

	MT	Belgrade	Elizabeth Deshner	Self	01/13/2026 04:01 PM
---	----	----------	-------------------	------	---------------------

Subject: Written Testimony for SFIC

Comment: -

Attachments:

 [VIEW ATTACHMENT 1](#)

Hello and thank you for the opportunity to comment. My name is Liz Dешner and I am one of the school psychologists serving Belgrade Schools in Gallatin County. I've been in this position for 15 years, so I've had a front row seat to growth in Montana for my tenure, and feel that the timing of this decennial study is spot on.

First, I want to thank you for the time you've put into this very important work. I have been listening to public hearings and participating in breakout panels, and I truly appreciate how much recognition this committee has given to mental health, as well as an unprecedented shift in the educational landscape post-pandemic. Montana is far from immune from what impacts our greater society, which you can see in our attendance and mental health trends and how they coincide with national trends. 90% of students in the US continue to be educated in public schools. This work is beyond important and valuable, so thank you for doing it. Studies like these are also important so that there is an opportunity to dive into local data even further and make adjustments based on what is found. Someone much smarter than me once said "0s and 1s don't lie." I would add 0s and 1s don't have an agenda, so thank you for reviewing state data.

I also want to thank you in recognizing funding gaps in special education. The federal rate has never matched what was promised, most recently being 14%. An 86% funding gap is a significant burden on states, so thank you for any and all attempts to fill that chasm.

I hope to make two points with regards to general equity in education within our current funding model. The first is with regards to the classification of school districts, more specifically how classifying our districts by population thresholds does not automatically lead to equitable education. Remember I work in Belgrade, the only school in the history of Montana to move up from Class C to AA. While we have experienced this growth which has shifted property taxes continually, we have also continued to maintain the same city limits and status as the bedroom community of Bozeman. Bozeman school district is also a AA school, so they have the same state requirements and general funding model as us. However, Bozeman has a completely different level of business tax base from their city limits which feeds into their budget. What that means is that we have two AA districts less than 10 miles from each other where one has twice the funding than the other while both are expected to provide the same amount of opportunities and meet the same requirements. That's not equity.

I'm also a member of our contract negotiations team, so have been involved in trying to increase teacher pay for the past several years. Bozeman has been largely successful in passing levies while Belgrade has been unable to pass the majority of levies for over a decade. This is in large part due to the financial strain falling more harshly to homeowners in Belgrade than Bozeman. Those failed levies have compounded over time and now we literally cannot compete with any other AA districts, not just Bozeman. This is true for not just teachers, but ALL staff. Last year, we restructured our pay matrix and negotiated salary increases only for 1 year, which were contingent on passing the STARS act. In spite of passing STARS, we again fear we can't increase teacher pay or benefits this year because of failed levies, inflation and increased costs.

Bonds have been problematic in this landscape as well. The impact of COVID on our real estate market delayed the district from being able to purchase land that had already been approved by voters. It was nearly 2 years before we were able to purchase and secure the property, and now the increase in building costs has made it impossible for us to build the taxpayer approved school without asking for more money. We had that election in November and it failed.

Some view this as a reflection of a lack of the support from our community or believe that the voters are saying no because those without children are voting against it since it doesn't impact them personally. I can understand those mentalities. However, when I've gone out and spoken to our community members it is clear that Montana families overwhelmingly support educating our children, and the vast majority of families currently served by our school district support what we've been doing. The residents of Montana recognize that today's students are tomorrow's future. A much simpler answer is at play: cost of living. I live in Belgrade - my property taxes tripled in 5 years. Our community hasn't just voted down things for the school, we've struggled to increase budgets for other public works. Our community literally cannot afford to bear additional burdens in the form of increased property taxes. There just has to be another way to increase or shift revenue.

Another possible source of inequity seems to be maintaining the buildings themselves. In the current landscape, rural and suburban schools across the board have been struggling to effectively pay for repairs and maintenance. Shields Valley elementary in nearby Park County has not been able to effectively heat their building since 2023 due to a failed boiler. Families should not have to question whether or not their students will be forced to learn in cold classrooms. If you are familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, you understand that basic physical safety must be intact before our children will be ready to learn.

In Belgrade, the backlog of necessary work in our middle school alone could take up our entire maintenance budget. We are continually shifting around the maintenance requests to prioritize safety issues. Belgrade has made attempts to offset some of these problems with creative solutions. Since Heck-Quaw is a historic building, the district couldn't absorb the costs of repair and bringing it up to code. Instead we built a new school, Story Creek Elementary, and did a land swap with the city. Because Story Creek was a replacement school, we were prohibited by law from building for anticipated needs. We had to build it to provide equivalent space and classrooms. Even though we couldn't be proactive, we did remediate the challenges of teaching in a school with sewer, boiler and access problems. We expanded other schools and shifted boundaries to accommodate growth.

Current legislation also requires the district to hire "the lowest responsible bidder" to complete projects above \$80,000. The "lowest responsible bidder," in my opinion, failed to deliver. Story Creek opened in the fall of 2021. In less than 3 years, we had to replace flooring in the gym and have had multiple buckets in hallways or classrooms due to problems with a leaking roof. There's a bucket filling up in a third grade classroom right now.

As a parent, teacher, and taxpayer I consider myself a triple winner stakeholder in Story Creek Elementary. I cannot understand why a brand new school has structural failures at all, nor can I understand why there doesn't seem to be some form of protection to the stakeholders from that damage. If our school were a house, there would be warranties and a clear legal pathway to make us whole. The taxpayers and families don't appear to have the same safeguards. I struggle to understand how this fits into the requirements of an equitable education and fiscal responsibility.

I have more to say on a few factors specific to special education and mental health that have jumped out at me, but that's a bigger comment or conversation to save for another time or form of testimony. Again, thank you for your hard work on this very important issue and for staying focused while you do it.



MT

Belgrade

Gary Lusin

Self

02/10/2026 09:58 AM

Subject: Establish a formal Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education

Comment: SFIC,

As you start Phase 2 of your work I strongly encourage you to not forget the important information and recommendations from the Phase 1 work. Our System of Education must be studied and re-established so we can develop the full educational potential of each person. We need to fund the right and high functioning system. To do that we will have to establish a formal commission that will be funded appropriately and facilitated appropriately so we can take the time to really dig into important issues and come to very good consensus on how best to resolve them. The current process, which I support, is not sufficient to study our system adequately. As you progress through Phase 2 I respectfully ask that you present a formal structure with appropriate funding and guidelines so we can begin the process of putting together a high functioning system of education for our students, their parents, and our communities.

Thank you for your service,

Gary Lusin, Bozeman School Trustee