



Montana
Office of Public Instruction
Denise Juneau, State Superintendent

**STATE OF EDUCATION ADDRESS
SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION DENISE JUNEAU
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Thank you President Barrett, Speaker Knudsen, Senators, Representatives and honored guests for this opportunity to provide the State of Education.

[Introduction in Blackfeet] My name is Denise Juneau, and I am the Superintendent of Public Instruction. I am an enrolled member of the Mandan-Hidatsa Tribes of North Dakota, but I introduced myself in Blackfeet today because I grew up on the Blackfeet Reservation, am a descendent of the Blackfeet tribe, and a proud graduate of Browning High School. I tell students all the time that my high school diploma was the most important piece of paper I ever earned. It opened doors and provided opportunities I would have never believed when I was younger. The education I received in Browning eventually led me to Montana State University, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the University of Montana School of Law, and a career that led to me becoming the first American Indian woman elected to statewide office in the country.

I was lucky to be raised by parents who placed a high value on public education. They are here today, Stan and Carol Juneau. I would like to thank them for never lowering their expectations about the kind of world they want to live in and for instilling the values of justice and fairness in me and my brother. They are why I believe so much in public education and in helping others become educated.

My niece Sara and her two children, Alexander and Brynn, are also here today. As a first grader and a preschooler, they are a great reminder to me of the importance of early learning. It's been really fun to learn from them as they grow. Everything is new and so much learning takes place, even with the smallest things. They are the best at communicating their learning about new things. When Alexander encountered his first identical twins in Head Start, he came home very excited to let his mom know that he just met two boys who were born with "the same face."

Brynn is three and attends a child care center, and she wants to do everything her older brother does. She is sure she's ready for school. On a recent visit, Brynn was trying to learn the words to the song, "We Will Rock You." She listened to that song 100 times on the iPad. Everyone in the house also had the privilege of listening to the song 100 times as she tried to decipher the lyrics. If you ever meet Brynn, you will soon find out that "she will, she will, rock you."

While I think that Alexander and Brynn are the smartest kids ever, I know that all young children have that thirst for knowledge, that sense of wonder about the world we live in. It's the job of educators to help nourish that quality, or in some cases, help restore it.

High quality preschool can help close the achievement and opportunity gaps and ensure students enter kindergarten ready to learn with the foundation they need to succeed in school. That's why I stand with Governor Bullock in his efforts to provide a high quality education for Montana's youngest learners. It's time for us to provide our earliest learners with an Early Edge.

On the other end of the K-12 spectrum, we have done a lot of work to help students transition to college and careers. A strong partnership between my office and the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education has led to significant advances in increasing access to post-secondary education. We now offer the ACT to every junior at no cost to their families, have doubled the number of students taking dual enrollment courses, reduced college remediation rates and, during the second year of College Application Week, more than 3,000 seniors submitted applications to a Montana college for a waived or deferred fee. Thank you for your strong partnership, Commissioner Christian.

Last session, the Legislature supported my request for \$1 million to increase career and technical education student organization membership. That funding has paid off: Montana FFA achieved the greatest percentage of membership growth in the country, and Technical Students of America nearly tripled the size of their membership.

We have student representatives and their advisors from Business Professionals of America, Family, Career and Community Leaders of America, FFA, Future Health Professionals, Technology Student Association and Skills USA in the balcony today. Over the past 18 months, these student groups have dedicated more than 30,000 hours to community service and workforce skill development. Please stand and let us thank you for your leadership in your schools and respective student organizations.

When students take three or more CTE courses in high school, they graduate at a rate of 97 percent. That's why Career and Technical Education is an important part of Graduation Matters Montana.

I'm sure all of you are aware of the good work happening in the forty-eight Graduation Matters communities across the state. Communities as diverse as Laurel, Eureka, Miles City, Glasgow, Wolf Point, and Hamilton are pulling together their schools, parents, students and businesses to find ways to collaborate and keep more students in school. My office has raised more than \$1.2 million in private funds to support these local efforts. The focus on dropout prevention in Graduation Matters communities is working. From 2009-2014, Montana's graduation rate has increased from 80.7 percent to 85.4 percent, and the dropout rate has decreased from 5 percent to 3.7 percent. This represents an all-time high in Montana's graduation rate and means that 733 fewer students dropped out in 2014 than in 2009. Those numbers are a tribute to the hard work going on in local communities.

I have introduced two bills directly tied to Graduation Matters, Senate Bills 12 and 14. These are two avenues for the legislature to partner with schools and parents to keep more students in school so they graduate and have a chance of success in our global economy.

Senate Bill 12, carried by Senator Moe, would provide funding to schools that do the right thing and educate a student who might need an additional semester or year to earn the credits for graduation. Montana is currently the only state in the nation that cuts off school funding when a student turns nineteen.

During the hearing in the Senate Education Committee, a young man named Will from Great Falls explained that when his father was laid off, he became the bread winner for his family for a period of time, working 12 hour shifts from 4:30 pm to 4:30 am. Will couldn't keep up with

school and his efforts to make money to support his little brother and sister, and he ended up leaving school.

Will and his family got help from others, and he found his way back. Even though he was 19 years old, the alternative public school in Great Falls, Paris Gibson, brought him back, and he is now going to earn his high school diploma. This young man deserved an opportunity to finish high school. There are kids all over Montana with stories like Will--kids who become the main wage earner for their families, or kids who lose a parent or guardian and their life goes off track. They deserve a second chance. They shouldn't be stopped from receiving their education because 'the clock ran out on them' when they turned 19. You can help schools and students all across the state by passing Senate Bill 12.

Senate Bill 14, carried by Senator Driscoll, will raise the legal dropout age to age 18 or upon graduation. It sets an expectation that in today's economic climate, it's imperative that a student have a diploma or certificate as they enter adulthood. Knowing the long-term economic and social benefits to individuals graduating from high school, as policymakers and leaders in this state, we must share the accountability in addressing the dropout rate and set a clear expectation for our young people that they will graduate from high school.

Students who are 16 or 17 years old accounted for 65 percent of all dropouts in 2014. We expect passage of this bill would keep about 190 students from dropping out of school in the first year. That is a significant number. Raising the legal dropout age *will* make a difference.

The last time we raised our expectations of students in this area was 1921 – 94 years ago – when we asked that they stay in school until they turned 16 or complete eighth grade. Our 21st Century realities cannot be sustained by our 100-year-old policies. We must set our expectations higher than eighth grade graduation. We must expect more from our schools and our students. This is an idea whose time has come.

If legislators can come together to protect teens from the negative health risks associated with tanning beds, surely we can work together to support parents and schools in their efforts to keep students from dropping out of school. It is, as the Billings Gazette called it, “a no-brainer.”

Graduation Matters Montana is not just about graduating students from high school. It's also about making sure they are prepared for their next steps. Thanks to the leadership of the Board of Public Education, we have raised our standards in English and math. Today, I walk into classrooms and watch young learners work through math problems and think of themselves as mathematicians. I watch young people discuss major issues of our time using evidence from primary sources to back up their arguments.

Teachers have told me they are amazed at the changes they have seen in their classrooms since they started implementing the standards. Our students are rising to meet the challenge of higher standards, and we should not go backwards. These standards will help us continue to keep Montana kids among the best in the nation.

The chairperson of the Board is Sharon Carroll, a math teacher from Ekalaka. For the last three years, her school had a graduation rate of 100 percent. I visited them last year to congratulate them on their excellent track record. Those numbers show the strength of our rural schools in this state--or maybe it just shows the strength of good math teachers like Mrs. Carroll.

The Board has been courageous and visionary in its efforts to move Montana's public education system forward, and I thank them. These board members are dedicated to their mission of creating a high quality education system. During their last meeting, board member Lila Taylor from Broadus called in from a stockyard. That's dedication. Will the board members present today please stand so we can all thank you?

You need to know that where we have challenges in the public education system, we confront them head-on.

One of the more demanding initiatives I have taken on is improving student outcomes in schools and communities that are facing significant challenges. I want every child, wherever they live, and regardless of their economic circumstances, to graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in the next phase of their life. Under my Schools of Promise initiative, we have been working to transform several of the lowest performing school systems in the state. These schools are located in communities that experience poverty that is generational and persistent.

This is a partnership between schools, communities, and the OPI to provide comprehensive professional development for all school staff, provide mental health wraparound services for students who need additional support, and build connections between parents, the community and the schools. I appreciate the collaborative work the staff in these schools are doing. Although there are many challenging conditions, there are also strong family ties, deep connections to a rich culture, and significant history in these communities. And, there is much hope to build upon.

We put students at the center of our Schools of Promise work and help them raise their voices. Brandon Bradley, a student from Hays Lodge-Pole High School, is here today. When his grandmother passed away, he moved to Hays with his grandpa and brother to attend school. His grandfather recently passed away, and Brandon was left with the responsibility of raising his younger brother, working at the local store, and attending school. In addition to all of that, he is a member of our school improvement work group and makes sure student voices are included in the discussions about how their school works.

Brandon has been empowered to have a voice in his education and is making sure his peers are invited to the table as well. They have set student rules for getting along in school, decided the future direction of student engagement and are in the process of getting t-shirt making equipment so they can learn about business and entrepreneurship. Brandon has approached the Fort Belknap Tribal Council to gain the exclusive contract for all their t-shirt making needs. He is a great representative of our student groups in our Schools of Promise where they are becoming leaders in both their school and community. Thank you, Brandon, for your tremendous leadership at Hays-Lodge Pole. With students like you leading the way, our future in Indian Country is bright.

Our Schools of Promise are full of stories like Brandon's. We work with the adults and the students in these schools. It is probably the most important work that we do. The staff on the ground in these schools and communities are truly affecting young lives for the better. That's why Representative Pease-Lopez is carrying House Bill 314 that would allow us to expand this work in four new communities, including mental health wraparound services for the most vulnerable students. We have a model that has gained national recognition, and we would like to continue this most important work that provides empowerment through education.

I know that all of us agree about the importance of education. How we deliver education is sometimes where we differ. I am proud to be the top advocate for public education. Public education means so much to all of us. It is still the great equalizer. It is the last great public endeavor we have in America that is open to all, to every citizen. Public education proves that America is still the land of opportunity. And, in our state, public education is doing a great job. Our public schools educate 92 percent of Montana students. Over the past ten years, Montana citizens have made significant investments in public schools and in our students.

Thank you, House of Representatives, for passing House Bill 27 so early in the session. Representative Hayman's bill provides the statutory increases for school funding. Passing this bill so early in the session will allow school districts to begin planning their budgets knowing that the funding is securely in place. I urge the Senate to also move it quickly and put it on the Governor's desk.

Unfortunately, efforts are underway again to pass legislation that would drain resources away from our community schools. We cannot afford to backtrack on the constitutional promise of a free, quality public education for Montana children. Public schools are open to all children. There are no lotteries to get in. They are accountable to the public and transparent about every dollar that is spent. They are the heart, and the economic engines, of our communities. They are *our* schools.

We must continue to set a high bar for student achievement, promote innovative practices, help students explore careers and post-secondary opportunities, and support our teachers and school leaders in their efforts to help every child reach their full educational potential.

One of the best parts of my job is seeing great teaching in action in Montana classrooms. There is nothing better than watching someone who truly excels at the craft of teaching. You can feel the energy in the classroom and see the students respond with excitement. I'm sure each of you can recall a teacher who made a special impact on your life, who ignited a spark in you, made you believe in yourself and pushed you to achieve something you didn't think you could. Those of you who have children likely have gratitude for the educators who are helping to inspire your kids to try something new and to believe in themselves.

One of the ways we have to honor the teaching profession is through the Teacher of the Year program. I am honored to have Montana's 2015 Teacher of the Year, Craig Beals, a chemistry and earth science teacher from Billings Senior High School, in the audience.

Craig has done high-level scientific research all over the world, from Belize, Mongolia, Greenland, Borneo, and Africa to Montana. He inspired his students to design and build the largest cardboard geodesic dome planetarium in the world. His students have used their science skills to help improve their local parks, recommended new zoning, and contributed valuable water quality data to a national database for scientific research. And most importantly, he is known for developing strong relationships with the students in his classroom and having high expectations for them.

Craig had this to say about his nomination for Teacher of the Year, "I teach because I love it. I work hard because that's what I was taught to do. I create because I can't help it. Never have I done any of these things for an award; I do them because I don't know any other way."

He is using his year as the Montana Teacher of the Year to celebrate all the amazing things that teachers in this state are doing for young people. He has created a scroll as well as Twitter and Facebook accounts for people to declare their support for teachers and to thank them for what they do every day. He knows that when teachers are shown a bit of appreciation, it goes a long way. I'm sure he would love to gain another 150 signatures on his scroll today.

Similar to the students in Craig's classes, I know the value of a Montana public education because it's a gift I was given. It is part of who I am, and part of what drove me to become an educator. And I know what we have to lose if we don't preserve and strengthen public education for generations to come. We must continue to work for excellence and equality in our education system.

We have a lot to be proud of and to celebrate. We have great teachers, great students, and great public schools. I am so fortunate to be able to visit our future leaders in schools all across Montana. Every time I meet with my Student Advisory Board, visit a classroom of middle schoolers, read to first graders, eat school lunch with fifth graders, see great classroom teaching, or attend a Graduation Matters event with students, parents and businesses, I know that our schools, our communities, and our future are in good hands.

My work as State Superintendent helps me remain optimistic about our future. Our hope lies with the next generation – it always has. That's what I get to do every day – support the next generation in reaching their hopes and dreams. We must all do our part to support them. When we ensure that each student is provided with an opportunity to receive a quality public education – that is how we make the future better.

Thank you all for your service to the State of Montana, its citizens, and its students. I look forward to working with you to pass good legislation that will make our public education system even better.