



WHAT DOES EDUCATION FREEDOM LOOK LIKE IN MONTANA?

May 2024

Key Points:

- Right now, 90% of Montanans, especially educators and parents, do not have the liberty to educate their own children free of prescriptive regulations.
- While Montana Public Schools spend around 57% of their total funding on instruction and student services, innovative private and micro-schools in Montana spend 80% or greater, and also have been investing in educators.
- The Bozeman Innovation Academy, a 2nd year micro-school affiliated with the Acton Academies, uses upwards of 85% of funding for instructional resources and the salaries of teachers.
- The Petra Academy, Montana's first classical Christian school, has raised teacher salaries 20% over the past four years.
- Both schools charge families tuition and have admissions requirements but go to lengths to enable a socioeconomic cross-section of families to participate.
- Montana educators, parents, and communities can benefit from many more schools like the Bozeman Innovation Academy and the Petra Academy.

A State Built on Liberty. Over the past 18 months, we have had dozens of conversations with lifelong Montanans and people who relocated to call the Treasure State home. In these interactions, the belief that people express most often is that Montanans value liberty.

Why is freedom so important to Montanans? From what we have been able to gather, there are several reasons. The first is that Montana is a rugged state with harsh weather. It takes self-reliance and independence just to stay alive and thrive. People who can't handle that kind of freedom quickly move somewhere else.

Secondly, Montana is a place where people can make their way up in the world based on the merits of their own hard work and ingenuity. The belief is that if people are given a fair shot and left alone, they will figure out how to succeed. This spirit of self-determination is deeply engrained in every Montanan and is what drives them to make their own future.

The third reason people come to Montana is to leave the problems that they experienced in other places. More and more American cities and states are struggling with big government, high taxes, and sprawling metro areas, which drive up traffic, congestion, crime, and cost of living. In these states, a growing number of people expect government services to take care of them. Montanans do not want the urban problems plaguing Seattle, Portland, and Denver. They want freedom.

A Regulated Education State. Yet when it comes to education, Montana has experienced less freedom and fewer choices than nearly any other U.S. state. Right now, 90 percent of families attend regular district schools. These schools operate under a huge, multi-layered, regulatory burden that is enforced by a unitary state education establishment – the Montanan hunger for freedom is strangely absent here.

However, there is a small but growing number of educators and families stepping outside district schools in search of liberty. To explore what they are experiencing, we interviewed Rusty Bowers, the founder of the Bozeman Innovation Academy, and Justice Kerr, the head of the Petra Academy.

At first glance, these two schools seem to be at opposite ends of the academic spectrum. Bozeman Innovation is a micro-school with a focus on entrepreneurship that offers a mastery-based program using the latest education technologies. Petra Academy, which operates in a large brick-and-mortar facility on 20 acres, is Montana's oldest classical Christian school. Yet what these two schools share is the *power to lead* – the freedom to deliver an excellent education outside the government system.

Bozeman Innovation Academy. There may be no more qualified public school educator than Rusty Bowers. From 2003 to 2014, he obtained a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees in mathematics' education and education leadership from Montana State University. After spending 8 years teaching math to high schoolers, he became the principal and football coach of the public middle-high school in Fort Benton.

Yet it was precisely the burden of regulation, standardization, and conformity that drove Rusty out of public education despite rising to be the principal of a Class-C school serving 150 students in grades 6-12 in Montana. "Educators have a lot of passion, but passion will always be trumped by standardization", says Bowers. "I began to wonder what it would be like to deliver an education without the burdens and strings of public money."

The [Acton Academies](#) are a growing international network of "one room schoolhouses for the 21st Century." The Academies were started to instill self-reliance and entrepreneurship in students from a young age. One of the Acton Academies' essential elements is [The Hero's Journey](#), a narrative structure that provides students with a way to experience adventure, learn personal identity, and explore what it means to lead a life of purpose.

Bowers was drawn to the Acton Academy model where students are educated in self-directed, peer-to-peer, learner driven communities. He observed, "I saw the way kids were excited about going to school and how quickly they took to being self-learners. I loved the whole idea that you're taking education, that is normally top-down, and instead you're giving it to the kids." As a mission commitment, the Acton Academies do not discriminate among families, but rather, take great pride in serving a diverse socioeconomic spectrum of learners.

Providing this type of education meant building a school outside the traditional public system, which also meant Bowers had to finance the school out-of-pocket. Like most entrepreneurs in other sectors of the economy, starting the Bozeman Innovation Academy required a leap of faith with personal consequences. "I had to bootstrap 100% of the startup," said Bowers. "I was a career educator in the district school system. Now, I was spending my own money on books, supplies, insurance, and trying to find families that share my vision and would also be willing to invest in this kind of education for their children."



Rusty Bowers, Owner & Guide,
Bozeman Innovation Academy



Head of School, Petra Academy

After completing the first full year, Bowers shared that finances remain a top concern even as the school expects to add more students next year. Without multiple channels of tax-payer funding, Bozeman Innovation relies on tuition to fully fund the school with upwards of 85% going towards instructional resources and the salaries of the teachers or “guides” as they are called in an Acton Academy.

Bowers said, “We had a great first year, the kids and parents were happy, and we have interest from parents for next year, so we will have to wait and see what enrollment looks like for the fall.”

The Petra Academy. As Bozeman Innovation Academy looks forward to its second year, less than five miles away, Petra Academy is looking forward to its 28th year of serving students. Justice Kerr, the head of school, joined Petra Academy four years ago but brings 25 years of experience in classical Christian education, rising from teacher to dean before accepting his current leadership role.

Kerr earned his undergraduate degree in philosophy from Oklahoma Baptist University before completing a masters’ degree in humanities from the University of Dallas, a private Catholic university known for graduating classical educators. Although he is a graduate of the public school system in Texas, when we asked if he has ever considered a career in public education, the answer was no.

Speaking about his time at the University of Dallas, Kerr noted “It was one of the best educational experiences of my life. Our teachers were still on the same journey as their students and my graduate professors never made me feel like they had it all figured out. We were all on the journey to learn what it means to be human.”

Thus, it was only natural that Kerr would be called to classical Christian education where schools form the hearts, minds, bodies, and souls of students. When asked what it was like to join a private school with such an esteemed reputation in the Gallatin Valley, Kerr observed, “Our founder Louise Turner started something really special here. She wanted something richer for her children and saw what was possible. She had a wonderful vision of how to form children.”

Access & Affordability. One common misconception about private schools is that they only educate an elite group of students. By contrast, Kerr said, “our families are not choosing Petra simply because it is private, classical, or Christian. It is because they desire something more. They want their children to delight in truth, goodness, and beauty, to go into the world, and be active civically, active in their churches, and serving the communities that they’re part of.”

We asked how Petra Academy remains accessible to families in spite of being a top performing private school. Kerr responded, “Our goal is to only charge what it costs to educate the children, so we have to be fiscally responsible. But we also try to set tuition so that we can expand the amount of financial aid we offer families.” One way that the Academy reduces tuition costs is by leasing its facility to two churches, which pay to hold services in the auditorium and the library.

Unlike public schools that receive tax-payer funding, the Academy must rely heavily on tuition and the generosity of Montanans. Over nearly three decades of serving students in Bozeman, Petra has built strong relationships throughout the community and with the families of graduates. This philanthropic support is passed along to the Academy’s teachers.

Paying Teachers. “Around 80% of our budget goes toward the salaries and benefits of faculty and staff,” Kerr informed us. We also learned that Petra Academy sets aside an annual target of between 2% and 3% of the budget for professional development, including sending teachers to conferences and shadowing expert teachers at other schools. Justice observed, “We have been fortunate to raise teacher salaries 20% over the past four years. Our community sees the value of investing in the teachers that are investing in their children.”

We asked Justice why Petra Academy has garnered so much support from families, donors, and the community. He said that the Academy is based on the simple premise of truly partnering with parents. He said, “The first questions I ask families when they come on a tour is ‘what’s the single most important indicator of your child’s success in school?’ They’ll say, ‘oh they’ll be able to read well.’ I tell them no, it’s you, the parent.”

Forming the Next Generation. Children learn from adults. They learn by experiencing our virtues, habits, choices, and how we honor our promises. It is not just what we say; it is what they see us do. In a faith-based school, children can learn the importance of commitments to marriage, family, children, church, the natural world, and God. By prioritizing family relationships as central to education, Petra has built a robust network of satisfied parents and students who can go on to live upright lives and give back to their communities. This, in turn, has grown into a wider network of support throughout Montana.

As our time with Justice Kerr came to a close, he shared one last story. “Shortly after I arrived at Petra, a family who had children graduated long before I came made a significant investment in the school. They wanted the school to be around for their grandchildren, and they said they didn’t want to envision a Bozeman without Petra. To be encouraged by a family like that tells us this place matters”

Why Expand Education Freedom? Montanans thrive on liberty. This belief is so important that the century-old statue on top of the state capitol dome is referred to as *Montana, the Goddess of Liberty*. When entrepreneurial educators like Rusty Bowers and Justice Kerr gain the power to lead private schools outside the state education system, it is amazing what they can do to build and shepherd communities.

Such leaders are not just exercising freedom for themselves; they are safeguarding the independence that attracts distinguished teachers and families to their institutions. Both leaders keenly recognize they are serving kids that will go on to live and work in Bozeman, become church members, and contribute to civil society as citizens, volunteers, and benefactors. They are thinking about students 35 years into the future when they are married and raising their own children.

When asked about the future of Montana, Justice Kerr shared a closing thought. “Montana has a way of grabbing your attention with its beauty and its resources. And it demands something of the people who live here. We have a wonderful opportunity for families across the state to think deeply about the communities we live in, how we engage and care for one another. We need to consider how to be stewards of this great place.”

Authors



Benjamin J. Lindquist

Benjamin J. Lindquist is an Executive Partner with Arcadia Education Group. He spent the past 28 years working to strengthen K-12 education for families who lack access to high quality options including 12 years starting and operating public charter schools in low-income

communities and 10 years as an education venture funder. Ben is a published author, researcher, and advocate with a bachelor's degree from St. John's University and the College of St. Benedict in Minnesota as well as an MBA from the Leeds School of Business at the University of Colorado – Boulder. In 2021-2022, he completed 12 courses towards a master's degree in Executive Ministry at Colorado Christian University. He lives in Lakewood, CO, with his wife of 24 years and their 12-year-old son.



Cody R. Bendix

Cody Bendix is a Managing Consultant with Arcadia Education Group. Born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona, he graduated from Arizona State University with a bachelor's degrees in U.S History and Political Sciences. Over the past decade,

Cody has worked with public charter schools and private schools alike running the gamut from classical to fully digital and hybrid programs leading marketing, communications, government affairs, and pioneering new levels of school accountability. Cody lives in Gilbert, Arizona with his wife and son. He is an avid soccer fan and enjoys getting outdoors in the hope of one day completing each section of the Arizona Trail.