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Testimony on behalf of Governor Brian Schweitzer on Senate Bill 152, Governor's Education Funding, including Full-time Kindergarten, before the House Education Committee, March 12, 2007, 3:00 PM

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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for the record, my name is Jan Lombardi, and I am Governor Brian Schweitzer's education policy advisor.

It is my pleasure to be here this afternoon on behalf of Governor Schweitzer to talk to you about the Governor's school funding bill. First, thanks to Senator Don Ryan for sponsoring Senate Bill 152 -- it looks like history may have a chance to repeat itself. This session's SB152 continues Montana on our journey to ensure we adequately invest in education for our kids, schools and teachers, based on local control, as well as prepare a ready workforce.

Education is truly a priority for this administration. SB152 is built on the Governor's Education for Life platform which sustains our strong public education system while preparing for the future. In this bill:

- Parents will have the option of full-day kindergarten so their young children have the best beginning possible.
- Elementary and high school students -- regardless of how rich or poor their neighborhood -- will have an equal opportunity to learn.
- Adults deserve the chance to seek a Montana college education without being limited by the size of their bank account.

Here is a brief overview of the seven educational items contained in this bill:

**Full-time Kindergarten (1)**

Governor Schweitzer believes the best results come from investing early in education and supports voluntary full-time kindergarten for all children.

Why?

Because the Governor believes that full-time kindergarten is the best way to target funding that will make a lasting difference in the lives of Montana's children and families, especially those at-risk.

His support for full-time kindergarten did not come lightly, but rather unexpectedly while attending a Western Governor's Association meeting.

At this meeting focused on workforce, the governor posed a question to a panel of K-12, higher education and business experts -- if you had just one more dollar, how would you invest it?

Known for being a champion of 2-year colleges to address the changing workforce needs of our state, the Governor was surprised by the consistency of the panelists' answers – invest earlier.

The joint recommendation by the specialists was to start young -- Kindergarten and earlier -- because:

- Students are then better prepared for elementary school
- They will have a better chance of graduating from high school.
- They're more likely to succeed in college.
- And ultimately they'll become a successful, skilled workforce.

It was then that the governor embarked on studying the body of research supporting full-time kindergarten and became convinced that Montana schools needed the ability to provide this opportunity to its youngest citizens.

It is important to note that Senate Bill 152 does not mandate school boards offer full-time kindergarten or require parents to enroll students in kindergarten, but provides the mechanism for communities to provide this early childhood experience.

#### **Other K-12**

In addition to full-time Kindergarten, Governor Schweitzer continues to take steps toward fully addressing the needs of our K-12 school system. SB152 also includes: **inflationary increases for the entitlements (2)** and two strategies to help schools recruit and retain quality educators:

#### **Increase the per quality educator component (3)**

Quality educators are the backbone of a quality education system. And Montana schools have difficulty attracting and retaining teachers and other licensed professionals needed to meet Montana accreditation standards. This bill provides an increase for each school district to make its own local decision on how to best recruit and retain necessary staff.

#### **Establish a quality educator loan forgiveness program (4)**

Although all schools have their challenges with finding and hiring quality educators, some of the smallest and most rural schools have the greatest difficulty. This bill creates a one-million dollar loan forgiveness program to further help Montana schools in critical geographic and subject shortage areas. This program eliminates college loan debt up to \$12,000 over four years for serving in a critical shortage area, as defined by the Board of Public Education in consultation with the Office of Public Instruction. We look forward to this loan program providing an incentive to some of our home-grown, high-quality teachers to stay and teach in Montana.

#### **School Facility Improvement Account (5)**

Kids need high quality educators, and they need good and safe school buildings and classrooms in which to learn, too.

Because we do not have an adequate picture of our school facilities in Montana, the state is conducting a study of K-12 facilities, at the request of the 2005 legislature, whose recommendations will be presented to you in 2009.

SB 152 establishes an account to provide money to schools to implement essential improvements as identified by the study. This one-time source will help schools with major

deferred maintenance, improving energy efficiencies and responding to changes in student populations that result in critical infrastructure needs in the 2011 biennium.

The Governor supports the concept of saving funds for school facilities. By planning ahead, the state of Montana will be better prepared to help schools address their critical facility needs and ensure the provision of a quality education to all students.

#### **Revise the moratorium on new school districts (6)**

SB152 recognizes that Montana communities are changing. It supports local control by revising the moratorium on creating new school districts in Montana and proposing a procedure for a community to create a high school district by expansion into a K-12 school district. This bill opens the door for a community to decide what is in the best interest of their local citizens, students and taxpayers. The Big Sky community is interested in this option for several reasons. It is an area of strong economic growth and growing student enrollment. The Governor would like the community to have an opportunity to decide the K-12 school structure that works best for their students and families.

#### **Revisions to Governor's Postsecondary Scholarship (7)**

For those students that borrow, the average loan balance for a Montana University System 4-year graduate is about \$20,000 and \$14,000 for a 2-year graduate. (2004-2005 school year). This is unacceptable.

Governor Schweitzer wants to hold the line on tuition for Montana's university system in the 2007 session and provide more scholarships to students. With his College Affordability Plan (CAP) for a zero percent increase in tuition and a greater investment in scholarships, our most talented will now have the opportunity to attend college in Montana and drive our state's future economic growth.

SB 152 streamlines the Governor's "Best and Brightest" Postsecondary Scholarship to reach more students with merit and need-based renewable scholarships for \$1 – 2 thousand dollars per year to attend a two-year or 4-year College in Montana. This bill includes an even greater emphasis on careers in our high demand areas like health care, technology, or a trade, which means almost 2700 students could be receiving scholarships by end of FY2009.

Thank you to the Montana Student Guaranteed Loan staff for their hard work on setting up the Governor's scholarship program. This bill helps them to deliver the scholarships in a more efficient and effective manner ensuring that the funds are provided to students and not administration.

#### **Conclusion**

Governor Schweitzer's legislative strategy for the 2009 biennium focuses on building a strong academic future for all Montana's children and building a strong workforce for tomorrow. Our neighboring states are also looking at many of the policies contained in SB152, like full-time kindergarten, recruitment and retention strategies for teachers and scholarships for their students.

Montana is competing with Colorado and Idaho – and China and India -- for workers and jobs. Simply put, without Montana investing in an educated workforce we cannot be a leader in this highly competitive world.

We know that education matters from the youngest Montanans getting ready for school and having access to full-time kindergarten to adults wanting to afford college. It is essential that all Montana students have an equal opportunity to be successful from kindergarten to college so that we build a steady workforce.

On behalf of Governor Brian Schweitzer, I ask this committee to pass SB152 to continue our investment in K-12 and higher education and move us closer to the Governor's vision for a world class educational system. Thank you.