

Montana Race to the Top State Application Overview

Montana requested nearly \$74,000,000 in funding from Race to the Top (RTTT) where, if funded, half of the award will go to participating LEAs. Eighty-two percent or 343 of the 418 possible LEAs explicitly decided to consider participating in the Montana RTTT program through completing and submitting a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This represents 86% of all public schools in Montana and 94% of all enrolled public school students.

If funded, the portion of the award going to the state will primarily be used to assist schools and districts in carrying out local plans and the elements of the state plan as described below.

Throughout the grant application, there is a steadfast focus on how Montana will address issues like teacher and principal evaluation and preparation and considering adoption of the Common Core Standards in Math and English/Language Arts. It is clear in the application that the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) and the Montana Board of Public Education (BPE) will involve all education partners and stakeholders as these initiatives move forward in a public planning process. It was never implied or sought that any summary decisions on such important issues will be made without engaging those that need to be involved in an open and participatory course of action.

It is equally clear that there is no interest in seeking alternative pathways to licensure beyond what is already in place in Montana. Also there has been no movement toward engaging in any rulemaking that does not honor local control and collective bargaining around the issue of evaluating teachers and principals based primarily on student achievement. Finally, the Department of Education (ED) would prefer the adoption of one of its four intervention models when it comes to assisting our persistently lowest achieving schools, which was something that was not agreed to in the Montana RTTT Grant Application.

There is the strong promotion of themes around Response to Intervention, addressing the needs of the whole child, regionalized delivery of professional development and support, and developing powerful data systems that would provide for linkages to either end of the K-12 learning experience and provide information to all stakeholders to used in data-driven decision making processes.

Response to RTTT Assurance Areas

The Secretary of Education has centered the RTTT initiatives on four priority assurance areas:

- Standards and assessments
- Data systems to support instruction
- Great teachers and leaders
- Turning around the lowest-achieving schools.

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The **standards and assessments** assurance includes the consideration of the adoption of internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace.

OPI has been engaged in the Common Core State Standards Initiative lead by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). We have convened instructional leaders from across the state to review the draft releases of both the Career and College Ready Standards and the K-12 English/Language Arts and Mathematics Standards. We have conducted state-level alignment processes along the way and have found that the present Learner Standards in Montana already meet or exceed the Common Core Standards for both Career and College Ready and K-12 English/Language Arts and Mathematics Standards. The process of bringing these standards into Montana classrooms will make its way into the structure of our Board of Public Education decision making process, which embraces public participation and provides meaningful leadership along the way. The final Standards are expected to be released in early June, which will trigger the process of considering what Montana will do regarding the adoption of these standards

Montana continues to be an active participant in the RTTT Assessment Program; the guidelines for this program were recently released by the ED. Montana is committed to participating in this program as long as it appears to be of benefit to education our state. This effort is clearly tied to the Common Core Standards work and will be critical to measuring our progress and success along the way as these changes occur in Montana.

Response to intervention (RTI) integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to potentially maximize student achievement. It is imperative that resources necessary to implement the RTI across the state of Montana be made accessible in order to ensure that meaningful interventions take place where and when they are necessary to maximize the local resources and time constraints in serving Montana public school students.

In order to provide a rich and complete set of course offerings to all corners of a large and sparsely populated state like Montana distance learning and dual enrollment can play a huge role in providing greater access to opportunity for all students and were supported in the application.

The OPI is working toward developing a system of support schools and districts which will be based on their individual needs as determined by a multifaceted, data-driven process. A five-stage process using 16 areas of support is being considered that will allow for school and district-specific response to determine the level and areas for support they may need. This system will rely on data to formulate an assistance model. In order to ensure that data is accessible to those who need it, Montana will need a Data Warehouse system which has been written into the grant application.

The **data systems** assurance includes building a longitudinal data system that measures student success and informs teachers and principals how they can improve their practices in concert with analyzing student data.

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A proposal to build a data system that will allow for the tracking a wide variety of district, school, and student assessment data over time has been written into the Montana RTTT application. If funded, data in this system will be available for use in the classroom, by the school principal, district leadership, and state level officials. This data could be used at the classroom level toward directing instruction as deemed appropriate in their setting, at the school and district level to track progress and special topics over time and at the state level to develop responsive assistance plans for schools and districts as described above.

The **great teachers and leaders** assurance includes recruiting, developing, retaining and rewarding effective teachers and principals. Additionally, it calls for changes in teacher and principal preparation and training programs.

There are many well-founded researched based models available to local school systems as they work with their teachers collaboratively on this topic, but what is missing is a clear Montana direction around this issue. A recommendation, to the Montana Board of Public Education, will be developed with input from all stakeholders that will provide a clear direction that all school systems in Montana will use to ensure that there is a minimum of consistency and expectation in the performance of those who lead and teach in our schools. It should be noted that Montana is a collective bargaining state. As such, both the LEA and its bargaining units have the authority to deliberate and decide equally on any issues like evaluation systems and procedures regarding the details of carrying out the evaluation process and recruiting, developing, retaining and rewarding effective teachers.

Teacher and Administrator preparation in Montana should parallel the needs and directions of the future of education in Montana schools to ensure that future and practicing teachers and leaders have the skills to make this come to fruition where they live and work. The OPI has developed a relationship with Montana State University and the University of Montana Teacher and Administrator preparation program leadership on each campus to support their innovative efforts already in place and to work together collaboratively on developing programs that prepare new and practicing teachers and administrators for the future of education in Montana.

The **lowest-achieving schools** assurance calls for action to be taken in turning around persistently underperforming schools.

Montana has also taken a very broad approach to turning around its lowest-achieving schools by collaborating with stakeholders in addressing some of Montana schools' unique challenges through the School Improvement Grant (SIG) process. Although this program has rigid options in OPI working with the identified schools which will not be in place outside of the SIG process, there will be valuable lessons learned in this process that will serve other schools in the future that are in high need of assistance.

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When many factors at the local level, including leadership, have not worked over time to the degree that the students have performed at the lowest of levels possible, unusual steps must be taken to assist and direct these schools and districts. In an effort to protect the interests of local control and still find a solution to make a path that will allow potential temporary intervention and assistance, OPI will be asking stakeholders to come to the table and search for this solution. The end goal of such an effort would be to give responsibility and authority back to the community once the learning and supporting environments are back in place. As with other reform issues previously mentioned, stakeholder engagement in developing this system to be effective and yet protect local control interests where they are working is paramount to the success of this process and will be employed as Montana moves forward in this work.

Optional Application Priority

Effective STEM education programs at all levels including K-12, undergraduate, graduate, continuing education, and vocational is a priority for an energy-resource rich state like Montana. We will accomplish this by supporting new and innovative initiatives that will help improve the content knowledge skills and professional development of the K-12 teacher workforce and informal educators and improve the resources available in classrooms and other learning environments.