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Making New Promises in Indian Country

By Sarah Yager
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A Montana reservation has a higher homicide rate than some of the country's most murderous cities. Here's what Obama, and the state's school superintendent, are doing to help.

A young tribal member in traditional dress attends a celebration on Montana's Crow reservation. *Reuters*

On December 2, President Obama delivered the keynote address at the third annual White House Tribal Nations Conference. His adoption into the Crow Tribe on the 2008 campaign trail had been a historic step in the relationship between the federal and tribal governments, and that warmth still lingered in the applause that greeted his appearance onstage.

That morning, Obama announced, in his administration's latest effort to reduce obstacles facing Indian communities, he had signed an executive order to lower the dropout rate and start closing the achievement gap for Native American and Alaska Native students. "Standing in this room, with leaders of all ages," he said, surveying the densely packed auditorium at the Department of Interior headquarters, "it's impossible not to be optimistic about the future of Indian Country."

Miles away that same morning, with the sky still draped like black velvet over the hard-bitten mountain town of Pryor, Montana, a 15-year-old boy leveled his .243 hunting rifle during a family fight and blew a hole in his father's chest. It was the fifth homicide in two months on the Crow Indian Reservation.

According to the 2010 census, the population of the reservation is just under 7,000. With a total of six suspicious deaths recorded last year, the homicide rate stood at 87.4 per 100,000 -- more than double the rate in Detroit, and nearly 50% higher than the rate in New Orleans, according to the most recent annual FBI data. Officials and members of the affected communities have been quick to label the crimes as isolated events, and a newly appointed police chief for the Bureau of Indian Affairs has announced plans to expand the 11-person force covering more than 2.2 million acres of reservation land. But just a few weeks ago, an altercation in Pryor between a police officer and a community member ended in gunshots and stirred the town again.

The recent violence flanking Obama's executive order raises troubling questions. Can school reform help alter the dark picture sketched in national statistics: crime rates more than twice and up to 20 times the U.S. average, unemployment estimated at 15.2%, soaring levels of sexual assault and domestic abuse? And how can reform be truly effective in the environment these problems have created?

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To reach Pryor from I-90, you turn south at Billings and follow a skinny two-lane highway that snakes around cottonwood trees and coulees for 30 miles to a reduced speed sign that marks its otherwise seamless transition into the main street of town. Past the post office and the boarded-up Castle Rock Café and the corner gas pump, Plenty Coups High School sits beneath a ridge of sediment and pine. The boy with the rifle was a cross-country runner and an honor roll student at the school, where his father had gone before him. Less than a third of students made it to graduation last spring -- others drifted out of town, dropped out with kids to care for, or just stopped showing up.

Dan McGee, the principal of Plenty Coups and superintendent of the Pryor school district who started last June, is no stranger to tough conditions in his students' lives. But he was shocked by the news that December morning, suggesting a level of despair even he had never guessed at. "I thought, *I can't imagine ever having to make that choice*," he told me, picturing his student taking aim.

But while the shooting was extreme, McGee is all too familiar with home situations that remove kids from the classroom: family transience due to job insecurity and lack of transportation, and missed days and slipping grades that make the prospect of return even more daunting. Finding a job after graduation is hard even with a diploma, andunemployment perpetuates the cycle of poverty that hampers academic success.

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With the lowest graduation rate in the state and a long record of depressed test scores, Plenty Coups is one of three high schools enrolled in Montana's Schools of Promise Initiative, a three-year, $11.5 million project aimed at turning around the state's persistently lowest-performing schools. State Superintendent of Schools Denise Juneau, who designed the program using funds from a federal School Improvement Grant, is hopeful that the initiative -- now at its midway point -- can play a role in boosting not only academic performance, but also the communities enveloping each failing institution.

Juneau is tall and broad-shouldered, with dark bangs and eyes the concentrated blue of river water. When we met in her office on a snowy day this winter, she explained that her commitment to Indian education began long before Montana received the federal grant. A member of the Mandan and Hidatsa tribes, Juneau attended high school on the Blackfeet Reservation in Browning, Montana, where her parents were both teachers. After graduating from Harvard's Graduate School of Education, she taught high school English on a North Dakota reservation and back in Browning. She took over as director of Indian education for the state in 2006 and held the post until her election to superintendent two years later -- a position that made her the first Indian woman to hold a top statewide office in Montana.

While Schools of Promise was not conceived as a program to target Indian students, all the participating schools are on reservations. Juneau identifies their common denominator as a specific type of poverty -- deep, isolated, generational, and concentrated -- permeating the surrounding populations, and breeding conditions that have helped to land them in the state's bottom five percent. "Children are coming to school with trauma, everyday trauma, that they live under: violence in the homes, alcoholism in the community, unemployment that's 80 percent, not just during the recession," she said. "We need to help treat that before they can even go sit in a class and learn about math."

Schools of Promise is following the "transformation model" of school turnaround, one of the four types sanctioned by the Department of Education's Title I funding program**.** Compared to models that mandate full staff replacement or attempt to resurrect failing schools under charters, the milder transformation model, which aims to fortify existing personnel and policies, can allow schools to comply with DoE standards without implementing much actual change. But in isolated and impoverished areas, said Sam Redding, the director of the Center on Innovation and Improvement, who has studied reform implementation in rural areas, the other options are often unviable. Montana has no charter law, and firing sprees cause upheaval in tiny, remote communities, where existing teachers are often deeply embedded and new ones almost impossible to recruit. Even closing schools isn't an option. "You can't send kids elsewhere when there is no 'elsewhere,'" Redding said.

For Juneau, though, "transformation" is a literal order. Her initiative employs buttresses on every level: from instructors who help teachers implement classroom and curriculum changes, to school board coaches, to "transformation leaders" who work with administrators on execution and best practices. Academic influences off school grounds are also considered: Juneau's office recently acquired a $600,000 state grant for mental health services, which is now funneling into the Promise communities in a system of wraparound services -- identifying and strengthening

existing support structures for individual students, and looping caregivers and mentors into sustainable frameworks.

And perhaps the most important contribution that Juneau brings to the Promise schools is an understanding of the history that pushed each of them to the breaking point.

Stretching back to 1588, when Jesuit missionaries in Florida commandeered the instruction of tribal children, efforts in Indian education have been bound by outside motives. Over the next 300 years, religious settlers continued to build and operate mission schools amid native communities. Meanwhile, starting with a 1794 treaty and carrying on for most of a century, the U.S. government offered teachers and educational resources to tribal leaders in exchange for chunks of their ever-shrinking territory.

In the unification years after the Civil War, the Bureau of Indian Affairs established federal boarding schools to help tribes -- in the words of Thomas Jefferson Morgan, then-Commissioner of Indian Affairs -- "conform to 'the white man's ways.'" Mandatory attendance laws forced students into barracks-like facilities, often far from home, where they were given English names and forbidden to use their native languages. Juneau's great-grandfather was among the children shipped by train to Pennsylvania's notorious Carlisle Indian School, where "before" and "after" photographs were taken to gauge successful assimilation.

A shift arrived with the 1928 Meriam Report, commissioned by the Secretary of Interior, which uncovered abuses of Indian students in boarding schools and issued a series of recommendations for education policy: emphasize local day schools to avoid uprooting students from their families and communities; reinstitute native cultural education; interfere less. In the 1930s, John Collier, FDR's new appointee for Commissioner of Indian Affairs, began to put the suggestions into practice. The cornerstone of Collier's reform agenda was the Indian Reorganization Act, which shifted decision-making authority away from the federal government and toward tribes. But when he departed around the end of WWII, progress unwound. The following decades were characterized by the termination movement, which forced integration by removing federal funding and refusing to recognize tribal sovereignty. When that failed -- leaving tribes with neither support nor the structure for self-sufficiency -- the self-determination movement tookover, setting up today's government-to-government relationship.

Aware that her Promise initiative is being built on the shards of many broken ones, Juneau is attempting a new, collective approach to change. By introducing community liaisons -- local residents hired as full-time state employees to serve as bridges for families and schools -- she hopes to incorporate the voices of those who, after students, are most affected by the reforms. "We're saying, 'We're schooling in a different way now. We want you to come in, and we want you to support your child and your student,' rather than, 'We're going to do this job,'" Juneau said.

Savannah Sinquah, the community liaison for Pryor, graduated from Plenty Coups in 2002 and moved off the reservation to study business administration at the University of Montana. She was working as a family/parent advocate for Indian students in the Billings public school system when she heard about the liaison job in the fall of 2010. When we spoke on the phone this

February, she had just wrapped up a pep rally for the Plenty Coups cheerleading and basketball teams. Community elders had been invited to speak at a school-hosted luncheon before the rally, and later, in the gym full of students and parents, administrators had praised the teams' perseverance through what Sinquah called "the hardest year we've ever experienced." The idea behind events like these, Sinquah said, is to infuse school activities with cultural and community relevance, welcoming parents who have been hesitant to cross the school threshold.

For generations, the proliferation of boarding and religious schools excised parental involvement in education. Many parents today, both Sinquah and Juneau pointed out, have been left without a clear sense of their responsibility or power to help their children succeed academically. Sinquah recently launched Pryor's first PTA organization to encourage parents and guardians to assume a role in the school's transformation and operations.

The initiative is also sending teachers into communities through a program of home visits, coordinated by the liaisons, to discuss mutual goals with parents and guardians and build working relationships. Don Wetzel, who coordinates the community liaison program for all the Promise schools, said that the visits are meant to "bring in both teachers in a student's life -- at school and at home." When a father shares that his daughter wants to become an engineer and the girl stops coming to class, the teacher can call the father and explain: *If this is your daughter's ambition, this is what she needs to do to reach it -- and this is how you can help her*.

According to Juneau, the home visit system is also crucial for school faculty, many of whom are non-tribal members and didn't grow up on the reservation, and who may have internalized the idea that some families just don't care. "Hearing, 'I want my child to go into the military, I want my child to be a dentist, I want my child to be able to go out and do this,'" she said, "and knowing that, despite being in deep poverty and being in the conditions that they are, every parent still loves their child, and they have hopes and dreams for them -- I think that's been a significant learning process for some of the teachers."

Sinquah said that the program has been especially useful in Pryor, "where you think you know everybody." She recalled one visit to a family that had been viewed by many in the community -- including Sinquah herself -- as shiftless and self-indulgent, interested less in the classroom than in the next party. She was shocked when the student's mother opened up about her faith in education and regret for her own failure to graduate, explaining how she always told her son: "You're going to be the hero, because you're going to be the first in the family to finish high school." The mother pointed out a row of perfect attendance awards hanging on the wall. "She said, 'I put them there to remind him that he's our champion. I don't want him living on food stamps like we are.'"

The initiative's emphasis on forging connections between academic and community life extends even into the classroom, encouraging teachers to put national and global studies in a relatable context. On a recent day in Pryor, a science lesson about renewable and nonrenewable resources veered into a discussion of what natural resources mean for tribes, how they are managed, and how federal and local choices might impact or endanger them. "Kids were like, 'How do we change this?'" Sinquah told me. "'How do we change all of the things that are happening to us in the world?'"

And there, in those questions, is the real future of Indian Country.

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Past reform failures have left behind refuse -- "a state public school in the middle of an entire sovereign nation that has a specific relationship with the federal government," in Juneau's concise summary -- that can hobble movement forward. One school board, wrestling with the budget concerns of its teachers union, failed to draft a required memorandum of understanding before the state's deadline. Another school was removed from the program after the first year, largely because it opposed a section of the federal funding guidelines that mandated firing any principal who had overseen more than two years of low performance. The school's board of trustees, which had originally agreed to replace the long-time principal on entering the program, has since restored the displaced official and expanded his title to principal/superintendent.

Although Juneau sent the letter cutting ties with the school, she believes that the "urban perspective" of federal officials makes it hard for them to grasp the nuanced dynamics of reservation school districts, which are often, like Pryor, tiny and rural. "You go in and fire the whole teaching staff -- and given the low performance, and given the community, who's going to go there?" she asked. "I talk with teachers all over the state, and they're like, 'Well, those schools...' And I'm like, '*Go* to those schools! I could come to your community and it would be*easy* to teach. You want a challenge? Head out there.'"

Some teachers already working in the Promise schools, especially those who have been teaching for years, have been resistant to instruction themselves, said Sinquah. But facing the issues of recruitment and retention, Juneau is intent on working with those who have already proved their commitment to schools -- introducing incentives for teachers who get better, and trying to make it easier for them to do so. A team of mental health experts from the University of Montana that came to evaluate the Promise schools found that, through daily encounters with the turbulence in their students' lives, teachers were absorbing "secondary trauma"; Schools of Promise is now teaching them methods of self-care.

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While Juneau sees parallels between Obama's goals and those of past administrations, she is pleased that his executive order explicitly recognizes the some 90 percent of Indian students attending public schools, a factor that has often been absent in the past. She is also hopeful that progress will come from its clear agenda: the order calls for detailed action plans and performance reports from the Department of Education, the Bureau of Indian Education, and the National Advisory Council on Indian Education -- a partnership model that she, unsurprisingly, supports.

But ultimately, Juneau said, the rhetoric has been similar throughout history. "I think that what happens on the ground, on the state level and the local level, is really what we should pay attention to."

Test scores across the Promise schools have shot up since the program began. Levels of reading proficiency have risen 15 percent, and levels of math proficiency doubled in the last year. Though scores still lag well below the state mean across all academic categories, the increases have gone a long way toward closing the gap.

But the Promise team and the money won't be around forever, and the question remains what impact the initiative will have in the long-term. Over the next year and a half, responsibility will increasingly shift back onto the schools alone. Juneau stresses that even if current structures remain, lasting success will depend on outside factors, like economic growth, keeping pace with school improvements. "It needs to be a full-court press," she said. But getting more students to graduate, pursue postsecondary education, and pour their acquired skills back into their communities could help create a new kind of cycle on the reservation.

Take Savannah Sinquah, who traces her own educational success back to her sophomore year business teacher at Plenty Coups, who taught students how to write college essays, helped them research careers, and set up individual job-shadowing trips for everyone in the class -- connecting for the first time, Sinquah said, lessons in the classroom to a future outside it. That teacher, who has since moved away from Pryor to follow her husband's work, was part of the reason Sinquah chose to study business in college, and gave her a background that helped her score internships with the university's athletic department and with Nike.

But Sinquah found that she "wasn't happy, at the end of the day, making sales." She felt pulled back to the school system, wanting to do for other students what that teacher had done for her -- show the promise of an education. When the funding for Juneau's program runs out next year, Sinquah plans to begin graduate work toward a degree in school counseling. Coming back to work in Pryor one day, she said, has always been her dream.