



School Funding Interim Commission

69th Montana Legislature

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TO: School Funding Interim Commission
FROM: Pad McCracken, Commission Staff
RE: Innovation and Excellence in Education Working Group
DATE: June 2, 2025

The Commission's duties related to the Innovation and Excellence in Education Working Group (IEEWG) as outlined in House Bill No. 153 necessitate getting started quickly. This memo includes staff recommendations for addressing membership and facilitation of the IEEWG. Other possibilities exist, just wanted to provide a starting point for your consideration.

Membership

(10)(a) The innovation and excellence in education working group is composed of the commission and others as determined by the commission. The commission shall include representation from teachers, school administrators, school trustees, and parent advocacy groups in forming the working group.

Staff's recommendation is that the Commission identify stakeholders not already present on the Commission and request that applicable stakeholder groups provide the Commission with 1-2 recommendations of individuals for the Commission to name to the Working Group. Staff is also suggesting additional outreach for the Working Group through possible "road shows" and presentations/listening sessions at both the Educator Conference and Montana Conference of Education Leadership in October. Below is a noncomprehensive list of stakeholder groups that may be able to help meet the representation requirements listed in HB 153.

Teachers – MFPE (Montana Federation of Public Employees)

School Administrators – SAM (School Administrators of Montana)

School Trustees – MTSBA (Montana School Boards Association)

Parent Advocacy Groups

- Montana PTA
- Montana AGATE (Association for Gifted and Talented Education)
- Montana Empowerment Center (Special Education)

Facilitation

To be blunt, the Commission (and staff) will not be able to fulfill the requirements of the IEEWG without outside assistance. We are attempting to do in about 7 months what other states have taken 2-3 years to accomplish. The good news is that we can lean on the same reputable national organization that has assisted other states to accomplish similar, the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE).

Staff's recommendation is that the Commission authorize (as permitted under HB 153) a contract with NCEE to take a lead role in fulfilling the IEEWG's work. Staff has been working with the Department of Administration and requested approval of a "Sole Source Procurement" for this contract. If this approval is denied, we would pivot to an RFP process, but this would cost us 1-2 months. House Bill No. 2 includes a line-item appropriation for the Commission's work of about \$335,000. This amount included \$150,000 for contracted services. The quote we received from NCEE was for \$120,000. We will not be able to execute this contract until House Bill 2 is approved but are seeking the Commission's approval so that if all goes as hoped, NCEE could begin working with us in July. Below are some excerpts from the Sole Source Procurement Justification we submitted to DofA.

The Legislative Services Division is not aware of any other providers able to meet the requirements for facilitating the Innovation and Excellence in Education (IEE) Working Group under HB 153 (2025). Education policy staff with over a decade of experience and robust participation in national policy discussions with multiple education policy organizations have not come across another organization doing this specific type of work. The Division inquired with the National Conference of State Legislatures Education Program Director for other possibilities and no equivalent providers were identified. While numerous organizations work in the area of education policy and reform, those organizations are not focused on international comparisons in the same manner or to the same extent as NCEE. Nor do they have the experience facilitating benchmarking studies with state-level working groups with broad memberships as required under HB 153.

The support and facilitation LSD is seeking for the IEE Working Group is to ensure meeting the requirements of the Working Group as laid out in HB 153:

- conduct a benchmarking or gap analysis study comparing the education policies of Montana to the education policies of high-performing international and domestic education systems or review a similar analysis conducted for another state;*
- develop recommendations to adapt the appropriate education policies of high-performing education systems for the public education system in Montana*
- identify objectives to put the education performance of pupils in Montana in parity with that of pupils in high-performing education systems and make recommendations on how to meet the identified objectives*
- develop an implementation plan for the recommendations, which includes an analysis of the costs of the plan*
- publish its recommendations and implementation plan no later than January 30, 2026*

These requirements and the incredibly tight timeline provided to meet them necessitate seeking the assistance of an organization with the unique knowledge base of high-performing education systems around the world AND the ability to help state policymakers distill and incorporate, as appropriate, similar characteristics in redesigning the state's education system AND experience in designing realistic implementation plans in collaboration with practitioners, so that the entire effort and investment has the greatest chance for success. Again, LSD is not aware of an organization other than NCEE with this unique knowledge and skill set. The timeline for this project necessitates contracting with known and respected experts and getting underway as soon as possible.