

LOCAL CONTROL IS FAILING MONTANA EDUCATION

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Key Points

- The signs of Montana education's poor performance are both widespread and alarming.
- In our research, it is not evident that district school boards are raising alarms about declining performance or asserting local control.
- At least six major obstacles prevent school boards from providing effective oversight.
- In the absence of local control, state associations are advancing a powerful monopoly agenda.
- Local control can be restored by giving parents school choice, which allows them to "vote with their feet".

An Unmet Goal.

Section 1 of Article X of the Montana Constitution states, "It is the goal of the people to establish a system of education which will develop the full educational potential of each person. Equality of educational opportunity is guaranteed to each person of the state" ([source](#)).

Over the course of our monthly series, we have found clear evidence that, across the board, K-12 education in Montana is losing alarming ground relative to this Constitutional goal. Specifically:

- [In a 2023 comparison](#), Montana ranked 6th of 8 states in the Northwest region on the *U.S. News and World Report's* review of performance from childcare through college readiness.
- Depending on the subject, [between 54% and 67% of 11th graders did not reach the benchmark for college readiness](#) on the ACT in the 2022-23 year.
- From 2011 to 2022, [the percentage of 8th grade students scoring proficient decreased by 8% and 10% in Reading and Math, respectively on the Nation's Report Card](#).
- Montana is experiencing unacceptable teacher turnover and severe teacher shortages, [in part because of the low salaries being paid](#).

As these findings demonstrate, Montana education is showing widespread signs of decline even though, as we examined in our April 2024 article, [public funding has been steadily increasing](#) at a clip that should support high levels of performance.

The System of Local Control.

Montana has 400 school districts, which oversee 821 schools serving approximately 148,585 students.¹ According to a directory maintained by the Office of Public Instruction, these districts are governed by 293 different school boards of trustees.²

The individuals elected to these boards are granted significant constitutional authority to govern local districts effectively. This authority includes hiring and firing leadership, overseeing the budget process, setting academic

¹ [OPI: Growth and Enhancement of Montana Students](#)

² [OPI Reporting Center - School Directory](#)

standards, ensuring the quality of the teachers, curriculum, and programs, as well as other powers to “establish and maintain the educational program of the schools of the district...”³

Ideally, local public schools in every Montana district would be accountable to voters through their publicly elected board of trustees. These boards should govern schools to meet the unique needs of their communities and demand improvement when schools are not performing.

If the system of local control works as it should, K-12 education in a place like Lewistown, where agriculture, construction, and manufacturing are growing industries⁴, would look different than in a city like Billings. Even between Billings and Missoula, Montana’s two largest cities, school models, curriculum, and career pathways could be designed with the particular priorities and needs of the population in mind. It all comes down to the local schools doing what is in the best interest of their community.

Why Aren’t School Boards Working?

When they are elected, incoming board members often have good intentions. But all too frequently, they are set up to fail by how meeting business gets conducted and the broader conditions under which they serve.

For instance, school board trustees routinely receive meeting packets, which exceed 50+ pages, with only 48 hours to prepare. During meetings, they are asked to approve district-wide policies that impact budgets, hiring, teacher salaries, and classroom instruction. Trustees feel pressured to “rubber stamp” model policies provided by state organizations like the Montana School Board Association (more on the MTSBA later) or to simply act in compliance with state and district regulations.

All too often, the effect of such “local control” is standardization far above and beyond what the state requires. One example is the pay for new teachers across Montana school districts. A 2024 report found that average entry-level salaries were \$45,000 among large AA districts and \$39,400 in small C districts. That is a difference of \$5,600.⁵

Yet, as the chart below shows, reported per pupil spending and enrollment differs greatly between AA and C districts. In fact, some districts are receiving over double the funding that others receive.

District	Class	Enrollment	2023 Per Pupil Spending
Bozeman High School District	AA	2,736	\$18,651
Great Falls High School District	AA	3,064	\$11,139
Culbertson High School District	C	91	\$23,920
Savage High School District	C	35	\$39,413

Source: [OPI: Growth and Enhancement of Montana Students](#)

With such a huge variation in funding, we can assume that school boards should be able to pay teachers far more in districts with high funding than in districts with low funding. Yet what we see is that the average starting salaries for new teacher differs by only \$5,600 whether they are teaching in rural eastern Montana or in the state’s largest cities. This begs the question whether school boards and districts are using their local control to allocate resources that reflect such realities as funding, enrollment, cost-of-living, and student populations.

³ [Montana Code Annotated 2023](#)

⁴ [Lewistown celebrates as manufacturing company plans \\$90M investment](#)

⁵ [Montana Teacher Compensation Report 2024](#)

The conclusion is simple – local control has taken a back seat to statewide membership associations, which are not fulfilling the Montana Constitution’s goal to “develop the full educational potential of each person.”

Obstacles to Local Authority.

We have identified six major obstacles that prevent school boards from exercising local control over education and pushing forward the meaningful improvements of districts.

1. **Volunteers.** School board trustees run for election but do not need to meet job qualifications and are unpaid. Frequently, then, there is a mismatch between who gets elected and who is best equipped to serve.
2. **Red Tape.** School boards are charged with ensuring compliance with federal, state, and district regulations, which make it impossible to set direction independently or to make the first priority representing the changing preferences and needs of their voters.
3. **Turnover.** Trustees typically serve only 3-year terms, which is not anywhere near long enough to operate with the benefit of sufficient knowledge or walk their districts through meaningful cycles of improvement.
4. **Voter Disengagement.** Most voters do not have the time, interest, or resources to engage in school board elections unless they are part of a special interest group like a teachers’ union affiliate or a disgruntled group of parents.
5. **Scarcity of Expertise.** If every one of the 293 school boards had a minimum of 5 highly qualified members, the state public school system would require that 1,465 trustees get elected and/or reelected every 3 years. In many rural areas and small towns, such education expertise is in scarce supply.
6. **Dependence on State Associations.** Trustees do not have the authority, resources, or wherewithal to operate independently of Montana’s state education associations, which heavily influence whether or not they get elected in the first place.

Let’s explore each of these six major obstacles in greater depth –

1. Volunteers.

Montana state law states that “members of the trustees of any district may not receive compensation for their services as trustees...”⁶ The state also requires that school boards meet at least quarterly, but meetings can be as frequent as monthly for some districts.⁷ Depending on the agenda and the levels of engagement from members and the community, such meetings can last one to two hours.

At minimum, board members should expect to volunteer between four to twelve hours each year in meetings along. However, this does not include the time to review the previous mentioned board materials that can be more than 50 pages so they can make informed decisions on complex issues like the school budgets, collective bargaining, and academic quality.

⁶ [MCA 2023 - 20-3-311](#)

⁷ [MCA 2023 - 20-3-322](#)

It goes without saying that the level of commitment required to serve on boards effectively can be daunting. As volunteers, many of these trustees are likely balancing their duties with full- or part-time employment and other commitments. The greater the trustee's professional qualifications, the more likely they are to be juggling many personal, professional, and charitable commitments.

Unfortunately, this combination of factors means that the pool of candidates interested in seeking school board roles is small. Successful business executives, civil society leaders, influential philanthropists, and even non-profit directors are unlikely to run for office because they simply do not have the time for such a commitment.

2. Red Tape.

State and federal laws, regulations, administrative rules, and reporting requirements placed on public schools are no less than overwhelming. District schools are governed by 32 chapters of Montana laws but must also comply with federal laws under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Adding to this, the Secretary of State's office set forth hundreds of administrative rules that districts must abide by to remain in compliance. These are in addition to the policies that school boards inherit and must modify as they serve in active governance of their districts.

Take for example Chapter 53 of Title 10, which contains twelve sub-chapters on content standards, each with between four and seventeen policies relating to math, reading, writing, PE, social studies, arts, science, computer sciences, and career education. Chapter 55, which outlines school accreditation, has 18 chapters with sub-chapters that contain up to 20 different policies.

Adhering to academic, operational, and financial compliance standards is required for district schools to receive funding from the state. Ensuring compliance is the highest priority for local boards and district leaders that wish to ensure that they are getting all available local, state, and federal funding.

This expansive scope and burden to maintain compliance from one year to the next fundamentally constrains local boards from exercising their powers to affect real change within districts. One misstep could jeopardize essential funding, which motivates board members to avoid taking any risks.

3. Turnover.

Change does not happen overnight, or even within the three-year term of an elected school board trustee. Because there is no guarantee of reelection, trustees often prioritize objectives that can be accomplished with this short runway. Incoming boards members also inherit a sitting superintendent, who was typically recruited by the Montana School Boards Association. Unfortunately, too many superintendents claim their hands are tied by too many regulations and a lack of funding at the state and local levels.

The most achievable impact a board member can hope to have, especially within a three year term, is to increase funding by raising local taxes instead of exploring more substantive solutions.⁸ In effect, short terms narrow the agenda of local school boards to serving as cheerleaders for more funding rather than pursuing greater efficiency, effectiveness, and performance among the schools under their charge.

4. Voter Disengagement.

Unlike most elections, school board elections in Montana happen every year. Because they take place in May instead of November, they occur out of sync with state and federal elections.

⁸ [Montana school levies put spotlight on budget shortfalls, pocketbooks, funding formulas](#)

For example, in Yellowstone County where Billings is located, voter turnout for the 2022 school board election was limited to 39,900 residents or 37% of all eligible voters.⁹ By contrast, in that same year, voter turnout for the general election was 58% with over 61,000 citizens casting ballots.

Since 2018, voter turnout in general elections has ranged from 61 to 81% with the highest rates occurring during presidential races.¹⁰ Voter turnout for school board elections remains a fraction of general elections. Unfortunately, such low turnout means that school board elections are susceptible to special interests driven by spending from outside lobbying groups and education associations.

5. Scarcity of Expertise.

Montana law enumerates thirty powers and duties to local school boards of trustees. This expansive scope of authority takes school boards from high-level governing entities to working boards with granular roles and responsibilities.

To exercise their power effectively and run an exceptional school district requires that board members have an equally expansive breadth of expertise. Below, the chart provides a brief outline of the various areas board members are expected to manage. Many school boards simply lack the necessary expertise to execute their governance role.

Essential Functions	Core Academics	Ancillary Functions
Human resources	Standards alignment	Real estate acquisition
Talent sourcing	Scope & sequence	Facilities development
Superintendent oversight	Curricula selection & integration	Fundraising
Professional development	Lesson planning & delivery	Maintenance & custodial
Regulatory compliance	Formative assessment	Strategic partnerships
Finance	Summative assessment	Transportation
Asset management	School evaluation	Nutrition & food service
Business planning	Extracurricular programming	Physical & mental health
Risk management	Athletic programs	Postsecondary counseling
School culture	Special education	Crisis management
Board governance & policy	Behavior	Community relations
Marketing & public relations	Instructional coaching	Safety & security systems
Enrollment & parent relations	Registrar, records, transcripts	Emergency response

Finding such individuals with the necessary experience and expertise to serve on a single board would be a challenge, let alone filling 293 boards with qualified volunteers.

Because of these obstacles, local school boards are not in a strong position to hold the superintendents that they hire and oversee accountable for effective management. In most cases, they retain the Montana School Boards

⁹ [Curtain falls on high-profile school board elections](#)

¹⁰ [Secretary of State Voter Turnout](#)

Association to help them hire superintendents, who understand that – right from the get-go – their job was provided by the most powerful state education association.

6. Dependence on State Associations.

With nearly 300 school boards, the disparate needs of local districts get subsumed by larger interest groups. There are three ‘master’ state umbrella organizations that, together, convene and dictate the agenda for public education in Montana:

- The Montana School Boards Association (MTSBA), which represents school boards of trustees and helps develop board policies, offers training, and most importantly provides candidates to serve as district superintendents.
- School Administrators of Montana (SAM), a membership association that represents school and district level administrators.
- Montana Federation of Public Employees (MFPE), a state extension of the American Federation of Teachers and Montana’s largest union dedicated to public employees.

All three organizations come together to lobby jointly as the Montana Quality Education Coalition (MQEC). Their primary objective has been to increase school funding and while they have been successful in this, as we have seen already, much of this money goes to an increasing number of administrators instead of going to the teachers and schools.¹¹ Teacher salaries remain among the lowest in the nation and academic outcomes continue to decline.

Despite having little to show families over the past decade, the MQEC will oppose any change to the status quo, which now includes opposing independent charter schools. Even though Montana voters are increasingly calling for changes to K-12 education, any chance of local solutions to local challenges gets lost in the singular statewide agenda of these powerful associations.



Waiting for Change.

Under the Community Choice Schools Act passed in 2023, meaningful change to K-12 education could take hold if the state allows independently operated schools to be formed in Montana outside of districts. Unlike district schools, Community Choice Schools have the autonomy and flexibility to perform because they are exempted from large portions of state education code. Because these schools are only funded for the students they serve and have no authority to levy taxes to cover budget shortfalls, if families are not satisfied, the school must change and improve, or it will close.

¹¹ <https://frontierinstitute.org/reports/why-is-montana-experiencing-severe-teacher-shortages/>

In this way, Community Choice Schools are accountable to the individuals that matter most in education, children and families. Until Montana creates opportunities for families to “vote with their feet” by choosing the best schools for their children, local control of education will remain out of reach.

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