

READY OR NOT, MONTANAN HIGH SCHOOLERS ARE HEADING TO COLLEGE

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Fall 2023 proved to be a windfall for the Montana University System. According to the latest headcount, enrollment hit its highest point since the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching 42,010 students.¹

The University of Montana alone enrolled 10,327 students at its main campus. Missoula College had its largest freshman class since 2016. As the graph illustrates, over the past decade, 37,283 Montana high schoolers decided to pursue a postsecondary education in-state immediately following graduation.

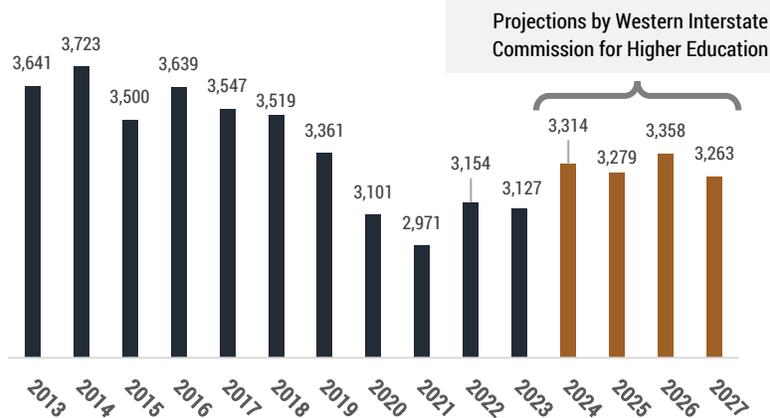
Another 13,214 students will enroll in Montana colleges and universities the next four years.²

In this 4th article in our 12-part series, the question we want to explore is how well Montana high schools are preparing graduating 12th graders for success in college.

Signing up for a marathon is not the same as being ready to cross the finish line. Likewise, enrolling in a postsecondary institution that will accept your tuition is not the same as being ready to complete a 2- or 4-year degree.

Freshman Attending Montana Colleges & Universities

Enrolled for fall semester immediately after high school graduation.



To help us determine if Montana high schools are preparing college-bound graduates, we will examine three key areas.

1. Montana High Schoolers
2. Statewide ACT Scores
3. Freshman Readiness for College Courses

By examining these points in order, we will ground our review in the realities of Montana secondary education for students in grades 9-12. With this context, we can better understand if the Treasure State is graduating students ready for college coursework.

1. Montana High Schoolers

Before we can determine how well Montana high schools are preparing students for college and career, it is important to consider the student population they seek to educate.

¹ [Most Montana Colleges Post Enrollment Gains in Fall Headcount](#)

² [Montana University System Dashboards](#)

One of the biggest trends in American education the past 35 years has been an incredible growth in student diversity. In the 1980's, most children and youth in grades PK-12 were white, middle- to upper-income, living in two parent homes. Today, U.S. students reflect an extraordinary diversity of native languages spoken, family cultural norms, household income levels, and religious practices. Across the nation, far fewer students are being raised in "nuclear families" with two parents.

In most states, this growing diversity used to be concentrated in urban centers but has steadily spread across suburbs, cities, and towns. Today, in districts like Denver, Seattle, and Minneapolis, it is not uncommon for high schools to enroll students who speak between 12 and 28 different native languages. Nationally, 55% of all students are of minority ethnicities including Hispanic, African American, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, and biracial students. Nearly 30% of all U.S. children are being raised in single parent homes, far higher than any other developed nation in the world.

This is the challenge many district high schools face, how to provide a high-quality education to an increasingly diverse student body. Increasingly, every family is seeking schools that can cater to each child's unique socio-economic background and learning needs.

Despite covering an area of 174,040 square miles, Montana continues to have a relatively small, rural population. With only 45,680 public high schoolers enrolled for the 2021-22 school year, Montana ranked 44th of all 50 states. Only South Dakota, Alaska, North Dakota, Wyoming, and Vermont had smaller student populations.

Because so many of its high schools are in rural locations, Montana records an average student to teacher ratio of 10:1 in high school. Thus, Montana's high school students should be getting the benefit of individualized classroom instruction and more personal attention than they would in nearly every other U.S. state.

The student population in Montana public schools is far less diverse than in most other U.S. states. To illustrate, fewer than 2% of high schoolers qualify as English Language Learners. Over 77% of high school students are white. The next largest ethnicity, Native American students, represent 10% of total enrollment in grades 9-12. Only 7% of Montana children and youth are being raised in single-parent households.³

As such, Montana has not experienced the same challenges associated with accommodating a diversifying student population that most other American states have. Considering the small student population, favorable student-to-teacher ratios, and consistency of the student population, Montana should be excelling in preparing students for college. But that is not the story that the data reveals.

2. ACT Scores

Montana adopted the ACT as its state high school exam in 2011 to provide a consistent picture of student proficiency and progress across public schools.⁴ The ACT and SAT are the two college-entrance exams accepted by most American colleges and universities. Student achievement on the ACT is predictive of college success.

³ [The States with the Most Single Parent Households](#)

⁴ [Office of Public ACT Information](#)

In Montana, the ACT is administered to all 11th grade students as a statewide, standardized assessment. Because the Montana Department of Public Instruction has been administering the ACT for 12 years, Montana’s public high schools have had many years to figure out how best to prepare students to perform well.

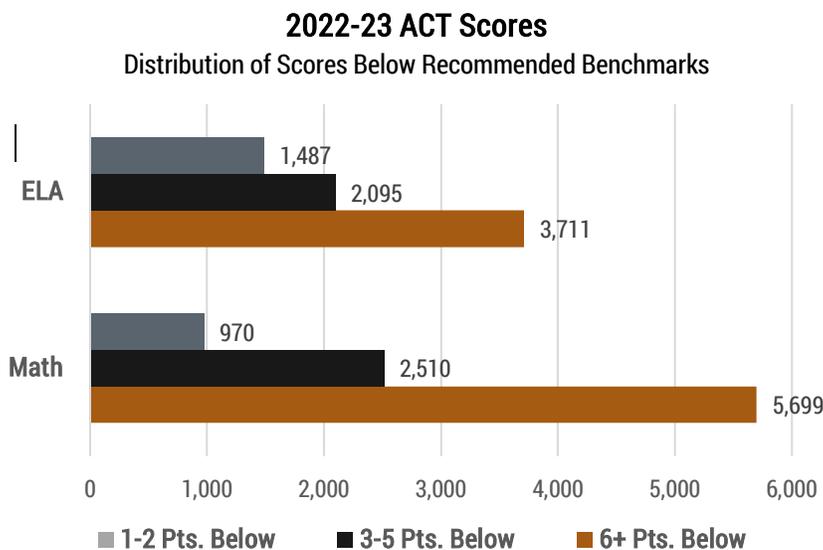
The ACT uses performance benchmarks to determine the likelihood of student success as college freshmen. Those benchmarks are described below:

“The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks are the minimum ACT scores required for students to have a high probability of success in credit-bearing first-year college courses. Students who meet a benchmark on the ACT have approximately a 50% chance of earning a B or better and approximately a 75% chance of earning a C or better in the corresponding college course or courses.”⁵

Presently, the ACT benchmarks are set at a score of 22 for Mathematics and 20 for English Language Arts (ELA). Using these benchmarks, we can establish whether Montana students are demonstrating the academic proficiency required to successfully complete college-level courses.

In the most recent testing, 67% of 11th grade students did not reach the ACT benchmark in Mathematics and 54% of tested students fell below the ACT benchmark in English Language Arts. However, it is the distribution of scores that we find to be the most troubling.

Students scoring 1- to 5-pts. below the benchmark in Math and ELA may be able to bridge the gap so they enter their first year of college on track. But as that gap widens, catching up becomes a steeper and steeper mountain to climb and significantly reduces the chances a students will successfully pass first year college-level courses.



This is exactly the case in Montana, as the chart depicts. A staggering number of students tested during the 2022-23 school year scored 6 points or more below the recommended benchmarks.

In ELA 3,711, or 51% of students, scored 6-points or more below the recommended benchmark.

But student outcomes in Math are much more concerning. Of the 9,179 students that did not reach the benchmark in Math, **5,699, or 62%, scored 6 points or more below the recommended level for college readiness.**

When we compare Montana to other U.S. states, we think it is reasonable to assume that Montana should be among the highest performing states for the reasons stated earlier in this article. Yet both the Office of Public Instruction and the National Center for Education Statistics find that Montana’s ACT results are no better than national averages.

⁵ [ACT Benchmarks](#)

3. Freshmen Readiness for College Courses

The Office of Public Instruction records the percent of Montana public high school graduates that enroll in at least one remedial course during their first semester at a state college or university. However, students are not counted into these totals if they take remedial coursework from other providers before they reach the postsecondary level.

In 2009, the Montana legislature took an extraordinary step to reduce the number of high school students that require remedial courses from Montana's colleges and universities. The legislature authorized the creation of the Montana Digital Academy, which specializes in providing remedial courses and other supports in Mathematics and English Language Arts as a supplement to public middle and high schools. The Montana Digital Academy, also called the EdReady Montana program, is housed at the University of Montana – Missoula Campus.⁶

Over the past 10 years, EdReady Montana has served 190,000 students in credit recovery, grade-to-grade transitions, and college readiness.⁷ By 2016, only three years after the program's launch, "more than 50,000 students in over 300 Montana schools and colleges were using EdReady to master core Math concepts and become college and career ready."⁸

Due to the growth of EdReady Montana, state colleges and universities are providing fewer remedial courses to incoming freshmen. In fact, remediation rates have been on a downward trend since their peak in 2016, when 28% of new college entrants took at least one remedial course. Last year, the implementation of EdReady Montana reduced the percent of students required to take at least one remedial course in college to 13%.⁹

What do the ACT scores and growth of the Montana Digital Academy tell us about the effectiveness of Montana's public high schools?

The ACT scores among a majority of 11th grade Montanans are falling well below recommended benchmarks. Tens of thousands of students in grades 9-12 are taking digital coursework and catching up on missed credits so that they don't have to take remedial college courses. We can only draw one conclusion from this evidence – most high schools are not preparing students for college success.

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education projects that 42,010 students will graduate from Montana high schools over the next four years. If current trends hold, between 20,580 and 13,500 of these students will fall well short of ACT benchmarks in Mathematics and/or English Language Arts.

This is not just a post-Pandemic problem. Statewide ACT scores declined across all areas between the 2016 and the 2019 school year, forcing tens of thousands of students to turn to Montana Digital Academy to be college ready. Montana high schools must recognize the persistent downward trends and take steps to fix these challenges.

One proposed solution is for district high schools to authorize new charter schools under House Bill 549. The Kalispell, Billings, Corvallis, Frenchtown, Hamilton, and Missoula school districts have each submitted applications for new or existing programs that focus on post-secondary or career tracks. However, as we discussed in our

⁶ [EdReady Montana - History](#)

⁷ [NROC EdReady Montana](#)

⁸ [NROC EdReady Montana Report](#)

⁹ [Office of Public Instruction Reporting](#)

[November article](#), these charter schools would fall under the same district leaders, educators, managerial norms, district policies, state department rules, and legislative regulations that are preventing Montana high schoolers from becoming college ready in the first place.

For example, in Frenchtown, 60% of students tested below the ACT benchmark in ELA and 77% below the Math benchmark. Yet the district is seeking approval for the Bronc Fast Track Public Charter, which would enable students to complete college credits and even earn associate degrees during high school.¹⁰ Should the same district that is not preparing 2 out of 3 students for college-level coursework start operating a charter school that awards college credits and two-year degrees?

In most states, the purpose in opening charter schools is to better meet students' needs by introducing innovation, choice, competition, and accountability for results into public education. When we examine the research on charter schools, it is evident that student outcomes are getting stronger in many parts of the nation. Yet such positive change can only happen when there is the freedom for new leadership, innovative practices, and better choices to be implemented.

As we have demonstrated in this article, every year, thousands of Montana students deserve access to high schools that prepare them for college. Thus, there is a golden opportunity for charter schools to light the way by designing and delivering better options. The question is, how do we best blaze that trail without allowing the poor performance plaguing so many regular district high schools to become the norm among charter schools?

In 2009, it was necessary for the Montana legislature to authorize the Montana Digital Academy to begin to reduce Montana's college remediation rates without continuing to rely on traditional district-run high schools alone. Today, Montana has an extraordinary opportunity to continue to fix this statewide problem by allowing new charter high schools to open. Yet we believe that opportunity can only be realized if new charter high schools can open outside the constraints preventing many district high schools from improving.

In our next article, we will continue our exploration of college and career readiness. Specifically, we will look at whether Montana high schools are equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and attributes to be successful in the workforce and contribute to Montana's economic well-being and prosperity.

Authors



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¹⁰ [State Receives More Than Two Dozen Charter Applications](#)

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