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## Education Interim Committee

67th Montana Legislature

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TO: Education Interim Committee and Section E Interim Budget Committee  
FROM: Pad McCracken, LSD Research Analyst  
RE: Transformational Learning  
DATE: August 31, 2021

Both the Education Interim Committee and the Section E Interim Budget Committee have expressed a desire to examine the outcomes of the Transformational Learning and Advanced Opportunity programs established by the Legislature in 2019. Having worked on the legislation for both programs from their inception and after reviewing the most recent annual reports, I am compelled<sup>1</sup> to share some thoughts. This memo will focus on Transformational Learning as that is the program I believe would benefit from some attention. Advanced Opportunities is a permanent enhancement program that will be fully funded as of fiscal year 2024; any district that wants to participate will be able to, and currently funded districts seem to be using the funds to expand and advance student opportunities as envisioned by the bill.

Transformational Learning is a temporary program (terminates at the end of fiscal year 2027) that allows a limited number of districts to receive funding for a span of four years. The legislation was meant to act as an incubator for an educational redesign commonly termed "student-centered learning." A number of organizations are eloquent at describing and championing this redesign; I mentioned several of them in [this 2017 brief](#). For the purposes of this memo, let it suffice that this redesign is not a tweaking of our existing (and too often) factory belt approach to education, but a revolutionary reimagining that puts the learner at the center, allows the learner to progress based on proficiency, develops student agency, and unwalls education to create a community-based ecosystem of learning. This is a seriously disruptive reinvention of a century-plus-old model of education and it will entail HARD work. Schools that lead the way in this direction will truly be pioneers.

A couple important points:

- Everyone involved with education—teachers, administrators, students, parents, trustees—has been simply trying to keep their heads above water since March 2020. It isn't realistic to expect them to build a new ship while treading water. That said, a school system further evolved towards a student-centered approach would be nimbler in navigating stormy seas like a pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> "A legislative employee shall render candid advice to legislators on matters of policy and procedure within the employee's areas of work responsibility." Legislative Branch Code of Conduct

- All of the districts that have received funding through the transformational learning program are expending it on valuable educational initiatives. This analysis is in no way a judgement of districts' expenditures. What is apparent though is that only a handful of districts appear to be pioneering the frontiers of student-centered learning. This is the result of a non-selective award qualification process with very little meaningful up-front or back-end accountability.

The 2021 Legislature revised the qualification process for the program from first-come, first-served to a lottery system. While this will address concerns related to the fairness of a push-the-submit-button-first approach, it still awards state funding randomly.

School districts and the advocacy groups that support them are leery of and generally opposed to competitive grant programs. Much of this opposition seems to stem from the memory of the Quality Schools Facility Grant Program that existed from 2009 to 2017. The distaste for this program is legitimate; it pitted districts against each other and strung them along for months and years with the hope of receiving grant funding to replace a roof or a boiler often only to have those hopes dashed. The program was repealed and replaced with the formula-driven, equitable, cost-sharing Major Maintenance Aid program in SB 307 (2017; Jones).

But a school facility support program and an incubator program serve vastly different purposes. Prudent investment of tax dollars demands that incubators are selected based on their readiness and their potential in helping chart a successful course for others who will follow.

Montana is not alone in encouraging schools to explore the transition to a student-centered model. Looking at program design, most use a selective process in determining which districts to be the initial state-supported pioneers and include a cohort model, in which selected districts work and learn together with some degree of centralized expert support. For some inspiring examples, see:

- North Dakota's Harvesting Innovation efforts include the Personalized, Competency-Based Learning Initiative utilized a small cohort of with support from KnowledgeWorks: <https://www.nd.gov/dpi/districtschools/harvesting-innovation>
- Idaho's Mastery Education Framework includes both Exploration and Practicing and Exploration to support districts at different stages of the process: <https://www.sde.idaho.gov/mastery-ed/>
- Utah's Personalized, Competency-Based Learning Grant Programs utilize an advisory committee to select awardees for both planning and implementation grants: <https://www.schools.utah.gov/curr/pcb/>
- Rhode Island's Personalized Learning Initiative and its use of Lighthouse Schools as incubators: <https://www.innovate.ri.gov/statewide-personalized-learning>