "initiative fatigue" at the schools.

The four core values OPI developed to guide the SIG work—transparency, collaboration, vision, and capacity building—were very helpful in that they "raised the bar" of what a typical agency-to-school relationship can be. It proved to be challenging to set a new path of working together, however, because the OPI is both a collaborator and the enforcer of the SIG requirements. OPI staff strove to develop a culture of mutuality, yet there were times throughout the grant where OPI staff had to push hard on reforms that SIG required and would otherwise not be priorities for the school districts.

Two specific components of the structure of the SIG program hampered OPI's efforts. First, the turnaround model requires that principals who have served the school for more than two years be replaced. This blanket requirement caused the removal of a popular principal in one high school, and it proved challenging to find a replacement principal. Rural communities disproportionately suffer from a small pool of talented candidates for demanding jobs such as a school administrator in a struggling school where the nearest movie theatre can be over an hour away and housing is often well below substandard. In addition, rural

communities tend to foster close-knit relationships, and an influential subset of the local community rejected the SIG work on the grounds that the principal had been removed. The work at this particular school slowed down to such an extent that OPI ended its agreement with the school to implement SIG. Soon after, the school board reinstated the principal. OPI requested the USDOE provide a rural exception to the principal replacement requirement, yet that request was denied.

A second challenge is the three-year time frame for the SIG grant. As described, there have been success stories in all aspects of the project. Students now enter schools where they are appropriately placed in courses that meet their instructional needs. School teams are engaged in RtI training and work on-site with their data. School administrators participate in monthly school finance calls. School board trustees focus on student achievement. The challenge is to ensure these efforts continue beyond the grant period, when financial resources diminish and OPI's capacity to support the schools lessens dramatically. The OPI has been approved for an extension of SIG funding to a fourth year to support sustainability efforts, yet OPI staff know turning around a school that is struggling at the level in which these schools started will take more time and effort than the SIG program is structured to provide.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Daily work with the schools has given OPI staff a much keener understanding of the challenges and the opportunities that exist to help struggling schools succeed. The insight gained is allowing OPI to differentiate its school improvement efforts with SIG schools, keeping in mind existing capacities and supports. The experience is also informing OPI's approach to school improvement at the agency level, which will eventually benefit all schools in the state identified as in need of improvement.

Capacity building and sustainability have been central components of the work of SIG. Starting in the second year of SIG, the OPI embedded capacity building into its training, on-site support, and planning with local SIG teams, such as using an annual planning process through the District Action Plan. The job-embedded coaching strategy that OPI utilized is also geared to invest in the people who work at the schools and live in the community—supporting a broader vision and expression of what it means to be a successful school and equipping them with tools to use to get to that vision.

In addition, the OPI is collaborating with federally funded education-related programs like GEAR UP¹ and Jobs for Montana Graduates to share the strategies of SIG so that these programs can build on the work that SIG has begun.

¹GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness & Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) is a federal program that works to increase students' college and career readiness through academic preparedness, postsecondary planning, and financial aid knowledge. Jobs for Montana Graduates is affiliated with Jobs For America's Graduates and assists students to stay in school, graduate, and successfully transition from school into employment, postsecondary education, other training or the military.

For instance, the OPI contracted with a Montana college to provide professional development to turnaround school administrators on issues such as budgeting, addressing tough issues head on, and developing a vision for school improvement. GEAR UP requires administrators to participate in ongoing professional development, and OPI is encouraging GEAR UP to build off of the curricula and approach the SIG funds helped to create.

Another initiative of Superintendent Juneau's is Graduation Matters Montana (GMM) which seeks to increase the number of Montana students who graduate from high school college and career ready. GMM is an innovative approach that incentivizes the development of local school–community–business partnerships to focus on current and promising strategies that will have a real impact on student success in Montana. OPI is incorporating its adoption of common core standards into its GMM work.

Since Juneau launched GMM in 2010, 33 communities have started a GMM initiative, representing 70% of Montana's high school students. While early signs indicate the approach is working (dropout rates are down, and local businesses and community organizations are partnering with schools at an unprecedented rate), the graduation rates for American Indian students are not going up—they decreased slightly in the past year. The OPI is preparing to develop a series of strategies and interventions to support more American Indian students through high school graduation, and OPI staff are looking at the experiences of the SIG program to glean effective strategies to employ in this statewide effort.

Action Principles

Actively engage the chief state school officer in targeted turnaround efforts

- Personally visit schools and communities and commit state staff and agency resources to signal that change is required.
- Communicate clearly and consistently why turnaround is required and involve the local community in the creation of a vision that includes a sense of urgency needed for change.

Approach the work holistically and provide hands-on support

- Attend to the interconnecting systems that create a functioning school system—effective instruction, solid administrative decision-making and leadership, and an engaged, safe student culture.
- Provide on-site, side-by-side coaching support to customize professional development and to strengthen individual aspects of the system so they can work in greater harmony and efficacy.

Maintain focus on instructional supports

- Recognize that the teacher–student relationship is critical and work to introduce programs that directly or indirectly build positive, supportive school relationships.

- Assign adequate staff—such as an on-site Instructional Leader—to provide direct support as well as to help coordinate outside supports on how to use evaluation processes, the implementation of common core, and use of other levers to support a continuous improvement effort in instruction.

References

- Calkins, A., Guenther, W., Belfiore, G., & Lash, D. (2007). *The turnaround challenge*. Boston, MA: Mass Insight Education & Research Institute. Retrieved from http://www.massinsight.org/publications/turnaround/51/file/1/pubs/2010/04/15/TheTurnaroundChallenge_MainReport.pdf
- Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., Redding, S., & Darwin, M. (2008). *Turning around chronically low-performing schools: A practice guide* (NCEE #2008-4020). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide.aspx?sid=7>

