

WHY IS MONTANA EXPERIENCING SEVERE TEACHER SHORTAGES?

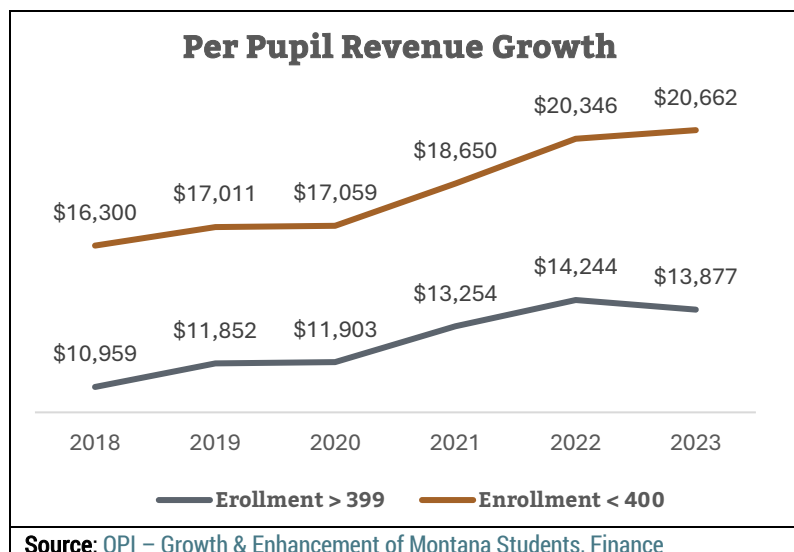
Key Points:

- Classroom teachers hold the most important positions in Montana public schools because they are the ones educating students every day.
- Montana teachers experience persistent low pay and even layoffs despite public school funding steadily increasing the past 6+ years.
- Since 2017, administration costs for Montana public schools have increased by 4.7% while money flowing to instruction has declined by over 6%.
- Recent examples show public school districts are prioritizing budgets for increased administrator salaries while cutting educator positions.
- School administrators are overwhelmingly represented by Montana's public education lobbies compared to teachers, possibly influencing school decisions to prioritize administration over instruction.

For the past two years, media sources have reported that Montana has started the year with as many as 1,000 unfilled teacher positions.¹ These shortages have fueled a political debate around why Montana's public school systems are struggling to find and retain quality teachers.

A 2024 report on Montana by the National Education Association, one of the country's two leading teacher unions, found that starting salaries for new teachers were \$34,476, dead last in the nation. Average salaries are not much better at \$55,909, which places Montana at 42nd of all 50 states.²

Low public school funding is one of the primary arguments being made for the teacher shortage in Montana. Yet as the chart to the right illustrates, per pupil revenue has been rising steadily for the past five years across public schools of all sizes.



For this month's article, we take a closer look at why classroom teachers are paid so little when public school revenues are rising so much. Sadly, what we find is that Montana's public education establishment – the state associations of administrators, business officers, and school board members – appear to be acting in their own self-interest instead of doing what's best for kids, families, and communities.

¹ [Montana May See 1,000 Teacher Vacancies Leading into 2023-24 School Year](#)

² [National Education Association - Educator Pay Data 2024](#)

Troubling trends in Montana public education.

In past months of this series, we have pointed out that student achievement in Montana has been trending downwards for the past 12 years. In our April 2024 article, we showed that public school enrollment has only increased by 2% since 2018 while public school funding has increased by 27% over the past five years.

Despite more money going to public schools, spending on classroom instruction, which includes teacher salaries, has declined. By contrast, more and more money is being spent on administration, including higher administrator salaries and more system administrators who are not instructing students. Since 2017, administration costs have increased by 4.7% while money flowing to the classroom has declined by over 6%.

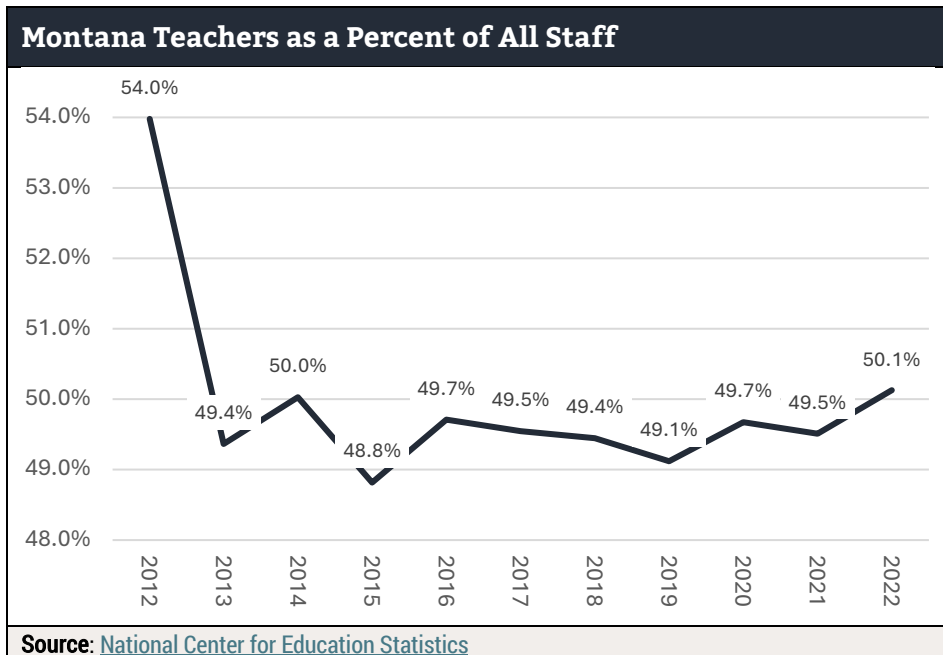
In fact, as the chart illustrates, the number of Montana school administrators now outnumbers the number of classroom teachers. For seven consecutive years, from 2015 to 2021, non-instructional administrators and staff made up the majority of jobs in Montana's public education system.

Montana Public School Spending	
Finance Type	Change 2017-23
General Administration	+ 4.7%
Instruction	- 6.2%

Source: [OPI – Growth & Enhancement of Montana Students, Finance](#)

Teachers are not prioritized.

Obviously administrative jobs pay more than classroom teaching, but in the case of Montana, administrators can make between three and five times more depending on the district.



With average per pupil funding at approx. \$14,451 during the 2023-24 school year, a classroom of 25 students in Montana received around \$361,275 in funding. If the NEA report is accurate and the teacher is new to teaching, that teacher's salary represents only 9.5%. Even the average teacher salary in Montana of \$55,909 is only 15.4% of the total funding for a class of 25 students.

Between 85.6% and 90.5% of funding is going somewhere else.³

³ [Frontier Institute - Are Montana Schools Underfunded or Underperforming?](#)

More frustrating for teachers is that, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, average annual salary of teachers in Montana public schools has dropped 9.9% between 2009 and 2021.⁴ While teachers were making an average of \$53,628 for the 2021-22 school year, administrators (not including superintendents) in Montana's AA school districts were making between \$72,000 and \$138,000 that same school year.

In the Helena Public Schools, a 2022 review of salaries revealed that administrators were paid between \$25,000 to \$70,000 more than at similar districts. This was the result of a 30% increase to administrator salaries, while at the same time teachers received only a 2% raise. When the district tried to revise the pay scale for administrators it projected that the highest paid teacher would make \$86,351 while the lowest paid administrator, a middle school assistant principal, will make \$104,000.

Still as the chart indicates, even average salary ranges for administrative positions across Montana's largest districts remain considerably higher than the average teacher pay.⁵

2021-2022 Administrator Salary Ranges		
Position	Helena Public Schools	Other AA Districts
Elementary School Principal	\$98,646 - \$111,000	\$89,600 - \$128,268
Middle School Asst. Principal	\$96,500 - \$109,474	\$89,101 - \$107,008
Middle School Principal	\$115,999 - \$131,999	\$104,373 - \$121,889
High School Asst. Principal	\$98,646 - \$109,474	\$92,735 - \$117,826
High School Principal	\$120,000 - \$140,000	\$105,445 - \$130,271
Director of Activities	\$147,351	\$88,000 - \$122,850
Director of Special Education	\$147,352	\$94,441 - \$124,451
Director of Curriculum	\$152,529	\$88,932 - \$122,850
Director of Facilities	\$152,529	\$82,000 - \$125,000
Director of Information Technology	\$136,997	\$72,270 - \$122,850
Director of Human Resources	\$151,320	\$92,762 - \$131,575
Director of Finance	\$156,000	\$85,689 - \$131,575
Elementary School Asst. Superintendent	\$139,880	\$114,058 - \$138,786
High School Asst. Superintendent	\$153,920	\$114,058 - \$138,786
Chief of Staff	\$156,000	N/A
Superintendent	\$172,500	\$160,000 - \$184,050
Source: Helena school board approves new administrative pay scale		

Now, as many of Montana's largest districts face budget shortfalls, it is their teachers that face the brunt of layoffs. Despite the annual state budget for public education being at the highest it has ever been, almost \$1.3 billion⁶, some of Montana's largest school districts are laying off dozens of teachers.

In Missoula, the County Public Schools trustees voted to terminate the contracts of 47 educators.⁷ In Helena, over 50 teachers were laid off at the end of the 2023-24 school year.⁸ Yet, sitting atop Montana's school districts, and at the highest end of the pay scale, are the board appointed superintendents.

⁴ [National Center for Education Statistics](#)

⁵ [Helena school board approves new administrative pay scale](#)

⁶ [OPI – Growth & Enhancement of Montana Students, Finance](#)

⁷ [Missoula County Public Schools cuts 47 teaching positions](#)

⁸ [Helena School Board lays off over 50 teachers](#)

Highly paid superintendents.

According to a public directory through the Office of Public Instruction, there are 247 district superintendents overseeing Montana's 395 school districts. And as the sample table shows, their salaries are generally based on the size of the school system.

However, among Montana's eight largest districts, their base salaries total over \$1.2 million per year.

This baseline total does not include benefits or additional compensation, as is the case for Billings' new superintendent who also gets 13.5% of his base salary each year for a total of \$209,000.¹²

Overall, the salaries of Montana's superintendents are not readily shared with the public, except in very few cases.

Superintendent Base Salaries		
School	Enrollment	Salaries
Forsyth Public Schools	287	\$90,000 - \$100,000 ⁹
Lincoln School District	150	\$65,000 - \$85,000 ¹⁰
Whitefish School District	1,952	\$140,000 ¹¹
Belgrade Public Schools	3,484	\$165,000
Billings Public Schools	17,150	\$205,000
Bozeman Public Schools	7,547	\$185,000
Butte Public Schools	4,421	\$184,478
Kalispell Public Schools	6,346	\$172,530
Great Falls Public Schools	10,441	\$170,000
Helena Public Schools	8,016	\$172,500
Missoula Public Schools	9,497	\$190,000

Eight Largest Districts

So, to give us a conservative estimate of the total cost of district superintendents salaries, we first grouped them into three categories based on the number of students in Montana's 395 school districts. Around 84% of these superintendents are likely managing districts with less than 500 students, 13% serve in districts with 500 – 2,000 students, and finally 4% lead districts with over 2,000 students.

Based on the reported salaries for Montana's eight largest districts and job postings for rural district superintendent positions, the following table puts forward an estimate of base salaries and the total annual cost for the state.

Enrollment	Superintendents	Estimated Salary	Total Cost
2,000+	9	\$165,000	\$1,485,000
500 – 2,000	32	\$100,000	\$3,200,000
Less than 500	207	\$85,000	\$17,595,000
TOTAL			\$22,280,000

By this estimation, the base salaries of Montana's 247 district level superintendents are costing taxpayers over \$22 million per year.

Why are administrators paid so much more?

Although state law and regulations require schools to account for their spending, it is not generally the responsibility of the Montana legislature to tell public schools how to spend their money. Some of the funding is designated for specific areas like special education and services for at-risk students, but a majority goes into the district's general fund. From there, the money can be spent however they choose and as we have shown, very little is going to teachers.

⁹ [Superintendent of Forsyth Public Schools Job Description](#)

¹⁰ [Lincoln Public Schools Superintendent Job Description](#)

¹¹ [Whitefish School District Interim Superintendent Employment Contract](#)

¹² [Bozeman school board approves superintendent contract](#)

Still, Montana has several membership associations and advocacy groups calling for legislators and taxpayers to increase school funding as a way to increase teacher salaries.

There are three main associations that represent the interests of Montana's public schools: the School Administrators of Montana (SAM), the Montana School Boards Association (MTSBA), and the Montana Federation of Public Employees (MFPE). Only the MFPE, backed by the National Education Association, seeks to directly represent the interest of Montana's public school teachers.

The leadership of these three organizations, along with 15 other school administrators, sit on the board of the Montana Quality Education Coalition, one of the state's largest advocacy organizations.¹³ The MQEC has a clear agenda to oppose education freedom while calling for increased funding.

And if we look at the increase in per pupil funding over the past six years, they should be very pleased.

However, we can only interpret their intentions by their actions. And in the case of MQEC and the administration of Montana's school districts, their actions have led to a rising number of non-teaching staff, rock-bottom salaries for teachers, the high rates of pay for administrators, and an ongoing teacher shortage, not to mention declining academic outcomes.

Even amid this new reality and the ongoing challenges, organizations like the MQEC continue to oppose anything that may change the status quo.

The relentless lobby for more money.

It is a case of "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Recently, Montanans went to the ballot box to elect their local school board of trustees and to vote on mill-levies to increase school funding. These elected governing board and local control over taxes to fund schools are often cited as critical levers for accountability and local control over education.

Under the leadership of their elected governing boards, Great Falls¹⁴, Kalispell¹⁵, Billings¹⁶, Bozeman, and Missoula¹⁷ School have all hired new superintendents in the last two years. In the case of Great Falls, it was the Montana School Boards Association that conducted the search and placed the incoming superintendent.¹⁸

After facing a 21% median increase to property taxes between 2022 and 2023 with little to show in the way of improved outcomes, voters are now hesitating to simply give schools more money.¹⁹ Voters in Helena, Billings, and Belgrade rejected levies outright. However, in Missoula, voters approved three of four levies, yet the district still laid off 47 teachers.

¹³ [Montana Quality Education Coalition Board of Directors](#)

¹⁴ [New superintendent announced for Great Falls Public Schools](#)

¹⁵ [Matt Jensen selected Kalispell Schools superintendent](#)

¹⁶ [Board votes to hire Edwin Garcia as new Billings School superintendent](#)

¹⁷ [MCPS board approves contract for new superintendent](#)

¹⁸ [GFPS approves salary range for superintendent search](#)

¹⁹ [Montana large district levy results 2024](#)

Authors



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