



## **Budget & Education Working Group**

### **Group A: Special Needs Students and Programs July Meeting Summary**

Below are notes from comments made by the Budget & Education Working Group members.

#### **Narrative:**

Topics discussed include the challenges faced by special education teachers, the need for higher salaries, transparency in taxpayer dollar usage, and the importance of addressing the disconnect between educators and the community. The group also explores potential solutions for funding special education programs, such as setting up a 501c3 for schools and requesting more federal funding. Other topics include managing caseloads for special education teachers, mental health supports in schools, and the use of technology in classrooms. Concerns about transparency in school budgets, were also addressed.

#### **Discussion Points:**

- Cost of living
  - Increase the cap on inflation from its current level of 3%.
  - Mandate an increase for starting teacher salaries to aid in teacher recruitment and retention and offer salary and other incentives for teachers who choose to stay in Montana 3 or more years.
  - Increases must rise to at least address the large gap in the cost of living in Montana.
- Federal Funding:
  - Ask federal legislators to increase the amount of federal spending allocated to Montana.
  - Federal government should fund IDEA at higher level.
- Special Education Teacher Retention
  - Develop a different salary table for special education teachers that reflects their training and education levels.
  - Provide resources for extra training and pay increases for longevity, greater than what is offered today.
  - Offer state funded training for special ed teachers that addresses harassment and discipline issues in the classroom.
  - Shortage of speech pathologists school psychologists.
- Local Funding:
  - A percentage of budget surpluses (5-10%) should be legislated to automatically go to education.
    - Use current surplus to assist with inflation cost increases.
  - If local levies can't be passed to fund health safety and other necessary upgrades (technology), then one option would be for state taxes to be increased in those communities and that tax money redistributed back to local schools.
  - Each school district or group of districts in some cases, should be required to set up 501c3 to accept donations
    - Increase cap on dollar-for-dollar donations to schools.
    - Allow more direct donations tagged for specific expenditures.

- Increased Special Needs & Behavioral Needs Populations
  - Increase in number of students and severity of needs of students has increased.
  - More reliance on paraprofessionals
  - Increased behavioral issues (with and without special needs). More students with one-on-one needs.
    - Mental health needs.
  - Caseload pressures.
  - 3–5-year-old: schools are required providers if the students are qualified for services. Population exploding.
- Technology:
  - Are we fully taking advantage of technology advancements?
  - How can we better address/ monitor technology downsides? social media, bullying
- Community Engagement
  - Taxpayers in Montana have lost an understanding on how their tax dollars are used (road repair, plowing, water and sewer infrastructure and operation, schools, etc).
  - School should advertise how levies or funding is being used in the school. “Your Tax Dollars at Work”
  - Increased transparency on how and why projects are prioritized and funded by the school and school boards.
- Gifted & talented piece is missing in many schools.
  - Not enough oversight of the services provided. “Check the box” exercise.
  - Increase funding for gifted and talented: maybe more towards per pupil funding.
  - Often one of the first programs to be cut.
- English Language Learners:
  - Increased population, while staff to serve population has not increased.
  - Increased diversity of languages.
  - Funding does not meet the level of services the school is required to provide.
- Building Maintenance
  - School infrastructure in Montana needs to address health and safety issues in all school buildings and then improved learning spaces for Montana's children including access to technology.
- Therapy Services
  - Caseload increases, balance caseload & case manager work.
  - Cost of contracts with therapy professional. Huge cost for coops
  - Medicaid reimbursements – OT, PT.
  - Increase reimbursement rates for OT, PT professionals...