

Joint Meeting of Montana's Constitutional Education Authorities

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On June 6, 2022, the bodies with constitutional authority for education in Montana jointly gathered to collectively reach consensus on a bold vision for the future of education in the state. Montana's Education Interim Committee and Education Interim Budget Committee co-convened the landmark group, consisting of representatives from the Board of Public Education, the Office of Public Instruction, the Governor's Office, the Board of Regents of Higher Education, and the Montana School Boards Association.

Co-chaired by Representative David Bedey and Senator Edie McClafferty, the group asked a series of forward-looking questions. In the context of a changing global economy, the advent of new technologies, and a rapidly changing labor market, what will Montana's students need to know and be able to do to be successful? What will Montana's education system need to look like to produce those kinds of students? And what challenges will need to be overcome to realize that vision for education? Jason Dougal, President and Chief Operating Officer of the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), served as the facilitator of the conversations.

Is There a Case for Change?

Dougal opened the meeting by showing participants data on the changing nature of the global workforce. He then asked participants to reflect on what that data might mean for the continued prosperity of Montana's students, and whether Montana's education system was adequately set up to face the challenges of a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous future.

Dougal argued that the current education system was perfectly designed for the context in which it was developed: the blue collar, assembly line economy at the turn of the 20th century. As a result, teachers were often only slightly more educated than the students they taught. This was sufficient because school was modeled after the factories of the time, with big decisions being made by the managers and delivered by the line workers. This system was ruthlessly

efficient at producing the outcome it was designed to produce: widespread basic literacy and numeracy for the majority, with a more rigorous education reserved for an elite few.

That system allowed the U.S. to lead the world in education attainment and quality for almost a century. It drove the biggest economy in the history of the world to ever new heights, fostered an explosion of the middle class, served as the backbone of a stable democracy, and helped win two world wars.

Because the system performed so well for so long, Dougal argued that it has proved very difficult to change. But unfortunately, the world has changed around it. Dougal traced the rise of the global economy back to the era immediately following World War II. At that time, the cost of communications and shipping began to drop dramatically. This allowed products to be made somewhere other than where they were sold. As a result, low-skill work like certain manufacturing was outsourced throughout the 1970s and 1980s. But even higher-skill work like accounting and radiology tech began to be outsourced and automated in the 1990s.

And for every job lost to outsourcing, Dougal's research shows that more than 10 are lost to automation. Many high-skill, non-routine jobs are being augmented by automation, and the nature of the work is changing. Almost no lasting jobs exist for approximately 80 percent of America's high school graduates. New jobs will be created, but most of those jobs will require not just retraining, but a much higher and deeper level of education as well as targeted technical training.

While these data are global, Dougal showed a set of indicators suggesting the facts held true in Montana as well. Data from the Montana Department of Labor and Industry shows that there were almost 40,000 job openings in 2021 despite the fact that almost 30,000 hires took place in 2021. This suggests that there are job openings for which employers cannot find qualified candidates. In addition, Montana is contending with a gradually aging population, which has serious implications for the state's revenue and spending: lower income and property tax revenue for Montana; higher household healthcare spending and lower spending on goods & services; and higher Medicaid expenditures.

Dougal asked whether the evidence suggested that Montana could fill the jobs needed by a flourishing, high-tech industry. These jobs pay 59 percent more than average state earnings, raise wages 0.8 percent faster than the state average, and forecast employment and revenue gains seven times higher than statewide growth rates. The question, for Dougal, is whether Montana chooses to be a high-skill, high-wage state with a virtuous cycle of higher skill acquisition and investment, or a low-skill, low-wage state with a vicious cycle of offering increasingly large tax credits to businesses to hire workers for jobs that could be sourced anywhere in the world.

Dougal implored Montana to consider how urgent it is even for well-educated people to develop new skills. In his view, nations that fail to educate their students to levels of education previously enjoyed only by their elites will face increasing income inequality and decreasing political stability. He opined that Montana needs citizens who have a wide knowledge base that allows them to learn new things easily, coupled with a deep disciplinary knowledge in a narrower field in which they apply that knowledge. And they also need the “soft” skills necessary to cope with the widening world and changing context.

In discussion and reflection, participants broadly agreed with Dougal’s analysis of the challenges facing the state. Many noted that Montana had a history of being innovative and resilient, but often slow to adapt to changes in the economy, from extraction, to manufacturing, and then to high-tech. Some wondered about how to communicate the urgency and the scope of the changes to Montana’s citizens, many of whom might not appreciate how rapidly the economy and technology were evolving.

In a special session of the meeting, Governor Gianforte delivered remarks to the participants. He acknowledged recent investments in teacher pay to attract more qualified educators, attempts to modernize higher education to become hubs for workforce development and training, and efforts to create more individualized, applied, and asynchronous learning opportunities for Montana’s students. Despite this good work, he urged participants to recognize that the challenge ahead could only be met by a “One Montana” approach that brought all the constitutional players together with a unified voice.

High-Performing Education Systems & Common Elements Underpinning Them

Following his analysis of the global economic context, Dougal asserted that the U.S. had struggled to build a stronger education system that could prepare all students for the changing future of work and life. The U.S. had invested heavily in “silver bullet” approaches, like smaller class sizes, more technology, charters and competition, and tougher accountability systems. But our country had never come together to: analyze the global context; decide what was needed to meet the moment and set a strong, future-oriented vision; and design an entire education system to get the results needed.

Other countries have done exactly that – and produced an entirely different model of education as a result. These are the countries that dramatically outperform the U.S. on global measures of student achievement like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). As diverse as Finland, Canada, Singapore, Estonia, and China, these nations graduate students up to four years ahead of the typical American high school graduate. Dougal showed how in those places, students’ income, ethnicity, gender, and other characteristics do not predict their

educational achievement as often as they do in the U.S. In these jurisdictions, every student has the opportunity to realize their potential.

While Dougal readily conceded that these countries are each different from one another, and have different histories, cultures, and contexts, he contended that they all have several common features underpinning them. Captured in [*NCEE's Blueprint for a High Performing Education System*](#), these features include:

- Effective teachers and principals
- Rigorous and adaptive learning system
- Equitable foundation of supports
- Coherent and aligned governance

Dougal urged participants to consider these characteristics as they thought about the kind of education system that they wanted to build for Montana.

A Vision for Montana's Students

Breaking the room into smaller working groups, Dougal first asked the participants to consider the question: "What do we want Montana's students to know and be able to do?" A range of responses were generated across the groups, but they coalesced around several key themes. The group agreed that:

All Montana students should master a set of foundational literacies: reading, writing, mathematics, history, speaking, and listening. They also need a set of competencies including interpersonal skills, collaboration, communication, analytic ability and critical thinking.

Montanans need to know how to be moral, ethical, compassionate and kind. They will recognize the value of personal, communal, and spiritual development, and understand and appreciate their role in their schools, families, communities, and democracies. They should understand their personal and cultural history, and are proud to be a Montanan. At the same time, they should relate to, respect, and appreciate other cultures different from their own. In particular, they should honor the unique culture and heritage of the many Native American cultures in Montana. Native American Montanans and their peers should work together to share their learning and culture in mutually respectful ways.

Montana's students should have a sense of purpose and worth. They will have ambitious hopes, dreams, and aspirations. They will come to deeply understand and appreciate their

own skills and aptitudes. But they will also understand that success is a function of effort. They will develop the agency, the motivation, and the capacity to set their own goals and chart their path to achieving them, with support from their peers and community. They learn that their lives are going to change many times and they need the tools to be flexible, that they will have to learn and grow throughout their entire lives. They will fail many times along the way, but learn from their failure while maintaining creativity, curiosity, resilience, and self-worth.

As a result of this knowledge, skill, and understanding, all of Montana's students should have the opportunity to either go to college without remediation or to attain a credential that will allow them to enter the workforce or advanced technical education.

A Vision for Montana's Education System

Dougal then asked the group: "What will the education system need to do/look like in order to produce the type of students described above?" After discussing this question in small groups, participants came together and agreed that:

Montana's education system needs to be built on a world-class set of curricula, assessments, and learning materials that enable all students to learn the skills they will need for the future of work. High expectations for all students must be the norm across the system, as every student is expected to demonstrate proficiency. Authentic assessments of proficiency drive learning, not just validate it.

Learning is not only built on common high expectations; at the same time, it is highly personalized. Many different pathways are available to students. These pathways include rigorous, applied, and fully integrated career and technical education, available to all students across the state. In addition, a plethora of offerings in arts, drama, and sports are available. Learning in Montana can take many forms and happen in many places. Students learn individually, in groups, in classes, with mentors, in workplaces, in communities, and spiritual spaces. Teaching and learning is culturally relevant and tailored to students' goals, interests, strengths, and opportunities for growth. These learning experiences are facilitated by digital technologies in ways that support deeper learning and meaningful engagement and leverage teachers' expertise.

Providing these kinds of learning experiences to all students in Montana requires world-class teachers. Montana's education system should recognize teaching as a profession: well prepared, well supported, subject to high expectations for performance, and provided with opportunities for growth and advancement. Preservice teachers have much more time in authentic practicums learning from master teachers. In-service teachers collaborate to develop themselves and their peers, collectively brainstorm how to support students across grade

levels and subjects, mentor less experienced teachers, and pilot and improve new instructional materials and approaches.

Montana's education system must recognize that leadership and the capacity to make change exists within the education profession. School leaders are selected, prepared and developed to be strong leaders within their schools and communities and manage complex change initiatives. These leaders feel respected, valued, and motivated to improve, and stay in their jobs so they build rapport and trust in their communities. The expertise and experience of both teachers and school leaders is trusted, respected, and consulted when considering any new policy initiative at the state and district levels. Teachers, principals, and district leaders understand system-level goals and can identify the purpose of new initiatives and reforms for realizing those goals.

Montana's education system includes both strong accountability and robust supports for schools, teachers, and students. Montana's accountability system should consider the latest research on what students need to know and be able to do and what learning science says about how best to facilitate that kind of learning. It should not measure arbitrary input measures or minimum standards. At the same time, the system needs to provide schools with support: early learning opportunities so students show up to school ready to learn, abundant opportunities for students to access guidance counselors and health and mental health supports, additional learning supports for students who fall behind or struggle, and robust outreach to parents and the community to engage them in student learning. Montana's schools should be safe, healthy, and welcoming places for all students to learn.

Getting From Here to There: Challenges and Next Steps to Address Them

As a final question, Dougal asked participants to reflect: "Given all the flexibility that you have in Montana today, what are the biggest challenges to creating the system you just described?"

Participants agreed that the complexity and scale of change required was daunting and required many different players to reach consensus. They recognized that the formation of this group was an unprecedented positive first step toward achieving a unified vision. But all unanimously agreed that the locus of authority for determining what is taught and how schools operate resides with the local school boards.

The group recognized that while they had collectively endorsed a case for change and embraced a sense of urgency, many parents and community members have not just yet. They do not see the world rapidly changing around them and so may not be eager to explore a new vision of what schooling could look like. The group saw their role as serving as emissaries to their respective agencies and communities, building a broader public awareness of the case for change and a new vision for students and schooling, and helping parents, teachers, and

students to see the rationale and the possibilities and opportunities inherent in realizing that change.

Even once the purpose of change is broadly embraced, creating the policy environment and capacity to implement that change will take coordination, intentional planning, and concentrated effort across all the constitutional players. By bringing this group together, the state has taken a strong first step toward that coordination.

In drawing the session to a close, Chairman Bedey outlined several next steps. Each constitutional player should brainstorm their own responsibilities and opportunities to advance a new vision of education in the state, in line with their constitutional authority. The full group will reconvene on September 13, 2022. At that session, they will review the case for change and the visions articulated in the first meeting, consider and agree upon a set of strategic goals designed to enable Montana to realize its vision for students and for the education system, and describe their own constitutional roles in achieving those goals. The output of that meeting would be a high-level plan for a pathway forward, including what can be accomplished in the current legislative session; how can a communications and advocacy plan for socializing the case for change, vision and goals be developed; and what ongoing support for the constitutional players will be required?

The amount of work ahead is considerable, but Chair Bedey urged participants to consider the opportunities ahead of them and the responsibility they all bore to the State Constitution: *“to establish a system of education which will develop the full educational potential of each person. Equality of educational opportunity is guaranteed to each person of the state.”*