

HJ 56 STUDY OF BULLYING AND STUDENT WELL-BEING REPORT TO THE 2021 LEGISLATURE

THE COMMITTEE'S WORK

The 2019 Legislature approved, and the Legislative Council assigned to the Education Interim Committee [House Joint Resolution No. 56](#), requesting an interim study of bullying. The committee broadened the focus on HJ 56 to encompass student well-being more generally. This short final report will provide a chronological summary of the committee's work and links to relevant documents as well as the committee's findings and recommendations. For a full record of the committee's work, including a list of committee members and meeting minutes and videos, please go to <https://leg.mt.gov/committees/interim/2019edic/>.

June 2019

- reviewed the resolution
- received stakeholder and public input
- discussed and determined to broaden focus to student well-being generally and to highlight successful interventions to reduce bullying, build resilience, and support student mental health

September 2019

- reviewed [recent legislation related to student well-being](#)
- reviewed [data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)](#)
- learned about the [Multi-Tier Systems of Support framework](#)
- heard from schools implementing [PAX - Good Behavior Game](#)
- visited with students representing the Executive Board of the Montana Association of Student Councils about student well-being

November 2019 (in Bozeman)

- presentation from the Center for Mental Health Research and Recovery about the [YAM \(Youth Aware of Mental Health\) program](#) in schools ([handout](#))
- heard from Bozeman Public Schools about their [trauma-informed approach](#)

January 2020

- learned about OPI [efforts to assess school climate](#) as part of Montana's ESSA plan

May 2020

- hosted a panel discussion with students, teachers, counselors, and administrators about student well-being amidst COVID-19 and school closure

- learned about [school nutrition generally](#) and school breakfast [models](#) and [impacts of utilizing the "Breakfast After the Bell" model](#) *

June 2020

- looked at [eliminating reduced-price co-payments](#) for school meals *
- learned about [Handle With Care programs](#) *

* The school nutrition and Handle With Care topics weren't initially undertaken as part of the HJ 56 study, but were later viewed under the umbrella of student well-being and included in this report.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. While bullying remains a concern, data from the YRBS suggests that anti-bullying efforts have made a difference in Montana.
 - a. Schools are encouraged to continue efforts to eliminate bullying, establish and maintain healthy school climates, and build resilience in students.
 - b. State and local education policymakers should regularly monitor all available data related to bullying.
2. Data from the YRBS and testimony from students, teachers, school counselors, and school administrators suggests that student mental health is a growing concern. The pandemic, school closures, and strains on families will likely exacerbate this problem.
 - a. As Montana continues to weather the pandemic and as we recover, the mental health needs of students need to be prioritized; school districts should consider successful initiatives such as utilizing trauma-informed approaches and implementing peer-to-peer support programs, like Hope Squads.
 - b. State agencies and other organizations that support schools in implementing research-based programs that build resilience and support student mental health like PAX and YAM are encouraged to continue their good work.
 - c. Policymakers should examine ways of strengthening schools' ability to help meet the mental health needs of students.
 - d. Elements of education that contribute to unhealthy stress for students should be examined and modified to reduce stress whenever possible (an excessive emphasis on testing is a stressor mentioned by students and teachers who provided input to the committee).
 - e. The legislature should clearly authorize Handle With Care programs so that teachers and school personnel can be made aware when a student may have experienced a traumatic event.
3. Student well-being depends on basic needs being met.
 - a. The legislature should eliminate reduced-price co-payments for school meals, thereby reducing a barrier for low-income students to access nutritious school meals, increasing the number of low-income students participating in school nutrition programs, and leveraging federal support.
 - b. Schools should consider school meal delivery models that maximize student access, like Breakfast After the Bell.