



MT

Helena

Gabriel Furshong

Self

09/17/2025 02:19 PM

Subject: IFSC Public Comment - Gabriel Furshong

Comment:

Attachments:

 VIEW

ATTACHMENT 1

September 17, 2025

Dear Commissioners,

As a licensed public school teacher and the father of two small children, I want to thank each of you for your service to the State of Montana and to all public schools across this great state. Public school funding is overwhelmingly complex, and I'm exceedingly grateful for your efforts to strengthen the funding process for children, parents, teachers, and for all Montana communities who depend on a well-trained workforce.

I'm writing today for two reasons. First, I want to express my hope that this commission will increase funding for the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers in both rural and urban school districts.

Five years ago, at the age 40, I completed a Masters in Teaching at Montana State University and, soon after, began teaching second grade in Helena Public Schools. For the next three years, from fall 2021 through spring 2024, my experience increased and my take-home pay decreased. For the last of these three years, my annual take-home pay was less than \$15,000 after paying taxes and health insurance costs for my family. During the summer of 2025, as our school district faced another round of health insurance increases, I decided to pursue work that offered more reasonable compensation.

In Montana, many teachers—especially early-career teachers and teachers serving rural schools—have faced similar decisions, and I hope this commission will make it easier for them to continue serving future generations.

My second reason for writing is to emphasize the fundamentally apolitical work that teachers do every day. As a second grade teacher who taught exclusively in Title I schools, I spent 80 percent of my time teaching literacy and numeracy. As adults, my former students will decide for themselves what to read and what to write. They will apply the universal language of mathematics to solve problems of their own choosing. They will also identify with political arguments according to their own conscience.

In short, my job as a teacher was to train students to be *powerful* learners rather than *political* learners. I proudly recited the Pledge of Allegiance every morning, and I eagerly served families with points of view that stretched across the political spectrum. That is the duty of every teacher, and I believe it merits increased support from our state legislature.

Thank you so much for your consideration, and thank you for giving your precious time to this important commission.

Sincerely,

Gabriel Furshong

Helena, Montana



MT

Helena

Sarah Froehlke

Zero to Five Montana

10/14/2025 03:54 PM

Subject: Zero to Five Montana's Public Comment

Attachments:

Comment: Below is Zero to Five Montana's public comment for the School Funding Commission on October 14, 2025.

 [VIEW](#)
ATTACHMENT 1



October 14, 2025

School Funding Interim Commission, Room 317

Agenda

Good afternoon, Chair Bedey and Members of the Commission, my name is Sarah Froehlke (F-R-O-E-H-L-K-E) and I'm the Policy Analyst at Zero to Five Montana, a nonpartisan, statewide early childhood organization, dedicated to increasing access to quality early care and education across the state.

We are happy the Commission highlighted early learning and want to uplift a few opportunities for the Commission to consider in the future. The passage of HB352 in the 2023 session and HB 338 this past session are exciting steps forward for early learning in our state by creating pathways for school districts to offer early literacy and numeracy interventions. We have been inspired by the positive impact these programs have made for young learners and families and are encouraged by the promising results demonstrated in OPI's Early Literacy Targeted Interventions report. For example, of the 2,025 students who participated in the Classroom-Based Programming, 87% demonstrated measurable growth.

Zero to Five Montana has worked alongside community and state partners as this program has been implemented and facilitates the Montana Early Learning Alliance (MELA), a coalition of early education leaders from higher education, the public school sector, the child care sector, and other advocates.

As the Commission continues examining areas for funding improvement, we want to highlight a few opportunities that could help bolster early intervention opportunities for young children:

- First, create clear pathways for partnerships between school districts and community-based organizations such as Head Start and licensed child care programs on ways to offer the early intervention programs. Zero to Five is currently working on gathering examples of successful community partnerships so we can learn what the successes and challenges are.
- Second, provide boost grants or start-up funds for early literacy programs to ensure classrooms have what they need to support children to be successful
- Lastly, implement or pilot the use of the same kindergarten entry assessment (KEA) in five or six school districts who have implemented early literacy programs. This would help us gather consistent data and see how well the programs are working. Most states use KEA to help make data-informed decisions.



Zero to Five Montana and MELA are committed to supporting the Commission and stand ready to provide nonpartisan early learning data, research, and connections to early learning leaders across the state.

Thank you for your time, Chair and members of the Commission. I am available for questions.



MT

Whitefish

Terry Marasco

Self

10/15/2025 06:11 AM

Subject: Survey for reaching a broad base.

Comment: Commissioners, first, thank you for the extensive public comment opportunities!! I thought a broader survey would provide a useful base for your initiative and build trust in the communities.

Attachments:

 [VIEW ATTACHMENT 1](#)

TO: Montana School Funding Interim Commission, 10/15/2025

Dear Commission Members:

While the Road Show participant statistics are useful, it will be necessary to gain insight from educators and parents to that reflects a credible and representative base of opinion.

1. Broadcast a survey to school parents and guardians through school principals. Each school may have a complete list of each student's home contact. This will provide the commission with a broad picture of what Montanans are thinking about education. Additionally, since the perceptions of the public regarding education has eroded over years (Education Week, 2/2025: "Satisfaction with public schools at a 25-year low"), massive input may cause this confidence to grow.

If it is useful to get down to the granular level, the home survey could include the ability to choose the school the student attends at that time.

I ran this idea by Brad Holloway, principal at Glacier High School, who said he would be glad to broadcast such a survey to his staff and parents and that "it would be interesting to see how the state's regions would reply.

2. Broadcast a survey to business owners to gain their perspectives on what skills they believe are necessary for their industries. Perhaps the survey would include the list of World Econ Forum notations but not in ranked order. This would provide the commission with a view of how Montana's business communities perceive future job needs. It may ask the business owner to pick the top 5 and rank those choices in priority order. This would align with steering the education system toward integration with the Montana economy.

The MT Department of Commerce is a source. Perhaps send to companies with 1,000 or more employees.

This process would be relatively inexpensive.

Best,

Terry Marasco, Whitefish, MT terrymarascomontana@gmail.com 775-293-0189



MFPE Priorities

Montana Decennial Study

The sole task of the decennial study commission is to uphold Montana's Constitutional promise to fulfill the educational potential of every student through a system of *public* schools. MFPE's decennial study priorities are student- and family-centered.

1. Students learn best when their primary needs are met.
 - a. Fund school breakfast and lunch.
 - b. Every student deserves access to a licensed nurse.
 - c. Every student deserves access to a licensed mental health professional.
 - d. Every student deserves time every day to play.
 - e. Every student deserves to graduate with a well-rounded education which includes music, art, library, CTE – not just core subjects.
2. Every student deserves highly trained professionals in their classroom. Recruit and retain the *best* teachers and support staff.
 - a. Provide salaries commensurate with similar education levels and experience in the private sector.
 - b. Provide benefits that allow school employees to focus on students.
 - i. Low-deductible, high-quality health insurance
 - ii. Retirement benefits
 - iii. Childcare
 - iv. Unemployment benefits for support staff
 - c. Guarantee teacher-led professional development is available at no or low cost to educators.
 - d. Fund enough paraprofessional positions to support *all* student needs.
3. Every student deserves a safe place to learn.
 - a. Fund safe facilities with up-to-date infrastructure and security, HVAC, and water systems.

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.