



January 21, 2009

TO: Susan Byorth Fox and Casey Barrs, Legislative Services Division
FROM: Travis Reindl, Communication *Works*
RE: January 10 Summary

Many thanks again for the invitation to facilitate the Learning for Life workshop, which was a rich and wide-ranging discussion. Following is a quick summary of highlights, as well as some suggestions for next steps. Feel free to contact me at 202.955.9450 or treindl@commworksllic.com if you have questions or would like to discuss any of this in more detail.

Discussion Highlights

Benefits and Consequences

What does Montana stand to gain through a more seamless approach to education—vision, policy, and accountability? What does Montana risk by not pursuing a more seamless approach?

By moving toward a more seamless approach, Montana can have:

- A more efficient education system that will produce more results for the dollars invested (less remediation, more students entering the workforce faster).
- A more agile, adaptive, and consumer friendly education system (accessible in more places and in ways that meet the changing needs of students).
- An education system that is better prepared to meet changing workforce needs, so that more of Montana's talent can stay in Montana.

By not moving toward a more seamless approach, Montana will risk:

- Diverting scarce resources to re-educating existing students rather than reaching new students.
- Having workforce shortages that will cause employers to import talent, move jobs out of state, or both.
- Not being able to diversify the state's economic base, which will leave Montana more vulnerable to future economic downturns.

Opportunities and Challenges

Where does Montana have chances to move forward in building a more seamless education system? Where are the potential obstacles?

Opportunities

- Communication and collaboration between K-12 and postsecondary education has improved significantly over the past decade, aided by initiatives such as the Kindergarten Through College Workgroup. This provides a foundation for more joint efforts in the future, as well as inclusion of non-public educational institutions in discussions about vision and priorities.
- Promising policies and programs are already up and running, which sets the stage for discussions about expansion and next steps. Examples include dual enrollment, Big Sky Pathways, and two-year transfer.
- Steps are being taken toward data sharing across sectors. OPI and OCHE are currently involved in a transcript sharing pilot project, and linkages between OPI/OCHE and DLI and DSS could greatly improve information about students in the system and what happens to them.
- The current fiscal environment may provide leverage for innovation and significant policy change, including a fresh look at funding mechanisms.

Challenges

- There must be a simple and compelling definition of “seamlessness,” and the question is whether that is possible, given the number of different (and sometimes competing) interests involved.
- Communication within sectors (K-12 and postsecondary) must improve if communication between sectors is going to improve.
- There is a culture of autonomy/decentralization/local control (reinforced by the state’s laws and constitution) that raises control and autonomy issues in conversations about vision, policy, and accountability.
- Balancing between transparency and privacy complicates discussions about data sharing.
- The state has a revenue system (no sales tax) that can limit the number of options for education finance reform.
- The public may be skeptical of any promises the education system makes about reform.

Priorities

Where should Montana’s education leaders and policymakers be focusing their attention in the immediate term to deliver on the promise of a more seamless education system?

- Create a set of shared goals and accountability measures, with a special focus on improving opportunities and results for groups and regions that have historically been left behind.
- Increase the availability and accessibility of two-year postsecondary education, including continued improvement in the area of transfer.
- Expand dual enrollment programming.

- Explore the next steps toward integrating data across systems (K-12 and postsecondary education, workforce, social services).
- Expand distance learning, both in terms of geographic reach and programmatic offerings.
- Improve student support programs and services, particularly those related to college readiness.

Suggestions for Next Steps

Following are just a few thoughts about issues for DLS and legislators to consider, both during the 2009 session and as you move toward the interim:

The time is right to move toward a shared vision, goals, and success measures across K-12 and postsecondary education. PEPB has done a lot of this work in postsecondary education, and the Kindergarten Through College Workgroup has laid a foundation for communication and collaboration. The agreement between the Legislature and the Board of Regents around the PEPB framework could be adapted to bring in the Board of Education.

The state sorely needs more integrated data on students and their outcomes, and there is a great deal of interest in cross-sector linkages. An interim study could address a number of questions regarding the types of data needed for better decision-making about policy and programs, as well as technical and legal issues related to linking data systems across agencies.

Examine current policies affecting activities such as distance education and dual enrollment to identify unintended consequences and disincentives. Expanding either or both of these efforts without taking a hard look at what may be standing in the way of more participation or better results could prove to be a costly mistake.