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BOARD MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Denise Augustine, former superintendent of Indigenous education, British Columbia, Canada

MAKING A DIFFERENCE WITH STUDENTS DRIVES HER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Learning Forward board of trustees member Denise Swee'alt Augustine has been an educator for over 25 years in British Columbia, Canada. Augustine is a First Nations woman who lives in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island, on the unceded lands of the Hul'q'umi'num people. She recently completed a secondment with the British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care, serving as the superintendent of Indigenous education.



How would you like to introduce yourself to our readers?

I identify as the mom of two grown women, as a grandmother, and as an elementary teacher. When I speak to groups of educators, I'm usually introduced in sort of the standard Western way, with my title and a description of the work I'm doing. But if I'm in a crowd of strangers, I don't say anything about my work. I talk about how we raise our children and who we spend time with and the things that are nourishing me and the people I care about.

I also identify as a Hul'q'umi'num woman, which is the name of the language of the First Nations people here in this region of Vancouver Island and surrounding parts of British Columbia. My name is ancestral — I carry the name of my grandmother's sister. It's different than my daughters, whose names have literal translations. My name doesn't have a translation, but it comes with teachings from my aunt, who had the name, teachings about generosity, being humble, and caring for community members.

Why is professional learning important to you?

Being a teacher is such a public job. It's not OK that our systems put adults in front of kids in a public way and expect them to just wing it. Teachers really need to have concrete knowledge and skills. The more skills I have and the more I understand what I'm doing and why I'm doing it, the more confidence and ability I have to improve the learning environment for each and every learner and the more likely I am to change.

I have always really worked hard to improve my practice, and I've always brought some friends along. Informal professional learning communities, the ones that people create themselves, are often the most powerful. For many of us, professional learning has been an integral part of our work, throughout our whole careers.

Can you share an example of how you have seen professional learning lead to educators serving all children more equitably?

The school (where I worked) was about 60% First Nations students, many I was related to. The adults who visited described our school as a warm hug. We didn't have an attendance problem. Everybody loved coming to the school.

But after the principal went to a district meeting, he shared our literacy and numeracy results, and we were doing badly — the bottom of the pile. At that time, the graduation rate for all Indigenous learners was 30%. (In Canada, when we use the word Indigenous, we mean Métis,

Inuit, and First Nations learners.) I found myself looking into the big brown eyes of 22 kindergarten kids, most of them First Nations, thinking, “Based on the current data, only a third of these children will graduate.” It’s not because they can’t learn, nor because they’re not curious. This was obviously not a “kid” problem but an “education” problem. That was a significant aha moment. I realized school needed to be more than a warm hug.

One of the other teachers and I dug into literacy to find out: What don’t we know and what do we know? We brought a team together. We had a very dedicated staff who decided we were going to change the story.

Together, we made a schoolwide literacy plan, aiming for more than a year’s worth of growth every year. Every adult, including the secretary, assessed the kids and found the skills they knew and didn’t. We put them in multiage transient groupings, based on what they needed at a given time, and reassessed them. We learned about and documented the needs. The data helped us clarify where we needed to look. The story helped us hold on to what we learned and fueled our dedication to making a difference. Within that first year, we saw significant positive results. It was magical. For me, that is the driver for professional learning.

What aspects of professional learning were especially helpful for your school?

Modeling has always been an important piece. People have a hard time imagining something they haven’t seen or experienced.

That is true with parents as well. The work that is closest to my heart is working with other adults to raise the children of our community. I don’t know how to do that without standing shoulder to shoulder with parents. When I was a teacher, my classroom was open and I would invite parents in. A number of the parents commented on how much they learned by watching how I interacted with the children.

For example, during one spring performance, a boy with autism got on stage and took more than his time. The parents watched me navigate the situation with gentleness, noting that his classmates knew how to kindly help him move off the stage. Whether it’s with parents or other teachers, being transparent has given me the chance to talk about these types of interactions. Someone might ask, “Why didn’t you just give him three strikes and sit him on the carpet?” The question is an invitation to sit and learn together.

How is supporting adults different from supporting kids?

I’m smiling because learners are learners. What works for a group of kindergarten kids is just a variation of what works for adults. They sometimes squirm and don’t like it in the beginning, and then are inspired and driven. I’m being a bit cheeky, but it’s kind of true. (With both adults and kids), we need multiple points of access. Some learners really want to read about it first and some want to get in there and muck about (with trying new strategies). Then we need to be purposeful in going deep because if we only stay at that entry point, it is only surface learning. We bring people together to unpack the work and ask: What did you listen to? What did you try? How did it go? And what will you do differently next time?

What steps is British Columbia taking to integrate Indigenous education and support equity for Indigenous learners?

This is a huge change that takes time, but there are some things we can point to. The creation of the First Peoples Principles of Learning has been influential. The Professional Standards for BC Educators now includes a standard that teachers must work toward reconciliation and integrate First Nations and Indigenous content and perspectives. We have also changed the grad program, which is grades 10, 11, and 12. Now three of the (students’)

credits must be in an Indigenous-focused course.

In November 2023, we passed Bill 40, which has three pieces. First is school of choice, where a First Nation may decide which school their children attend. Second is the requirement that every school district has an Indigenous Education Council that prioritizes local First Nations and approves the spending plan for targeted funding for Indigenous learners. Third, a First Nation can apply a co-created model agreement to the school board from which they’re purchasing education. The agreement outlines each party’s responsibilities and is a mechanism for improving the relationship between the board and the First Nation. All three components make significant shifts in the balance of power.

What will you take away from your secondment with the Ministry of Education and Child Care?

I always planned on being an elementary school teacher for the whole of my career and didn’t have a view of going anywhere beyond the classroom. (But) when some First Nations community members pointed me to an Indigenous education curriculum coordinator position that came up, I put my name forward. I saw the power of professional learning at the school level and was curious about supporting learning across the district.

As I have moved through various leadership roles, I have learned that creating environments where every single student will experience safety, a sense of belonging, and deep learning takes all of us. We can no longer afford to point our fingers at each other and suggest that positive change must start with “them”: governments, unions, administrators, teachers, parents, etc. We each have a vital role and must find ways to listen deeply to each other, keeping learning and children at the center of our work. Our children and our planet need us to walk side by side, honoring our ancestors and planning for the generations yet to come. ■