



## In Profile: Denise Augustine



*Denise Augustine has worked in public education for 29 years and counting. She's worked in both the Sooke and Cowichan school districts in roles including teacher, coordinator, district vice-principal, district principal and director. Denise is currently on secondment with the Ministry of Education.*

*In this interview Denise talks more about her work and offers some suggestions for anyone wanting to deepen their reconciliation practice.*

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### Tell us about yourself.

I'm a Coast Salish woman of mixed ancestry from the Stz'yminus First Nation. My hul'q'umi'num name is Swee'alt. I am the daughter of Keatlemaat, Jane Marston, and the grand-daughter of Edith Silvey. I am currently on secondment with the Ministry of Education. One part of my role at the ministry is being the lead for the First Nations Education Outcome Improvement Team (FNEOIT). In the **BC Tripartite Education Agreement (BCTEA)** the parties (BC, Canada and the First Nations Education Steering Committee) agreed to collectively identify school districts where First Nations students have been struggling for a long time. Then a



team (FNEOIT) works with those districts to see how we can ensure those students experience more success. This is important reconciliation work for the Ministry. We are recognizing that our education system has negatively impacted our Indigenous learners and we are taking steps towards making it right.

Another role I have is to support the Ministry in acting on the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission Recommendation #57**, which emphasizes the importance of public sector workers building knowledge and the capacity to be culturally responsive. One of my first steps has been within the Learning Division, where we hosted a half-day experiential workshop called “Cultural Connections”. I am keen to find ways to work with others in the Ministry to build our collective knowledge of – and appreciation for – the diverse and rich Indigenous cultures in BC.

## How has your experience working in the education system prepared you for your current role with the Ministry?

I have been in education long enough to see some important changes begin in regards to the types of learning environments we create for children and youth, but there is still more work to do. I am in a unique position to share stories between folks here at the Ministry and those out in the districts. Given that we are all working very hard to create the best possible educational experience for the children and youth of B.C., it seems helpful for us to have a deeper understanding of how we can support each other. I continue to look for ways to support communication between the Ministry and school districts because I believe we are smarter together and can help each other do our work better.

## What gives you hope?

We have many pieces in our society right now that are inviting each and every one of us to step into the work of understanding the truth of our collective history and trying to figure out, together, how we repair the relationships between First Nations and non-First Nations. We have documents and policies that are creating space and support for this reconciliation work, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and our current curriculum. There are so many ways into this learning today, compared to 10 or 20 years ago, so that gives me great hope.

I also am inspired by the fact that the students currently in our schools are the first generation that's learning our collective history in a more fulsome way. And when I think about what that might look like 10 years from now I think of my grandma, and how proud she would be. I always hear her voice saying “When are we going to start telling the true history of Canada?”

I also think of the words of Chief Dan George, who talked of a time when our people could go into the forest, and find the absolute right, large, straight, clean tree from which to carve a massive ocean-going canoe that could carry our people on the journey. And he went on to say those trees don't exist anymore, we've cut them all down. So, we are now in a time when we need to find two trees that are straight and clean and fit seamlessly together, so that we can build a canoe that will carry us all to do the work. And he was talking



about a time in history when Indigenous and non-Indigenous people need to work side by side, paddling in the same canoe to move our future generations forward.

## Do you have any other reflections you want to share about the journey of reconciliation?

We need to remember to be compassionate, because we're talking about a very wide spectrum of learning and we are all at different places on the journey at different times. We're all going to get it wrong sometimes. After all, environments with diverse perspectives and opinions are not always easy places to be. But we need each other. It's like a natural environment. We don't want flowers or animals of only one kind – a healthy environment is one with a variety of organisms. It's the same in our relationships with each other and in community. We need diversity, and as a society, we need to figure out how to live collaboratively and harmoniously amidst that diversity. And that can be tough work.

## What advice would you give to educators who are looking for tangible ways to incorporate reconciliation practices and the 10 Draft Principles that Guide the Province of British Columbia's Relationships with Indigenous Peoples into their daily work?

First, get to know yourself better. What world view, what assumptions and biases, what privilege do you carry?

Second, learn more about the place where you work and play – learn about the FULL history including what things may have been like pre-contact. Who are the Nations that still live on this land? Who are the chiefs? What challenges are the local Nations facing?

Third, read **The Inconvenient Indian** by Thomas King; **The Wayfinders** by Wade Davis; **Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death and Hard Truths in a Northern City** by Tanya Talaga; and **21 Things You May Not Have Known About the Indian Act** by Bob Joseph. And then keep on learning!



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