

Montana Innovation and Excellence in Education Working Group

Draft Policy Recommendations

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Policy Recommendations

The IIEWG has a clear mandate and a clear process:

- Comparing the education policies of Montana with the policies of high-performing international and domestic educational systems;
- Develop recommendations to adapt the appropriate education policies of high-performing education systems for the public education system in Montana;
- Developing an implementation plan for the recommendations;
- Publish its recommendations and implementation plan no later than January 30, 2026.

What follows is a brief summary of the process the Working Group used to derive these recommendations and the subsequent implementation plan.

Comparing the education policies of Montana with the policies of high-performing systems

The IEEWG considered research on the performance and priorities of high performing systems worldwide, reviewing the National Center on Education and the Economy's research on what global systems value and measure. Then, Commissioners reviewed a representative sample of Montana's own education policies in order to understand how Montana's policies confer benefits but also potentially create administrative burdens and other 'costs of implementation' that districts and schools incur while implementing these policies. Through this review process, four domains of education continuously emerged as areas to target for policy improvements:

- Early Learning, defined as Pre-K aged through 3rd grade for the Working Group's purposes.
- Transforming Teaching, which considers the needs of teachers and education leaders.
- Pathways to Graduation, which is inclusive of traditional college, CTE, and other non-college pathways to employment.
- Learner Centered Design, which includes a number of educational approaches including proficiency based models and other designs that prioritize non-seat-time based metrics and involve learners as co-creators of their educational experience..

The Working Group also considered the connections between Montana's Graduate Profiles and their own consideration of the skills that Montanans will need to have to thrive now and in the future. The Office of Public Instruction's analysis of the state's top 10 most common competencies listed in the graduate profiles statewide yielded the following list:

- Communication
- Critical Thinking
- Life long learners/Life Long Learning
- Integrity
- Citizenship/Global Citizen/Good Citizenship
- Academic Excellence
- Responsibility/Responsible
- Community Minded
- Collaborate/Collaborative
- Resilience/Strength & Resilience

These ten competencies include a deep foundation of basic academic knowledge and skills ("Academic Excellence," "Life long learners"), a set of skills that will aid students in an increasingly competitive world ("Communication," "Critical Thinking," "Collaborate/Collaborative") and skills that balance personal responsibility ("Integrity," "Responsibility/Responsible") with civic responsibility ("Citizenship/Global Citizen/Good Citizenship," "Community Minded"). Together these form a "north star" toward which system design efforts can be directed.

The Working Group also identified several system-level capacities that must be strengthened for Montana to achieve the shifts required to help all young people develop the competencies they need to thrive. These include more robust data management and monitoring systems, expanded training and technical assistance, and the ability to coordinate complex work across multiple state and local entities.

Ultimately, the Working Group agreed that...

IF we:

- Compare the education policies of Montana with the policies of high-performing domestic and international educational systems;
- And develop recommendations to adapt the appropriate education policies of high-performing education systems for the public education system in Montana in these four domains:
 - Early Learning
 - Transforming Teaching
 - Pathways to Graduation
 - Learner Centered Design

While also:

- Keeping the top 10 competencies listed in Graduate Profiles as a north star, and
- Attending to the systems capacities necessary for system success
 - Data collection, management, and analysis,
 - Technical assistance and professional learning, and management and
 - Public engagement,
 - Coordination and management capacities

Then Montana will more effectively provide a system of public education designed to develop the full potential of each person (as identified by the competencies contained in the north star) and guarantee equality of opportunity for each person of the state.

Transforming Teaching

Montana needs a comprehensive continuum of support for educators—spanning preparation through retirement—that ensures teachers and leaders enter the profession well prepared, grow through embedded and relevant professional learning, and have access to meaningful career advancement without leaving the classroom. In 2023, there were [1,000 teacher vacancies to be filled](#), and in 2025, many Montana districts were [relying on emergency certified teachers](#) to fill those vacancies. Many of those emergency certified teachers will seek full certification, but an overreliance on emergency certification suggests a system flaw in need of correction. Forward thinking, high-quality educators are the single greatest factor influencing student outcomes, and the state's ability to attract, develop, and retain these educators depends on a coherent system that supports the full arc of their careers. Montana's ability to support young people develop the competencies they need to thrive in the future workforce depends fundamentally on the strength, stability, and support of its educator workforce.

Recommendations

- a. Strengthening Recruitment and Preparation Pathways: Evolve teacher preparation and licensure pathways to meet the needs of Montana's schools and economic context. This includes increased investment in high-quality teacher residencies and the expansion of apprenticeship programs that allow interested high school

students to enter the profession earlier, with stronger preparation and without the burden of debt. Streamlining existing recruitment and preparation initiatives will also help reduce fragmentation and ensure efforts are aligned with long-term workforce needs.

- b. Building a System of Real-Time Professional Growth: While improving recruitment and preparation is essential, Montana should place equal—and perhaps greater—emphasis on supporting educators once they enter the classroom. Professional learning should move away from “one-and-done” workshops toward embedded, real-time, in-classroom supports such as mentorship, coaching, and collaborative learning among master teachers and novice educators. This approach strengthens instructional practice, builds community, and supports early-career teachers at the moment they need it most.
- c. Redesigning school staffing structures: By moving beyond the traditional structure The traditional model of a single teacher with 25 students is not yielding the desired results, and teacher vacancies and attrition continue to be cited as serious issues. Without attending to the structural conditions driving these challenges, Montana risks continuing to lose teachers within their first three years. As an alternative, Montana should explore team-based models. These models, such as a master teacher supported by apprentices and specialists, can be enhanced by technology to extend educator capacity, provide real-time training for apprentice educators, and offer increased opportunities for personalization to students.
- d. Creating Career Pathways that Retain Excellent Educators: Educators value opportunities to take on leadership roles without leaving the classroom. Montana should expand access to roles such as mentor teacher, teacher leader, instructional coach, and teacher-administrator hybrid positions. These roles strengthen the profession, improve retention, and build a pipeline of future leaders by allowing teachers to grow while continuing to do what they do best—work directly with students.
- e. Supporting National Board Certification: To further strengthen the educator workforce, Montana should provide stipends that cover the costs of National Board Certification. This program develops highly effective educators who often become leaders at the school and state levels. Studies have shown that NBCT teachers provide between one and two more months of learning per student than their non-board certified peers. Given current salary limitations, the reimbursement model is not functioning as intended. A stipend—paired with a reasonable clawback provision for those who do not complete certification or remain in Montana for a minimum period—would expand access to this valuable professional learning opportunity.
- f. Developing a Continuum of Leader Preparation and Support: A strong educator workforce requires a parallel continuum for school leaders. Administrator preparation programs should be closely aligned to educator practice standards and designed to recruit the most capable teachers into leadership pathways. It is

essential that high-quality, Montana-specific mentorship from experienced leaders complement classroom coursework. This system should support leaders from preparation through ongoing professional learning, mirroring the continuum provided for teachers.

- g. Ensuring Competitive Compensation: All of the above must be anchored in a commitment to Montana's teachers earning a livable wage. Competitive teacher salaries will be critical in order for the state to attract and retain the high-capacity educators needed to fulfill its constitutional mandate and realize the aspirations outlined in the statewide Graduate Profiles. Current compensation levels are not keeping pace with inflation or the cost of living, and without addressing this fundamental barrier, other recruitment and retention strategies will remain insufficient.

Early Childhood Education / Early Learning

Montana's early childhood education sector has seen promising developments intended to support early learning through third grade, and should continue to develop programs that prepare the youngest learners for strong early elementary education programs. The targeted intervention for literacy programs that are bearing results and expanding to math can be seen as proof of concept for early childhood intervention more broadly. High quality investments in early learners benefit not just three and four year olds, but also contribute to more effective elementary education. While [studies](#) focused on test scores suggest that even high-quality ECE can have fade-out effects, positive impacts on students' interpersonal and social skills appear to remain. Additionally, the benefits of targeted intervention are clear, with low-income students, students who are dual language learners, and students with disabilities educated alongside their typically developing peers all see outside benefits from ECE. In short, investments in early childhood education, when paired with strong elementary programs, benefit all learners and also have [benefits for the families](#) provided those opportunities.

Recommendations

- a. Provide upfront funding for districts in their first year of administering early targeted intervention programs. At present, districts that want to develop a district-run early targeted intervention program are subject to a reimbursement-based and enrollment driven system. This system creates a barrier to entry for any district that does not have the cash reserves to cover all start-up costs for an in-district targeted intervention program. Early learning programs have to hire staff, modernize facilities, and then screen students before beginning services. Providing up front funds to support the development of targeted

intervention programs can reduce or remove this barrier to entry and ensure more students needing early intervention receive it.

- b. Incorporate the current and future needs of early learning programs into the redesigned funding formula. ANB funding and Chapter 63 rules are not currently equipped to address the needs of early learning programs because early learning programs did not exist when the formula was developed. Staffing ratios, program requirements, and facility requirements are all different for early learning programs, and need to be incorporated into the funding formula.
- c. Provide high-quality professional development and instructional materials for ECE teachers and administrators that are inclusive of the types of students who will enroll in the early learning programs in the next 10 years – particularly English language learners. When done well, early learning programs have among the best return on investment of all educational programs for students placed at risk – at a minimum of \$7 of return on every dollar invested. Providing high quality instructional materials and the related professional learning will promote the effective implementation of early learning programs.
- d. Establish the use of universal screeners across the state to ensure all early learning programs have the necessary and appropriate information to serve early learners effectively, create more consistency in the experience and maximize the gains for the students. Effective developmental screeners can identify learning needs such as school readiness, supports and dyslexia, and can help educators determine how to strategize to meet these needs. Ensure that teachers and leaders are well prepared to administer the screeners and maximize their potential. By using screeners and post-intervention assessments, early learning program providers can continuously improve the program design and learn from one another.
- e. Provide transportation reimbursement for 4-year-olds. Similarly to the ANB calculation, the current transportation funding formula does not include 4 year olds. Including transportation reimbursement for 4-year olds creates the conditions for more young people across the state to take full advantage of education opportunities.
- f. Create a voluntary, opt-in early learning program. By limiting the program to screened-in early learners in need of intervention, the program suffers from several administrative burdens that can be resolved by expanding the program. Currently policy requires completion of this screening process prior to beginning programming. Finding prospective students, screening them, and admitting them prior to beginning services is administratively difficult and can result in a single classroom only serving 1-3 students, when capacity is much greater (at least 1:10,

according to the [NAEYC](#)). Revising policy to allow extra capacity to serve a greater number of students reduces the per pupil costs to a more manageable level, allows for less up-front administrative means-testing costs, and maximizes the return on investment for the local district.

Pathways to Graduation

Montana has laid extensive groundwork for a statewide reimagining of high school over the last few years. Maintaining the current infrastructure investments while using the benefit of experience and continuous learning to make judicious changes to current policies, along with advancements in learner centered program design, can further embed this reimagined high school and postsecondary transition.

Recommendations

- a. Increase overall funding for middle school CTE pathways programs. Currently, middle school classes do count toward pathway credits, but don't factor into the ANB funding allocation for CTE classes. Demand for these programs is growing, but the lack of funding available for districts to develop them is preventing program growth to match demand. One such marker of demand is participation in Career and Technical Student Organizations, which are funded at the high school but not at the middle school.
- b. Increase the number of activities that schools can fund in Middle School to encompass a greater range of career exploration activities. At present, the Advanced Opportunities grant is predominantly used to cover costs for cost-bearing programs in pathways. Key cost drivers include certification materials and fees for career pathways, which are predominantly available to high school students. The major allowable expenses for middle school students are career exploration clubs, but this restriction on what is allowable precludes other viable advanced opportunities activities for middle school students from being developed. Allowing a broader range of fundable activities could yield innovative and effective middle school career pathways activities.
- c. Clarify the intent of the STARS future-ready payment and resolve distortionary effects before it is distributed. The current policy will reward both the districts where students graduate from high school and where they matriculate from eighth grade. However, Montana has Elementary districts that are only K-4 who will be contributing to the education of students who qualify for the incentive, but will not be receiving it. Additionally, students who transfer from one district to another after 7th grade may qualify for a future ready payment later, but the district that educated the student through 7th grade may not qualify for the incentive.

Learner Centered Design

Current Montana policy permits local districts broad latitude to implement learner-centered district and school policies. However, promoting effective implementation of learner-centered models by providing clearer, more proactive guidance and implementation tools while performing technical assistance and troubleshooting functions that can remove implementation barriers would advance learner centered models. The state has a compelling north star in the top ten competencies from Graduate Profiles, and helping districts implement policies that would further the effective utilization of Graduate Profile-aligned, learner-centered designs would improve both traditional and innovative pathway designs.

Recommendations

- a. Adopt common definitions of key terminology used across the state and reconcile competing definitions already in statutes and rules. At present, different definitions exist in different rules and statutes. Also, since the advent of policies for proficiency based learning and other types of learner-centered pedagogies, the context and definitions have changed: The new Graduate Profiles align with the 2023 amended definitions of 'proficiency' that means "[a measure of competence that is demonstrated through application in a performance assessment.](#)" It is not enough to merely identify conflicting terminology through policy analysis: the system needs processes by which local educators can identify the language mismatches that cause districts challenges when implementing student centered learning approaches at the local and state level and propose solutions to state policymakers. The Transformational Learning Phase II grants provide a natural test-bed for identifying, harmonizing, and proposing language changes.
- b. Develop a roadmap for progress in moving toward a learner-centered model that provides each district with milestones for each phase of implementation. This roadmap should guide efforts, speed near-term implementation, and provide a structure for the collection of promising practices that other districts can emulate and scale in developing their own phased implementation of student centered policies encompassing everything from school board policy to teacher and student handbooks. Again, the Transformational Learning Phase II grants provide a natural test-bed for developing this roadmap.
- c. Resolve issues arising from current reporting systems that are misaligned with the policy intent and program implementation needs of learner-centered instructional models. Currently, OPI requires seat time reporting that statute no longer requires. Additionally, each student needs a teacher of record that presumes an older model

of one teacher of record for each student for a class, which presents challenges when districts are working to change their instructional models.

Recommended design features of educational governance and implementation systems

Successfully implementing this report's recommendations will require ensuring Montana's education systems have the necessary infrastructure to launch, maintain, and continuously improve the new systems these recommendations require. These are discussed below as 'design features' of the education system - the qualities of the system that must be in place for the effective operation of the system once recommendations are implemented. These systems will span five different domains of infrastructure:

- Policy
- Performance management and monitoring
- Governance
- Instructional materials
- Public engagement

Policy infrastructure design features

- **Harmonized policy language and nomenclature.** At present, the language in legislation, rulemaking, and district policy across the state is misaligned. This process will be time consuming, as legislation will need to be drafted and passed, rulemaking will have to occur, and district policies will have to be updated across the state. This will be a complex policy process, as it will involve using influence and incentives with each of Montana's school districts so that the state can have a single set of definitions.
- **Hard-coded policy 'triggers' should be written into enacting legislation.** These hard-coded triggers will have specific deadlines for specific actions and specific implementation actors. Possible hard-coded triggers may include but not be limited to, legislating that recommendations are enacted in a specific sequence, or that the chief implementers, such as the Board of Public Education, the Office of Public Instruction, and/or the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education implement recommendations within a timeline or in a sequence. The Working Group recommends that any such triggers be codesigned by policymakers and implementers, and not just handed down through legislation or policy rules. A more effective option would be to mandate the development of a plan with concrete timelines, and to develop 'triggers' such as the release of funding for any effort is conditional, based upon the successful development of a plan with clear goals, key leaders, fellow actors, action steps, milestones, and resources.

Performance management and monitoring design features

- **Sufficient capacity to conduct continuous improvement activities.** The state will need to maintain the ability to capitalize on early wins while recognizing implementation challenges early and change course as needed. The state, districts, and perhaps intermediary units will need the capacity to collect, analyze, report data, convert it to information, and drive decision-making both for academic programming and operational needs.
- **Clear performance-based 'on-ramps' and 'off-ramps' for recommendation implementation initiatives.** As conditions change in the state, the recommendations in this plan may result in successful efforts that have run their course, good ideas that new conditions render obsolete, or new conditions that demand newer, wiser options for improving Montana's education systems. Absent off-ramps and on-ramps, inertia may result in the maintenance of programs that are better off being replaced by more relevant efforts. The Working Group prefers that the capacities and systems to evaluate such choices be robust and continuously leveraged so new efforts can be launched with confidence, and unsuccessful or unnecessary efforts can be sunset with certainty.
- **Equality of opportunity checks.** Pursuant to the constitutional mandate, performance management, monitoring, and evaluations systems must be able to evaluate whether or not implementation is advancing equality of opportunity across districts and schools in different geographical, economic, and cultural contexts. Absent specific indicators and look-fors to ensure this equality of opportunity, well-intentioned policy may not anticipate and/or correct for inequalities that arise from implementation challenges.

Governance design features

- **Coherent governance.** In order for the recommendations to be successful, the activities articulated in any implementation plan require vertical coordination from the state level through each implementing district and horizontal coordination across multiple state and district agencies. This may require new interagency agreements, new relationships, and new technological tools. The Working Group recommends that the legislature consider how the implementers might develop the necessary agreements, relationships, and tools to govern policy development in a manner that requires as few new arrangements as possible.
- **Purpose-built entities built to coherently govern implementation.** New governance relationships should yield purpose-built governance and advisory entities that effectively turn data into information and subsequently into action while implementing the recommendations. These entities need not be new state agencies or even necessarily new positions, but rather new combinations of state, private, and civic entities that can assume leadership over the implementation of a set of recommendations, call upon the necessary expertise to evaluate the quality of implementation, and correct course as necessary.

Instructional Materials design features

- **High Quality Instructional Materials.** A critical systems level commitment that will need to be carried through all recommendations is a commitment to High Quality Instructional

Materials (HQIM). Some may question the placement of HQIM in this section of the report, but the Working Group believes that HQIM are critical both within each set of recommendations and across them, forming a set of standards for student and teacher materials that should be met throughout all four areas of recommendations. Additionally, HQIM should be available to all Montana learners, including English Language Learners and those who speak Tribal languages.

Public engagement design features

- **Avenues for consistent public engagement.** And finally, Montanans will expect that any new investments in the education system will be accompanied by processes and structures that can hold systems leadership accountable to the public. New public education and accountability forums and tools may need to be brought to bear so that Montanans are better equipped to understand the progress that has been made, help inform improvements to be made, and celebrate successes with their local communities and statewide, enhancing the legitimacy of the Decennial Commission, the IEEWG, and the education system overall.