

# coalition of advocates FOR MONTANA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

MASBO | MREA | MTSBA | MQEC | SAM

TO: School Funding Interim Commission Members  
FROM: The Undersigned Executive Directors of the Organizations  
Partnering in the Coalition of Advocates for Montana's Public Schools  
RE: Aligning the Funding Formula to Key Student Success  
DATE: August 8, 2025

Dear Members of the School Finance Interim Commission,

This memorandum analyzes Montana's school funding formula and advocates for changes to make funding equitable and adequate, addressing the unique challenges of state school districts. The current per-pupil funding model fails to meet the diverse needs of rural and urban districts, risking underfunding and compromising student success.

We propose a revised funding model that aligns expenditures with Montana's educational realities, suggesting a redistribution of funds to ensure all districts can provide quality education regardless of enrollment changes.

These reforms offer the School Funding Interim Commission a chance to advocate for equity in education, ensuring every Montana student has access to the education they deserve.

## **Key Expenditures Driving Student Success**

The most significant areas of school spending, based on FY2024 OPI data, include:

Function	FY24 Expense
<b>Teaching and Learning for Students:</b> Direct instruction through teacher salaries, benefits, classroom supplies, and instructional materials to enhance student learning and academic success.	\$1,123,662,658
<b>Providing Effective, Supportive Learning Environments for Students:</b> Construction and renovation projects to create modern and adequate facilities that support student education. Facilities upkeep, including utilities, cleaning, grounds maintenance, and repairs, to provide students with safe spaces conducive for learning. Debt-related spending, including bond repayment, assessments, and interest payments, to fund infrastructure and resources that benefit students.	\$527,830,472

<b>Facilitating Community Engagement and Operational Excellence Through Seamless District Operations:</b> Central office administration, including the board of trustees, district superintendent, district clerk and other administrative leaders, supports student success through strategic leadership, transparency, community engagement and assurance of compliance with all state and federal laws. The district superintendent actively interfaces with stakeholders to ensure accountability and foster trust, while essential operations—including financial and human resources—create a stable foundation for schools.	\$148,797,399
<b>Supporting Student Well-Being:</b> Services like counseling, health, library/media, and assessment to promote students' emotional, physical, and academic development.	\$139,381,884
<b>Safely Transporting Students:</b> Provision of buses, fuel, and drivers to ensure students have reliable transportation to and from school.	\$127,174,712
<b>Leadership for Student Achievement:</b> School-level instructional leadership and management by building principals and administrative support professionals to maintain and protect confidentiality of student records, maintain records of and ensure attendance, and ensure effective leadership and organization that benefits students.	\$120,192,111
<b>Providing Nutritious Meals for Students:</b> School meal programs and cafeteria operations to support students' health and nutritional needs.	\$94,987,147

### **Better Aligning the Formula to Key Expenditures Necessary to Serve Students Well**

A key responsibility of the Commission, extending beyond the assessment of student needs and the costing of quality education, is to ensure that the formula for distributing resources actively protects and promotes, rather than diminishes or undermines, the mission of Montana's public schools. This mission aligns with the People's Goal of providing a system of public education that fully develops the educational potential of each individual. To achieve this, the formula must prioritize stable, rational, and adequate funding for the essential functions upon which schools currently allocate their resources, ensuring that every aspect of education is well-supported and capable of fostering student success.

### **Limitations of a Per-Pupil Funding Model**

While per-pupil funding appears straightforward, it fails to account for the fixed costs and unique challenges faced by districts, in rural and isolated areas, in urban areas and in all other districts.

**Unique Rural Challenges:** Montana's vast geography and sparse population (42 counties with fewer than 5 people per square mile) result in higher transportation and infrastructure costs that cannot be addressed by a simple per-pupil formula.

1. **Small Districts:** With 96% of Montana's public school districts classified as "small rural," fixed costs such as administrative overhead and facility maintenance remain constant, regardless of enrollment numbers.
2. **School Sizes:** Over 50% of Montana schools serve fewer than 100 students, and 92 schools operate with just one teacher. These small schools lack economies of scale, making per-pupil funding insufficient to cover operational costs.
3. **Teacher Vacancies:** Rural schools face significant challenges in attracting and retaining qualified educators, with 83% of teacher vacancies occurring in these areas last year. Competitive salaries and support services are essential to address this issue.

**Unique Urban Challenges:** Larger urban districts are also at risk under a per-pupil funding model. Without a foundational base amount of funding that assures reasonable student to teacher ratios, a per pupil funding construct as the sole basis of funding may force these districts to overload classrooms to balance budgets, leading to diseconomies of scale. Key issues include:

1. **Overcrowded Classrooms:** Larger districts often serve higher concentrations of students, and a per-pupil funding model that lacks a base amount can incentivize districts to increase class sizes to reduce costs. This approach undermines educational quality by overburdening teachers and limiting individualized attention for students.
2. **Operational Strain:** Urban districts face higher infrastructure and administrative costs due to their size, which are not adequately addressed by per-pupil funding. Without sufficient base funding, these districts may struggle to maintain facilities, provide support services, and meet diverse student needs.
3. **Equity Concerns:** Overcrowding disproportionately impacts students in underserved communities within urban districts, exacerbating existing inequities and hindering efforts to close achievement gaps.

### **Risks of Oversimplification**

A funding formula based solely on per-pupil allocation risks underfunding districts with higher fixed costs and diverse needs. Additionally, while some argue that per-pupil funding promotes student-centered goals, it may inadvertently align with privatization agendas, such as vouchers, which could undermine public education.

### **Addressing Counterarguments**

While some may argue that a per-pupil funding model encourages efficiency and accountability, it is essential to recognize that this approach can inadvertently lead to inefficiencies, inequities and diseconomies of scale. Critics might suggest that a simple distribution method fosters competition and drives excellence among schools. However,

the reality is that the unique challenges faced by rural and urban areas cannot be addressed through a one-size-fits-all formula. The current funding structure does not adequately address fixed costs for all school districts or the realities of schools with small enrollments and forces diseconomies of scale that harm student learning, undermining educational quality. By adopting a revised formula that considers diverse district needs, we can create an environment where all schools—regardless of size or location—can flourish and provide an excellent education for their students.

### **Proposed Solutions**

To achieve true equity and adequacy, we recommend that the funding formula better align with the key expenditures necessary to ensure equity in each school district. Given the anticipated ongoing declines in student enrollment and school-aged children as a percentage of the state’s population, further emphasis on a per-pupil construct that is already out of proportion will harm student interests. It will destabilize the funding necessary to guarantee each student access to appropriate educational programs and services regardless of the school district in which those students are educated.

Our broad recommendations include simplifying the per-pupil funding amount by removing the per-ANB decrement, increasing investments in quality educator and qualified staff payment, ensuring funding to support quality education for educationally relevant groupings of students through equal basic entitlements for each, expanding support for at-risk students, including students with disabilities, guaranteeing a level of funding at the BASE that does not require voter approval to reach adequacy, and removing the educationally irrelevant 3% cap on inflation.

In addition to the specific adjustments that we are recommending above, the Commission should consider better balancing the amount of funding distributed through each funding element to ensure a quality learning environment ready to provide quality education for each resident child. A conceptual framework to ensure these goals would look something like the following:

<b>Funding Distribution Method</b>	<b>Current % of Whole</b>	<b>Proposed % of Whole</b>
Amounts distributed on a per-pupil basis	85%	60% (to better preserve quality in the face of enrollment fluctuations)
Amounts distributed on a per-quality educator basis	7.5% (including STARS)	25% (to better align with the labor-intensive nature of public education)
Amounts distributed on a per-school unit basis	7.5% (including the basic entitlement per school unit)	15% (to ensure adequate resources for groups of students)



### Call to Action

As members of the School Funding Interim Commission, you hold the power to drive transformative change in Montana's education system. We respectfully encourage you to take proactive steps toward revising the current funding formula to better reflect the costs of quality and to accurately reflect the diverse needs of all districts. This is not just a financial necessity; it is a moral imperative to ensure that every child in Montana has access to quality education, regardless of their geographic or socioeconomic background. We ask you to prioritize discussions on adopting a more equitable distribution of funds and to commit to implementing the proposed changes that align funding with the key expenditures necessary for student success. Your leadership can pave the way for a brighter future for our students.

### Future Outlook

Implementing these funding reform recommendations can significantly enhance the future of education in Montana. By making immediate adjustments to the funding formula, we can empower districts to maintain strong operational standards, attract and retain qualified educators, and provide essential support services. This proactive approach will help bridge achievement gaps and promote progress toward educational equity. Embracing a more nuanced funding strategy that emphasizes adequacy, and equity will pave the way for a resilient education system, well-equipped to tackle future challenges. Investing in our schools today ensures that all students, regardless of their circumstances, can thrive and make positive contributions to their communities and the state of Montana as a whole.



Shelley Turner  
MASBO

Doug Reisig  
MQEC

Larry Crowder  
MREA

Lance Melton  
MTSBA

Rob Watson  
SAM



**TO:** School Funding Interim Commission Members  
**FROM:** Krystal Zentner, President, Montana School Boards Association, Trustee, Bridger Public Schools  
Sue Corrigan, Immediate Past President, Montana School Boards Association, Trustee, Kalispell Public Schools  
Rick Cummings, President-Elect, Montana School Boards Association, Trustee, Cascade Public Schools  
Jennifer Hoffman, Vice-President, Montana School Boards Association, Trustee, Billings Public Schools  
Lance Melton, Executive Director, Montana School Boards Association  
**RE:** Historical Background and Suggested Guiding Principles for the Interim Study of the Basic System of Free Quality Schools  
**DATE:** July 13, 2025

Dear Commission Members, on behalf of the Montana School Boards Association (MTSBA) and our 1,400+ elected school board trustees, we are excited to support your work in ensuring every child in Montana has access to a quality education backed by adequate and equitable funding. Since our founding in 1926, MTSBA has advocated for Montana's public school students, driven by our mission to unlock the full potential of each child through effective school board leadership.

### **The First Step – Assess student needs in the context of the binding guidance of the Montana Supreme Court from *Columbia Falls Elementary v. State***

As the Commission embarks on its analysis of the current system for funding Montana's public schools, there are substantive, threshold issues that must be analyzed and resolved before the Legislature initiates proposed solutions. Additionally, despite signs of a potential intent to become preoccupied with simplification of the formula, we believe that a drive for simplicity in the formula for its own sake contradicts the obligations of the Commission. The prerequisites that must be resolved prior to delving into specific changes in the formula are found in the Court's ruling itself:

- "Without an assessment of what constitutes a "quality" education, the Legislature has no reference point from which to relate funding to relevant educational need. . . . Unless funding relates to needs such as academic standards, teacher pay, fixed costs, costs of special education, and performance standards, then the funding is not related to the cornerstones of a quality education."
- "The accreditation standards establish a minimum upon which quality education can be built but do not fully define either the constitutional rights of students or the constitutional responsibilities of the State of Montana for funding its public elementary and secondary schools."

We respectfully encourage the Commission to take the words above to heart in framing the initial workplan for completing the decennial study.

### **Historical Context**

Your efforts come within a rich historical context. Just a year after MTSBA's inception, Montana established its first school equalization fund in 1927, initiating a journey toward adequate and equitable

education funding that continues today. Throughout the last 100 years, many of the proposals you will come to discuss have been previously examined, implemented, and sometimes later set aside. For instance, ideas about classroom entitlements, career and technical education, and even distance learning can be traced back to the 1935 funding formula.

Various significant studies have paved the way for ongoing improvements in our funding system, including:

1. The **1946 Montana Committee** on Public Elementary and Secondary School Organization and Finance.
2. The **1958 Peabody Commission**, which sought to modernize school structures.
3. The **1961 School Foundation Study Committee**, which led to critical legislative enhancements.
4. **The significant reforms introduced by the 1972 constitutional convention in Montana** aimed to fulfill the public's aspiration to harness the full potential of every individual through the state's public education system. These changes established a guarantee of equal educational opportunities, emphasized the commitment to preserving American Indian culture, reinforced the constitutional authority of elected school boards and the board of public education, and mandated that the state provide a basic system of quality, free schools. Additionally, the reforms required that the state equitably distribute its share of funding for this educational system.
5. The **2001 Governor's Task Force on Teacher Shortage/Salaries**
6. The **2003 K-12 Public School Renewal Commission**.
7. The **2005 Quality Schools Interim Committee** (which generated our current definition of quality and most of the current funding formula).
8. The **2015 School Funding Commission** that last analyzed our current funding formula.

### **The Backdrop of Previous Rulings**

During the period from 1972 to 2008, Montana's public school finance system underwent significant scrutiny and legal challenges, culminating in major reforms. The Montana Supreme Court, in *Helena Elementary v. State*, found that disparities in local property wealth led to significant differences in funding, creating unequal educational opportunities. A lawsuit in 1985, *Helena Elementary School District No. 1 v. State of Montana*, successfully challenged the constitutionality of the funding system, leading to a 1988 district court ruling that deemed the system unconstitutional due to its excessive reliance on local variable property wealth.

In response, the 1989 Montana legislature passed House Bill 28 to enhance the state's share of school funding and decrease reliance on local taxes, which increased county equalization levies to 55 mills and established a 40-mill statewide equalization levy. Ongoing challenges prompted further litigation in 1991, and in 1993—addressing many issues from previous lawsuits—legislators enacted House Bill 667.

By 2002, inadequacies in the funding formula led again to another lawsuit, *Columbia Falls Elementary v. State*, which was upheld by the Montana Supreme Court in favor of the plaintiffs. This case resulted in the establishment of the Quality Schools Interim Committee in 2005, leading to the creation of MCA 20-9-309, which defines quality education and shapes the current funding formula.

As you undertake this work, it is crucial to strive for original and impactful solutions. This process requires a commitment to excellence, focus, diligence, collaboration, and mutual respect. While it may be tempting to dive into specific solutions quickly—adjusting formulas or addressing identified



shortcomings—we must avoid jumping to conclusions without first fully assessing our students' needs. This foundation, as mandated by the Court in *Columbia Falls*, has the potential to unify our purpose.

### **The Current Circumstances**

Today, we face a moment of urgency in reassessing Montana's public school funding system as outlined in MCA 20-9-309. The challenges of the last decade, including the impact of COVID-19 on our children — who have faced isolation and significant educational disruptions — underscore the necessity of robust support systems to foster student success. A recent multimillion-dollar reduction in federal funding — projected at over \$27 million in FY26 — places further strain on our already challenged educational budgets and suggests that our past reliance on federal funding to address the challenges to student achievement may no longer be sustainable.

Our educators — teachers, administrators, and support staff — have shown tremendous resilience during these trying times. They, too, have borne the weight of disruptions while striving to meet students' needs. Their dedication is a testament to the spirit of our educational mission, reinforcing the importance of our inquiry into funding being tied to the resources we provide those on the front lines.

The efforts of our educators during and following the pandemic are well documented and averted what would have been much higher levels of learning loss if it had not been for their dedication and devotion to children in our public schools.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of MCA 20-9-309, we must prioritize a funding mechanism that not only ensures financial equity but also aligns with the current realities of education. Every student, regardless of background, must receive the support they need to thrive.

The educationally relevant adjustments currently embedded in the definition of quality provide the Commission with valuable direction regarding the required assessment of need for children with diverse characteristics (children with disabilities, at risk children, English Language learners, and gifted and talented children). The definition of “at-risk student” in §20-1-101 provides a unifying outcome-based definition that paves the way to the necessary assessment of student need that should be the first order of business for the Commission:

“20-1-101(4) “At-risk student” means any student who is affected by environmental conditions that negatively impact the student's educational performance or threaten a student's likelihood of promotion or graduation.”

As we consider the future, we must also embrace the opportunities and challenges presented by technological advancements, particularly with artificial intelligence already in our midst. This landscape demands that we prepare our youth for a world characterized by rapid change. Just as we have high expectations of Montana's public schools, the Commission must embrace high expectations for its own efforts in this interim. The intersection of peril and opportunity presents the Commission with a compelling landscape that demands bold action.

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<sup>1</sup> [COVID-19 Learning Delay and Recovery](#): Where does the U.S. Stand? By McKinsey & Company. The report underscores the devastating impact of COVID-19 on U.S. education, erasing two decades of progress in math and reading, with students nationwide facing significant learning delays. And while Montana did better than most other states, ranking 12<sup>th</sup> in the nation for overcoming learning loss, students in Montana are estimated to have suffered nearly a third of a year in lost learning.

## Changing Demographics and Costs of Living in Montana

Another aspect of assessing student need is presented by the changing demographics and costs of living in Montana. The State of Montana has transformed both demographically and financially in recent years. For example, in 2015 the median priced home on a statewide basis was \$250,000. Today, according to data analysis by the National Association of Realtors, that value has skyrocketed to over \$400,000, making Montana's housing market the least affordable in the country, surpassing states like California and Hawaii<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, the Montana Budget and Policy Center has estimated that a quarter of Montana renters spend more than half of their monthly income on rent.

These financial circumstances have created particular challenges for young families starting out their careers with younger children. It should be no surprise, then, that we find ourselves in a state of gradual ongoing decline in school aged children as a percentage of the overall population in Montana. This aging trend has been underway for the last 25 years but has become even more pronounced since the more recent spikes in housing costs. The representation of school aged children as a percentage of our overall population has dropped by 33% over the last 30 years, from nearly 20% of the state's population in the mid-90's to only 12.9% today.

To put this in perspective, if we had the same percentage of school aged children in Montana today that we had in 1996, there would be over 217,000 students in Montana's public schools today instead of the 147,469 remaining.

Year	Montana Population	Statewide K-12 Enrollment (not ANB, actual pupils)	Percentage of Total Population in K-12 Public Schools
1995	868,522	165,507	19.06%
2000	902,195	151,947	16.84%
2005	940,102	145,516	15.48%
2010	990,730	141,807	14.31%
2020	1,087,230	145,598	13.39%
2025	1,142,750	147,469	12.9%

The current financial circumstances impacting our educational system, while challenging, offer an unusual benefit. As we confront the reality of a declining school-aged population—evidenced by a striking 33% drop in representation over the past three decades—legislators now have a unique opportunity to refocus their efforts on refining educational quality amid reduced enrollments. Rather than attempting to sustain an ever-expanding system under the weight of rising housing costs and evolving family dynamics, we can pivot toward creating targeted, high-quality educational experiences that promote excellence within our current demographic constraints.

The gradual decline in enrollment, while a concern, allows the Legislature to channel its resources more effectively. With fewer students, we can focus public schools on optimizing funding and fostering innovative teaching practices that were previously diffused across larger populations. When enrollment swells, the challenge becomes one of mere quantity—ensuring that every child has a seat—often at the expense of quality. In contrast, a depopulating landscape enables us to refine our methodologies and enhance educational offerings so that each remaining student receives the robust, individualized instruction they deserve.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nar.realtor/research-and-statistics/housing-statistics/realtors-affordability-distribution-curve-and-score>



The existing funding formula, which allocates over 80% of its resources based on a per pupil basis, warrants critical reevaluation in the context of how it serves children. To treat each student as an isolated expenditure in a climate of diminishing numbers is akin to pouring water into a sieve—precious resources seep away without stabilizing and enhancing the capacity of our public schools to yield the educational outcomes we hope to achieve. The Commission should recommend a more holistic funding approach that recognizes the unique needs of students in each community, regardless of its size and enrollment patterns. By assuring that a quality school is effective, available and capable of serving each child in every community, we can cultivate an environment where financial constraints no longer dictate the quality of education.

While the narrative of enrollment declines can seem disheartening, it presents us with an unparalleled opportunity to reimagine our educational landscape. With intentionality and a renewed focus, we can create a system of public schools throughout the state that not only meet the current realities of Montana's families but sets a precedent for excellence that could reshape our educational future for the better.

### History Repeating Itself

It bears repeating that the circumstances faced by our schools today echo many of those present during the Montana Supreme Court's decision in *Columbia Falls Elementary v. State*. We have schools operating at funding limits (e.g., the average adopted general fund budget is over 97% of maximum; 27% of school districts have adopted budgets that are above the maximum, 67% of the children in Montana's public schools are being educated in schools with budgets at 97% or above), increasing accreditation issues, and educators leaving because of inadequate salaries. And although the efforts of the 2025 Legislature were truly impressive, innovative and appreciated among public school leaders, significant remaining challenges remain in the wake of that progress that, if left unaddressed, will harm the interests of children in Montana's public schools.

### Funding in the Context of the Rest of the Nation

Education is the cornerstone of a thriving society, and it is our responsibility to ensure that every child in Montana receives a quality education. Unfortunately, the statistics reveal a stark truth: Despite recent progress and recovery from 2020-2024, Montana's public schools remain underfunded, placing our students and communities at a significant disadvantage.

Let's examine the numbers. In total Spending<sup>3</sup>:

- Montana ranks **35th in the nation** in current expenditures per pupil. When Capital Expenditures are included, Montana's shortfall is even more pronounced, and we rank 38th.
- In total current spending per pupil, we are **\$358 million per pupil behind our next-door neighbor North Dakota**, which reflects the investment that a state very similar to Montana (e.g., Montana has 7 people per square mile while North Dakota has 11) has chosen to make in their children's futures.
- Montana is **\$518 million behind Oregon, \$654 million behind Washington, \$166 million behind Colorado, \$164 million behind Kansas, \$849 million behind Wyoming and \$1.4 billion behind Massachusetts**, a state that, no surprise, tops the nation in academic achievement indicators.

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<sup>3</sup> [Annual Survey of School System Finances](#), United States Census Bureau, 2023 Report (latest available, published annually in May of each year). Look to tables 8, 11 and 12 for key information on per pupil expenditures.

- In comparison to the national average, Montana schools are **\$421 million behind**.

These figures are alarming. They demonstrate not just a shortfall in dollars but a broader undervaluation of education in our state. It is objectively unreasonable to expect our public schools to yield top 10 performance on bottom quartile funding. How can we nurture excellence when we are providing our students with so much less than neighboring states and other states leaping ahead of our levels of student achievement? Despite the dedication of our teachers and the resilience of our students and families, we cannot overcome systemic, preconceived financial limitations that contradict the data. Money is certainly not the only determiner in student achievement, but it is, in fact, a powerful predictor of advancements and plays a critical role in setting the stage for high levels of student achievement.

Before falling back on the age-old argument that affordability to our taxpayers is an impediment to progress, let's make sure we remain fact driven in our inquiries. Montana ranks even lower in per pupil funding compared to other states when placed in the context of affordability to the taxpayer. We are currently at **42nd in the nation in the cost of K-12 funding as a function of personal income**, with public education costing **\$34.94 per \$1,000 in personal income, compared to a national average of \$42.87, more than 22% higher than in Montana**. Other states, including those with comparable economies, have shown that higher funding levels are reasonable and sustainable. If North Dakota can offer these funding levels, so can Montana.

In conclusion, our effort to reassess and improve Montana's school funding system is essential for the future of our students and the well-being of our communities. The historical context, legal precedents, and current challenges outlined in this memo highlight the necessity and importance of this work. As we respond to changing demographics and economic pressures, we must clearly understand our approach to educational funding. By focusing on equitable solutions and aligning resources with student needs, we can ensure that every child in Montana receives the quality education they deserve. We can successfully work together, informed by our past and committed to a better future, to create an educational framework that serves all our students effectively.

Thank you for your dedication to this important mission.



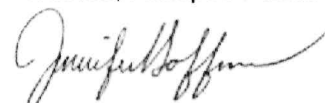
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Rick Cummings, President Elect  
Trustee, Cascade Public Schools



Jennifer Hoffman, Vice President  
Trustee, Billings Public Schools



Lance Melton  
Executive Director  
Montana School Boards Association

Sheila Hansen

#### School funding formula

It is time for MT to start consolidating schools for funding purposes. I know small communities are in love with their tiny schools, but some are so close together it is ridiculous to not consolidate them. Many of these schools only have a few students and are within just miles of another small school. We are already combining students for sports purposes. Why not for education? It seems fiscally irresponsible to keep funding all these schools. Montana is faced with teaching shortages, funding and salary shortfalls, old buildings, increasing utility costs etc. all dependent on a taxpayer base that cannot withstand much more demand. It is understandable to have schools in isolated areas where students would have to travel several miles to get to school, but that is not the case with many. It is difficult; I know, but we are coming to a time where it is just not reasonable or doable anymore. Please consider this issue in your funding discussions. Thank you,  
Sheila Hansen

LaDonna Sterling

#### Commission membership

I have no doubt that you are fully aware, that now that Pres. Trump's Education Dept Secretary has completely changed the way (and amount) funds are distributed to states and school districts, and that the passage of the federal budget reconciliation bill does not include fully funding public education, your job has become extremely difficult. Please strongly consider having a current Special Education or Title I teacher on your commission so that you will have a first hand voice contributing to the difficult discussions you need to have around the very real issues that you will be facing. School administrators only have the perspective of budget and overall school impacts. A teacher will have the very real, up close perspective of how that impacts children and the classroom. I was a Special Education or Title I teacher for 35 years, and participated through my union at school board meetings and the contract bargaining table for many of those years. I know the effects of legislation.

Kendall Cotton

Frontier Institute SFIC Letter

Dear Committee Members, The attached letter outlines Frontier Institute's broad recommendations for this committee's work in considering changes to the school funding formula. I would be happy to discuss these recommendations in further detail with you anytime. Thank you for your hard work on this very important committee! Thank you, Kendall Cotton President & CEO Frontier Institute [kcotton@frontierinstitute.org](mailto:kcotton@frontierinstitute.org)

<https://docs.legmt.gov/download-ticket?ticketId=cb7e5b1a-0346-4627-b170-c325d196ea28>

Jenny Murnane-Butcher

MOFE Memo to the School Funding Interim Commission

Please see the attached memo regarding Montanans Organized for Education's recommendations for study and reform of the Montana School Funding Formula.

<https://docs.legmt.gov/download-ticket?ticketId=9b47a362-660b-4893-92b1-1e07b10c5f5d>





MT

MILES CITY

sheila Hansen

Self

06/27/2025 04:19 PM

**Subject:** School funding formula

**Comment:** It is time for MT to start consolidating schools for funding purposes. I know small communities are in love with their tiny schools, but some are so close together it is ridiculous to not consolidate them. Many of these schools only have a few students and are within just miles of another small school. We are already combining students for sports purposes. Why not for education? It seems fiscally irresponsible to keep funding all these schools. Montana is faced with teaching shortages, funding and salary shortfalls, old buildings, increasing utility costs etc. all dependent on a taxpayer base that cannot withstand much more demand. It is understandable to have schools in isolated areas where students would have to travel several miles to get to school, but that is not the case with many. It is difficult; I know, but we are coming to a time where it is just not reasonable or doable anymore. Please consider this issue in your funding discussions. Thank you, Sheila Hansen





MT

Bozeman

LaDonna Sterling

Self

07/06/2025 08:45 AM

**Subject:** Commission membership

**Comment:** I have no doubt that you are fully aware, that now that Pres. Trump's Education Dept Secretary has completely changed the way (and amount) funds are distributed to states and school districts, and that the passage of the federal budget reconciliation bill does not include fully funding public education, your job has become extremely difficult. Please strongly consider having a current Special Education or Title I teacher on your commission so that you will have a first hand voice contributing to the difficult discussions you need to have around the very real issues that you will be facing. School administrators only have the perspective of budget and overall school impacts. A teacher will have the very real, up close perspective of how that impacts children and the classroom.

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MT

East Helena

Kendall Cotton

Frontier Institute

07/21/2025 12:57 PM

**Subject:** Frontier Institute SFIC Letter

**Comment:** Dear Committee Members,

The attached letter outlines Frontier Institute's broad recommendations for this committee's work in considering changes to the school funding formula.

I would be happy to discuss these recommendations in further detail with you anytime. Thank you for your hard work on this very important committee!

Thank you,

Kendall Cotton

**Attachments:**

 VIEW

ATTACHMENT 1



Frontier Institute  
PO Box 5104  
Helena, MT 59604  
406.924.9763  
frontierinstitute.org

July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025  
RE: School Funding Interim Commission

Dear Committee Members,

When considering review or revision of the public school funding formula, Frontier Institute urges the committee to prioritize the following general areas required by our Constitution and Montana Law:

### ***What the Law Requires***

Montana's Constitution requires K12 public education to **guarantee equality of educational opportunity**, to be **free and open to all students**, and to be **equitably funded** (Article X, Section 1).

The Montana Supreme Court has further clarified that to satisfy the constitutional requirements our school finance system must be based upon a determination of **the needs and costs** of the public school system and **be designed and based upon educationally-relevant factors** (Columbia Falls v. State). Needs, costs, and factors have historically been defined in 20-9-309 MCA.

HB 153 from the 2025 Montana legislature updates 5-20-301 MCA which outlines the priorities for this study commission. In addition to reassessing the educational needs and costs related to the K12 public education system, the legislature has directed this commission to specifically consider additional priorities when recommending changes to the state's funding formula, including:

- **Transparent.** This commission must strive for a funding formula that is understandable and transparent in addition to equitable.
- **Accountable.** Ensure funding is directed towards classroom instruction rather than towards admin costs and that funding rewards performance outcomes.
- **Maximum Parental Choice.** Allow for maximum parental choice within the public school system and eliminate the need for tuition payments between school districts.

### ***Current School Funding System Falls Short***

In addition to failing students, Montana's current public school funding system fails to meet the legal obligations outlined above.

**KEEPING THE SPIRIT OF THE WESTERN FRONTIER ALIVE**



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**Not Transparent:** Montana's school funding system is notoriously complex and opaque. Public school leaders have long recognized that the funding formula is "near impossible" to decipher and generates confusion and distrust among lawmakers and the public. Montana is in the minority of states which utilize a complex hybrid education funding formula with features of multiple formula types—student-centered, resource-based, and program-based.

**Not Equal:** Funding complexity, coupled with reliance on local property taxes, are significant impediments to allowing funding to easily follow students as families exercise choice seeking alternative public schools to better accommodate their needs. This is a violation of the Constitution's equality of educational opportunity guarantee and the directive from the 2025 legislature to promote maximum parental choice.

**Not Equitable:** The current funding system does not adequately represent a student's needs/costs and factors relevant to driving student outcomes, it is based primarily on school district inputs (such as number of staff etc.). Data from Edunomics Lab<sup>1</sup> demonstrates that even schools with nearly identical demographics and per-student funding levels see wide disparities in outcomes. This indicates a substantial gap between the relationship of funding and student needs.

Specific problems related to equity in school funding include:

- **The basic entitlement lacks purpose.** Rather than targeting dollars to districts with greater student need, it instead provides a funding floor to all districts.
- **Educationally-relevant factors are inadequate.** The six educationally-relevant factors outlined in 20-9-309 MCA are NOT adequate to estimate student needs and costs.
- **Equalization mechanism is flawed.** The Reason Foundation<sup>2</sup> has shown that per-student funding disparities in Montana schools are still often driven by local property wealth, despite GTB property tax equalization.

**Not Accountable:** Frontier Institute data<sup>3</sup> shows that since 2017, MT public schools have directed less of their total funding towards high quality instruction in the classroom and more towards serving administration and facilities. Edunomics data<sup>4</sup> shows that despite funding increases over the last decade, statewide math and reading performance continues to decline. And as already noted, public school funding bears no relationship to student outcomes. This violates the directive from the 2025 legislature to promote accountability for funding and reward performance.

<sup>1</sup> <https://edunomicslab.org/mt-scatterplots/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://reason.org/commentary/montana-school-finance-reform-faqs/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://frontierinstitute.org/reports/are-montana-schools-underfunded-or-underperforming/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://edunomicslab.org/montana-10-over-time/>





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### ***Recommendations***

Based on the shortcomings of the current system, we believe it is a constitutional and policy imperative for Montana to **implement a statewide student-centered funding formula design** as the primary way to fund public education. Here's what that means:

**Student-Based Allocation.** The large majority of funding should be allocated on a per-student basis based on individual regular student needs/costs, with additional funding weights for special educationally-relevant factors.

#### **Benefits:**

- **More Equitable.** More accurately allocated based on individual student needs/costs and educationally-relevant factors, rather than school inputs.
- **More Transparent.** Simple weighted per-student funding allocation can be easily understood.
- **More Accountable.** Simple policy levers that can easily be adjusted by over time to respond to new dynamics or drive improved performance.
- **More Equal.** Funding allocated based on student need enhances equality of educational opportunity.

**Statewide Funding.** Ideally, all funding is derived from state revenue rather than local revenue

#### **Benefits:**

- **More Equitable.** Funding is not tied to district property wealth, reducing funding disparities.
- **More Transparent.** Revenue derived from one tax authority rather than split between many.
- **More Accountable.** Reducing reliance on voted local property taxes to fund programs means schools can be more responsive to student needs.
- **More Equal.** Funding can easily follow the student between public schools while maintaining equalization, enabling policies which allow greater parental choice.

**Flexible Funding.** Ideally, all funding is flexible and unrestricted, eliminating numerous categorical/resource-based funding silos for retirement, transportation, tuition, buildings etc.

#### **Benefits:**

- **More Transparent.** Enables simpler budgeting and public engagement with school finances.

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- **More Accountable.** Empowers schools to be more responsive to local student needs and will ease locally-driven school district reorganization efforts.

**Maximum Parental Choice.** A statewide student-centered formula eliminates the need for enforcing the “lines” around schools and clears the path for the state to expand statewide inter-district and intra-district open enrollment policies.

Benefits:

- **More Accountable.** Parental choice is the ultimate accountability mechanism.
- **More Equal.** Public school students can attend any public school of their choice within the state that better accommodate their needs.

### ***Stakeholder Alignment***

Our recommendation to adopt a statewide student-centered formula aligns well with the recommendations made to this committee by other education stakeholder groups, such as the priorities identified by School Administrators of Montana (SAM) in their June 23<sup>rd</sup> public comment.<sup>5</sup> We find particular alignment with SAM's goal of reducing reliance on local property taxes and guaranteeing fair resource distribution across all districts.

Thank you for your time and leadership as you consider Montana's school funding formula and please don't hesitate to contact us if we can support your work.

Sincerely,

Kendall Cotton  
President & CEO  
Frontier Institute

<sup>5</sup> <https://archive.legmt.gov/content/Committees/Interim/2025-2026/SFIC/June-23-2025/Written-Public-Testimony.pdf>

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MT

Helena

Jenny Murnane-Butcher

Montanans Organized for  
Education

07/29/2025 03:37 PM

**Subject:** MOFE Memo to the School Funding Interim Commission

**Attachments:**

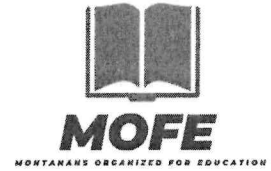
**Comment:** Please see the attached memo regarding Montanans Organized for Education's recommendations for study and reform of the Montana School Funding Formula.

 [VIEW](#)  
ATTACHMENT 1

## MEMO

**To:** Chair Bedey and Members of the School Funding Interim Commission  
**From:** Jenny Murnane Butcher, Deputy Director, Montanans Organized For Education

**Purpose:** Identify current shortfalls of the Montana School Funding Formula (MSFF), recommend next steps for study, and recommend next steps for legislative changes.



**Background:** The Montana state formula to fund K-12 schools has changed dramatically since Montana first became a United States territory and then a state. Overall, Montana has followed national trends in school finance litigation and legislation, including the equity and adequacy movements. Although the Montana Legislature has attempted to improve the MSFF during regular sessions, the formula developed in 2005 remains inequitable and inadequate to provide the constitutional mandate for “a basic system of free quality public elementary and secondary schools throughout the state of Montana that will guarantee equality of educational opportunity to all.”

**Strengths of the Formula:** The MSFF provides basic equity for school districts. The BASE part of the formula, which districts must receive with the help of state aid, allows for basic support for all school districts independent of property wealth. Also, the addition of other funding categories over time has allowed some districts to pull expenses out of the general fund, allowing for more resources to pay for staff and curricular materials.

**Challenges of the Formula:** Though the MSFF has grown to be more equitable over time, overall funding for school districts remains inequitable, is over-reliant on per-pupil funding, and has not been adjusted to account for modern educational expenses.

First, Montana’s funding distribution is classified as “regressive,” meaning that high-poverty districts receive less funding than low-poverty districts (Baker, Farrie, & Sciarra, 2018). This is partially because many rural schools are at BASE funding and are unable to pass local levies to get their budget up to maximum levels. Many of the most rural school districts have a student population where over 90% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, making it extremely hard to ask these families to raise their property taxes (Public School Review, 2024). To make matters worse, districts only receive the full annual inflationary increase appropriated by the legislature if they have passed enough levies to get their budgets to their maximum allowable amount.

Next, the reliance of most of the formula on per-pupil funding does not account for challenges faced by both very small and very large school districts. For very small districts, the combination of the Basic Entitlement and ANB funding does not cover the overhead costs associated with running a school district and maintaining facilities (2015-2016 School Funding Interim Commission, 2016), resulting in extensive deferred maintenance and low salaries for staff. For example, Avon School District, which serves only 28 students, has about \$5,000 less funding per pupil than Big Sky School District in a high-property wealth town (2022-2023 ESSA District Report Cards, 2024). These inequities are compounded by the passage of additional levies outside of the general fund, such as technology levies, that are easy to pass in some places but almost impossible to pass in others. For larger urban districts in high-cost-of-living areas, even maximum funding is insufficient to provide adequate salaries for teachers to live in the communities where they work (Bouman, 2023).

Most importantly, funding levels have not been adjusted to account for changing educational expenses. Despite increased costs to educate students with disabilities, as a proportion of school general fund budgets, state funding of special education services has decreased over time (2015-2016 School Funding Interim Commission, 2016). Also, because Montana primarily uses a census formula for Special Education funding, schools do not receive additional resources if they educate more students with disabilities. Schools also only

receive additional funding for high-need special education students in very extreme circumstances (School Funding Interim Commission, 2016). This means schools rarely receive additional funding to provide for students with disabilities who are costly-to-educate. Additionally, state adjustments to formula amounts have not kept up with inflation (Sakariassen & Dietrich, 2024). This has required districts to ask for more levies from local taxpayers, raising property taxes substantially in areas that pass them. Finally, Montana code limits inflationary increases in the biannual public school state budget to no more than 3%, despite substantial increases in costs including a 28% increase in energy costs since 2022 (Girten, 2023), an 8% increase in property and liability insurance since 2023 (Graf, 2024), and others. This means that the original formula deemed “adequate” by a court in 2008 has not kept pace with inflation (MOEC, 2023).

Finally, schools on reservations face additional needs and do not have the ability to levy additional resources above the minimum funding from the state because their districts are made up predominantly of federal lands. Federal Impact Aid is not sufficient to address this inequity (Montana Legislative Fiscal Division, 2024).

### **Opportunities for Study:**

As noted by education funding experts Downes and Stiefel (2015), simply using an old formula and updating it with incremental inflationary increases does not make funding adequate. Montana needs to do more to truly provide educational opportunities for all students. The first step is to ensure that the SFIC properly studies the needs of Montana school districts. The SFIC should ensure an adequate review of:

1. Funding challenges of very large and very small Montana school districts.
2. Actual cost of special education in the state.
3. Cost of modern education expenditures that are not factored into the current formula such as technology costs, safety costs, and new forms of instructional materials.
4. Cost of services that have outpaced inflation, such as employee health insurance, liability insurance, and utilities.
5. A statistical analysis of the equity of the current funding model, including an analysis of per-pupil expenditures by school district size and student characteristics.

### **Opportunities for Reform:**

Ahead of the next legislative session, the SFIC should draft legislation to address the findings of their study. Potential legislation should promote a funding formula that:

1. Increases funding available for the recruitment and retention of qualified educators.
2. Increases equity and adequacy by reducing reliance on the passage of local levies and bonds.
3. Adequately provides for the maintenance of safe, secure, and modernized facilities.
4. Provides for a weighted formula for special populations of students, including low-income students, students with low-incidence, high-need disabilities, and gifted and talented students.

**Conclusion:** Montanans Organization for Education represents parents and community members that care deeply about our public schools, and are actively engaged in the work of the SFIC. Many of our members care so much about funding for their local schools that they have served on bond and levy committees time and time again, despite increased hardship in passing these local funding measures. They have seen Career and Technical Education programs reduced, music and physical education programs cut down, and aging and unsafe school facilities forgoing repairs. Our organization stands ready to partner with the SFIC to ensure that the funding formula is appropriately studied and amended to benefit the education of all Montana students.



MT

Great Falls

Jamie Marshall

Kids' Education Yes (KEY)

08/13/2025 05:11 PM

**Subject:** Parent Voice to Support the Commission's Work on the Decennial Study

**Comment:** Dear School Funding Interim Commission Committee Members:

On behalf of Kids' Education Yes (KEY)—a nonpartisan education advocacy group led by parents in the Great Falls region —thank you again for the work you are doing to review and strengthen Montana's school funding system as part of the decennial study. Representatives from KEY have been attending remotely and learning from the commission meetings to date. Thank you for the commitment to seeking a representative from a parent advocacy group to serve on the IEEGW. Our group is organized through a core group of parents who are continuously working to be educated on topics related to state and local education funding, as well as seeking to support ways to encourage innovation and adaptability in funding for 21st century education. More information about who we are can be found at our website: [www.kidseducationyes.com](http://www.kidseducationyes.com)

Thank you again for your service!





MT

Polson

Tamara Fisher Alley

Self

08/13/2025 05:48 PM

**Subject:** Overlooked: gifted students in school funding formula

**Comment:** Greetings, School Funding Interim Commission! My comments and the associated graph I reference in them are attached. I'm also sending via email. Thank you! :o) Tamara Fisher Alley

**Attachments:**

 [VIEW](#)  
ATTACHMENT 1

 [VIEW](#)  
ATTACHMENT 2

August 14, 2025

Ki?su?k kiyukyit! Greetings, Chair Bedey and members of the School Funding Interim Commission,

I spoke in person at your June 4 meeting regarding the lack of adequate funding for gifted education services in Montana, despite those services being mandated in law and accreditation standards, and despite the special needs of gifted and talented children being referenced in both our state definition of a basic quality education and the law that created the school funding formula.

As an interested, curious, and motivated citizen and educator, I've found myself going down a rabbit hole of learning even more about Montana's school funding. In a way, our school funding formula is rather simple. It allocates money to each of the categories listed and referenced in both our definition of a basic quality education and the law that created the funding formula. They clearly tie directly to each other. *Except that there are two categories specifically listed in the definition and in the law that are NOT included in the funding formula.* Those two categories are "a student with limited English proficiency" "and gifted and talented children."

To help illustrate this point, I created a graphic (see attached) that shows the connections from the **definition** to the **law** to the **funding formula**, using colors to more clearly show how each aspect of the funding formula is tied directly to something in the definition and the law. Again – except in two cases.

The first column, read going down, is our definition of a basic quality education, word for word from 20-9-309. The second column is the law that called for the creation of an equitable school funding formula, word for word from SB 152 (2005) and 20-9-309. The third column shows the pieces included in our school funding formula, each directly across from the item in the definition and the law that it specifically funds. Again, except in two cases.

**It is a massive oversight on the part of the state of Montana to have our school funding formula so clearly tied to the specific items in the definition and law and yet to completely ignore two items listed in the definition and law for equitable funding via the formula.**

Some might say, well gifted education gets state funding via the grants that OPI allots to those districts who apply for it. Yes, a small amount of funding is available via that means, *however* only 1 in 8 Montana districts apply for it and it is a literal pie: i.e., the more districts that apply, the fewer dollars each district gets. (Districts getting these funds must also match their grant, dollar for dollar.) The whole point of the school funding formula is to address *inequities* in school funding by outlining what EVERY school will get – automatically - for each of the categories listed in the definition and the law. Every school does not get funding to address the special needs of gifted and talented children. In fact, nearly all of them do

not. And those few that do (via the grants), get a paltry amount that doesn't even cover half the cost (manpower + materials) of identifying gifted students, let alone providing them the services they need once identified.

Why and how these two categories of students – specifically listed just like the others that are funded via the formula – are not also funded via the formula like those they are listed with, is a mystery to me. I have read every online document I could find about the historical process of creating the formula and I couldn't find anything that specifically explained why they were left out of the formula. The only possible explanation might be a 2005 letter from then Governor Brian Schweitzer to then Attorney General Mike McGrath that referenced an increase in the gifted and talented grants – which did happen around that time for one biennium, but then the amount went back down to historical levels after that. It was not sustained because it was not in the formula. Funding for gifted and talented children remains inequitable. Not to mention inadequate.

Gifted and talented children sit in every Montana classroom, however the overwhelming majority of them are not identified as such because their schools lack a process and the manpower to do so. Most Montana schools lack a process and the manpower to identify their gifted students (not to mention provide them appropriate services) because the state has not fulfilled its obligations to fund and attend to their needs. No Montana school is getting adequate, equitable funding from the state to help them to identify and provide services for gifted and talented students and their special needs, despite their listing in the definition and in the law with other categories that are funded.

I am appealing to you to address this clear oversight as you examine and make recommendations to revise our school funding formula for the next decade. I am happy to answer any questions you may have for which I can be of assistance.

Most sincerely,



Tamara Fisher Alley  
K-12 Gifted Education Specialist, Polson Schools  
Past President, Montana AGATE  
Finalist, 2024 Montana Teacher of the Year  
[thethinkteacher@gmail.com](mailto:thethinkteacher@gmail.com)  
(406) 212-8264

20-9-309: Definition of quality education: (read going down ↓)	SB 152 (2005) and 20-9-309: Creation of school funding formula: (↓)	Current school funding formula: (↓)
(2) As used in this section, a "basic system of free quality public elementary and secondary schools" means:	(3) In developing a mechanism to fund the basic system of free quality public elementary and secondary schools and in making adjustments to the funding formula, the legislature shall, at a minimum, consider the following educationally relevant factors:	[In addition to the components in the cells below, funding categories are: BASE, over-BASE (levy, non-levy, and tuition), GTB, Fund Balance Re-appropriated, and Direct State Aid.]
(a) The educational program specified by the accreditation standards provided for in 20-7- 111		
	(a) the number of students in a district;	Per ANB Entitlement
	(b) the needs of isolated schools with low population density;	Basic Entitlement/GTB Aid
	(c) the needs of urban schools with high population density;	Basic Entitlement/GTB Aid
(b) educational programs to provide for students with special needs, such as:	(d) the needs of students with special needs, such as	↓
(i) a child with a disability, as defined in 20-7-401;	a child with a disability,	Special Education Payment
(ii) an at-risk student;	an at-risk student,	At-Risk Payment (*part of the Five State-Funded Components)
(iii) a student with limited English proficiency;	a student with limited English proficiency,	(missing from the funding formula)
(iv) a child who is qualified for services under 29 U.S.C. 794; and	a child who is qualified for services under 29 U.S.C. 794,	Special Education Payment
(v) gifted and talented children, as defined in 20-7-901;	and gifted and talented children;	(missing from the funding formula)
(c) educational programs to implement the provisions of Article X, section 1(2), of the Montana constitution and Title 20, chapter 1, part 5, through development of curricula designed to integrate the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indians into the curricula, with particular emphasis on Montana Indians;	(e) the needs of American Indian students; and	Indian Education for All Payment + American Indian Achievement Gap Payment (*both part of the Five State-Funded Components)
(d) qualified and effective teachers or administrators and qualified staff to implement the programs in subsections (2)(a) through (2)(c);	(f) the ability of school districts to attract and retain qualified educators and other personnel.	Quality Educator Payment (*part of the Five State-Funded Components)
(e) facilities and distance learning technologies associated with meeting the accreditation standards;		CTE funds
(f) transportation of students pursuant to Title 20, chapter 10;		Transportation funds (now 75% from the state)
(g) a procedure to assess and track student achievement in the programs established pursuant to subsections (2)(a) through (2)(c);		Data for Achievement Payment (*part of the Five State-Funded Components)
(h) and preservation of local control of schools in each district vested in a board of trustees pursuant to Article X, section 8, of the Montana constitution.		\$ N/A





MT

Belgrade

Gary Lusin

Self

08/13/2025 08:51 AM

**Subject:** Funding formula and system of education

**Comment:** Hello commission members,

As you engage in discussions about our funding formula, which I totally support and appreciate your work, I respectfully ask that you also consider our "system of education". We need to fund the right system, a system that will address the needs of our educators and students in our classrooms and buildings today.

This topic requires much more specific and deeper discussions so we all can hear from actual teachers, administrators, students, and parents from all grade bands and different size schools.

My thought for you to consider is to propose legislation in the 2027 session that would establish a Commission of Innovation and Excellence in Education, and fund that appropriately, that can allow sufficient, deep, and productive discussions and recommendations to re-establish our system of education which WILL develop the full educational potential of each person.

Thank you for your service to our state and out students.

Gary Lusin, Bozeman Trustee