Alumna Climbs to the Top as a Superintendent in the Mountain State

Linda Reed might be new as superintendent, but her dedication to education access goes back to childhood

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Superintendent of Archuleta School District Linda Reed’s dedication to educational excellence touches thousands of young learners in Pagosa Springs, Colo. and its region every day. But that might never have happened if it wasn’t for the suggestion of a friend while Reed was a student at Ohio University.

“I came to education through psychology,” explained Reed. “My mother was a teacher, and so I swore that I would never be a teacher. I started at Ohio University as a psychology major. I had a friend who said, ‘You’re into child psychology. Why don’t you take a special education class?’ Even in the ’70s, there was a significant field experience portion to the class, so I was working in a school with kids and I loved it.”

Reed’s first special education class triggered a change in major that was, at its core, a return to something she had done as a child.

“Special education resonated with me. It made me think back to when I was in elementary school in Columbus,” said Reed. “There was a class of students who were blind. I was the study buddy for a boy in that class. I would read to him and help him transcribe and do homework over the phone. That was something that stayed with me. I connected to people who learned differently. The more I learned about special education and those struggling with the basics of education I thought that maybe I could help them learn more easily.”

After graduating from Ohio University, where she met her husband during a game of flag football on her first day, Reed’s career grew and changed. She has transitioned from special education teacher to school principal, to an education consultant, to an assistant superintendent, and finally, her newest role, that of superintendent of Archuleta School District. But as far as her career has progressed and the scope of her influence grown, that original goal, to help all children learn, has remained her guiding principle.
“I thought, ‘If can impact this class of kids, what about the adults who work with them?’ Through that I could then impact more kids,” said Reed. “After I became a principal, each step was to see how much broader my influence could be. I have a belief system about what education can be. I truly believe every child has an innate capacity no matter where they come from to learn. And I believe if we give them the right environment and tools they can learn. I want to give the maximum opportunity for success to every child.”

And impact she has, for her students and for her teachers and staff. Reed is a tireless advocate for her school district. The district's accomplishments have garnered the notice of education researchers and think tanks. She listens to her teachers and administrative staff, and with their support has witnessed a dramatic turnaround in the high school.

“My passion for the last four years [serving as assistant superintendent] was changing the direction and focus of our high school. When I started, they had some issues with math achievement,” explained Reed. “We implemented system changes. In 2008, before I started, only 24 percent of our students were taking courses that indicated they were college bound, and we were always behind the state as far as our average math ACT scores. This year, 44 percent of our students were taking college-bound courses. And, for the first time this year, our students exceeded the state in our math ACT scores.”

But Reed is not taking sole credit for the high school’s success. That she places at the feet of the dedicated teachers and administrators who first developed the necessary system changes.

“What I love is that this change is completely driven by the high school,” she said. “The teachers and staff have said, ‘We need to expand and that has come from within.’ That is inspiring. I’m very proud of the work they are doing.”

For someone who moved to Colorado in 2009 to retire, Reed has been a busy woman. She has effected change and improved access to education for thousands of students of all ability, economic, and education levels from her first day teaching special education and well into the future. And if this is her retirement, she certainly does not show any signs of slowing down.

“I’ve loved every moment of my career,” Reed said. “It’s one of those things where if you feel like you can make a difference that’s what matters. I feel like I’m making a difference.”