

2019 State of Education Address

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and Members and guests of the Montana House! It is my honor to be able to serve as Montana's State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

I am grateful for the dedicated staff at the Office of Public Instruction, whose heartfelt mission is to serve our Montana public schools.

Thank you to my fellow elected officials and colleagues for being here today, and to the most important person in the room, my high school sweetheart and husband, Steven. He's stuck with me through 23 years of teaching, six legislative sessions, seven campaigns, and, so far, this job. That's commitment!

Join me in recognizing all of the dedicated teachers across Montana for their service to students. Today is Public Education Advocacy Day and you will see many of Montana's wonderful educators around our capitol and in your hearing rooms. Please join me in giving Montana's teachers a round of appreciative applause.

Montana's 2019 Teacher of the Year is Mr. Dylan Huisken. He sends his very best today and is unable to be here in person, as he is where he wants to be, teaching his middle school students in Bonner. He is creating amazing opportunities for his students through innovative approaches to teaching, especially in the area of Indian Education for All. Help me recognize Montana's Teacher of the Year, Mr. Dylan Huisken!

My mother and father were public school teachers in Billings. I am a product of Montana's public schools as are my daughters and grandchildren. I received an Economics Degree from the University of Montana, but education was my calling, and I returned to school to earn an Education Degree from Montana State. I was blessed to teach for 23 years in Billings Public Schools. It is my lifelong connection with our students and schools that drives me each and every day to serve with passion.

All means all. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act which replaced No Child Left Behind is being successfully implemented in Montana. For example, state and school report cards will be issued this spring to give families and communities transparent data on how their students are performing.

Together, in just two years, we have achieved a great deal for Montana's students, but there is still much to be done to ensure that every Montana student has the opportunity to succeed.

I have directed the Office of Public Instruction to serve students and educators under the banner of four initiatives. The initiatives are Montana Hope, Montana Teach, Montana Learn, and Montana Ready.

Montana Hope is the whole-child approach to education. It encompasses mental health, suicide prevention, and school safety. Without this fundamental groundwork, student learning cannot occur. Representatives Dunwell and Pierson are leading efforts to provide teachers with tools related to mental health. Representative Grubbs and Senator Salomon have introduced measures for flexibility in school budgets around safety.

Montana Teach is aimed at growing the teaching profession not just in numbers, but having a high-quality educator in front of every student. Thank you for your work last session on National Board Certified Teacher stipends. This session, Senator McClafferty is supporting the Montana Quality Educator Student Loan Assistance Program. I also appreciate Senator Lang recognizing recruitment and retention challenges, not just in rural Montana, but across the state.

Montana Learn is designed to close achievement gaps and create individualized learning opportunities that allow students to grow academically. Many pieces of legislation have been introduced to promote these goals and I want to thank the sponsors in this body: Representatives McKamey, Jones, Anderson, Windy Boy, and others.

Montana Ready is the result of the precious investment in a student's elementary and secondary education. I appreciate Representative Vinton for her emphasis on career technical education in middle school and Representative Bedey for understanding this is a state-wide issue, not just an individual school issue.

Students in Browning are graduating high school certified to begin high-paying careers in welding, students in Kalispell are building houses and raising agriculture products to sell within their community, students in Missoula are gaining International Baccalaureates, students in Billings are joining the Youth Entrepreneurs program through the Career Center, and more schools than ever before are connected to high-speed internet allowing for individualized coursework. These are just some of the countless opportunities that students across Montana are taking advantage of.

You have my promise that we will continue to promote and grow these opportunities to make students Montana Ready. Ready for success for the rest of their life.

On the first day of this session I hosted a school safety panel to showcase the diverse approaches that Montana schools are taking to protect our students. Student safety has been my number one policy priority this legislative session. It is a challenging topic, and it weighs heavy in all of our hearts and minds. I want to thank this body for making student safety a priority as well.

Senator Regier is championing the Student Safety Accountability Act. This recognizes that students are a protected class and cannot consent to sexual relationships with school officials as they are in positions of trust and authority over them. This is targeted, common-sense legislation. I am grateful to Representative Morigeau, Representative Ricci, Senator Bogner, and all of you who are making student safety a priority this session. **Montana must remove predators from our schools.**

We are also seeking professional development opportunities for educators focused on school safety. A federal STOP School Violence Act grant was awarded to Montana and provides new opportunities for professional development focused on school safety for our Montana teachers. The Department of Homeland Security also provided the OPI with funds to assist schools in creating emergency preparedness plans.

You have my promise that the knowledgeable health and safety experts at the Office of Public Instruction will continue helping you, our schools, families, and communities address the full range of support that Montana's children need.

I want to shift gears now to how we are teaching students, how students are learning, and how we are preparing them to be ready for careers or college after graduation. In 2018, Montana celebrated our highest graduation rates in recent history, including for our American Indian students. However, gaps continue to exist. We can, and we must, reexamine what an education looks like for each individual student.

I have weekly meetings with the American Indian legislators through our Tribal Education Caucus to address challenges to education on our reservations.

Please join me in Room 335 this Thursday morning at 7am for our education caucus, as we will be discussing mental health awareness and suicide prevention.

I want to thank you for your commitment to improving outcomes for our students. All Montana students must have the opportunity to succeed.

I am committed to developing strong relationships with Montana's teacher preparation programs through the leadership of the Board of Regents, and working with the Board of Public Education to provide flexibility to educators, as they work toward licensure or certification.

I am committed to great government cooperation with ongoing discussions with the Department of Labor, Department of Health, Department of Corrections, and our Military to promote solutions. I have begun to build strong public-private partnerships with many of Montana's businesses and industries to prepare our students in the path to be career, college, and community ready.

There is much to celebrate in Montana education and the future of education is strong. Yet, we still have much to do to prepare the next generation of Montana leaders for success. This legislative body plays a significant role.

I am requesting that you give Montana students the largest ever appropriation for K-12 BASE Aid funding: 70 million dollars. 70 million dollars which will provide our local school boards with stability as they begin budgeting for their next class of students. 70 million dollars that will provide for the quality education that Montana families and Montana students deserve.

I am urging your support for the restoration of our Career and Technical Education, our Gifted & Talented Education, and for our most at-risk Special Education students, as well as all of the other programs that were cut in prior legislation sessions.

I attended the appropriations hearing for HB 3 recently in support of Scobey's public schools. Representative Hopkins made a statement that his mother told him, that is very fitting here, "if you are going to play with something that isn't yours, be sure you put it back."

A promise is a promise. Restore state responsibility to fund our schools.

Under my leadership at the Office of Public Instruction, we have accomplished much more with less. We have reduced our footprint of 4 buildings to 3. We have reorganized for efficiencies. As a result, more resources are directly serving our schools and students in our communities.

Like you, I have much homework to do in the coming biennium. As you return to serve in your communities, the homework that I give you is to continue in the commitment of **putting Montana students first.**

Thank you.