



WHAT CAN THE ARIZONA CARDINALS TEACH MONTANA ABOUT EDUCATION?

Takeaways from Yearlong Series

Key Takeaways

- Montana education is mediocre and has been declining since at least 2011 on The Nation's Report Card and other important achievement measures.
- Decades of focus on improving public school districts has not stopped this decline nor yielded results for Montana's rising generation even with steady funding increases.
- The existing education establishment has not, is not, and cannot meet changing family, student, community, and employer needs without growth in parent choice, innovation, and competition.
- After the 2023 Session, attempts to give parents more choices, like access to ESAs and charter schools, were blocked by powerful interest groups that benefit from monopoly control.
- Montana's Legislature is introducing a new paradigm where parents and educators are freed from over-regulation and encouraged to do what is best for students and communities.
- Expanding education freedom will require many years of growing markets and supportive laws, but continuing along the current path – pouring more money and regulation into a monopoly – can only multiply mediocrity and failure.

Lessons from the NFL

The Arizona Cardinals got their start in Chicago. They joined the NFL in September 1920. While in Chicago, the team won two national championships, one in 1925 and a second in 1947.

Since then, the Cardinals moved to St. Louis and then to Arizona without winning another championship or Super Bowl. Today, the Cardinals football team is experiencing the longest championship drought in North America at 77 years and running.¹

Still, 12 other teams have yet to win the Super Bowl. Depending on the season, the Cardinals are hardly the worst team in the NFL. But is mediocrity good enough for the fans that root them on every season? Of course not. Fans want to see their team progress toward being the best in the nation. When their teams lose for years, they demand new players, coaches, and even management.

Yet when it comes to K-12 education, we tolerate poor, declining performance decade after decade. Critics are told that they are disloyal to public education. Too often, the only time that there is a change in management is when a public funding referendum fails, a public scandal is too ugly to ignore, or a superintendent retires.

This is the position in which Montana finds itself. Over the course of our 12-part series, we have determined that K-12 education system in the Treasure State is mediocre – in a state of long-term decline. In fact, Montana K-12 education ranks 27th in the nation according to the most recent US News & World Report rankings.²

¹ [Longest Championship Droughts](#)

² [US News & World Report Education Rankings](#)

Here are a few of our takeaways that stand out the most:

- Montana shows a significant long-term decline in both Reading and Mathematics outcomes on the NAEP assessment dating back to at least 2011.
- Over a decade after adopting the ACT as its statewide high school assessment, a large majority of students still do not meet the benchmark scores for college success.
- Since 2018, total enrollment in Montana public schools only increased by 2% but funding grew by 27%.
- Since 2017, administrative costs for Montana public schools have increased by 4.7% while money going to instruction has declined by over 6%.
- According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the average annual salary of teachers in Montana public schools dropped 10% from 2009 to 2021.
- Local control through elected school boards is overwhelmingly dependent on the advice and counsel of statewide interest groups, which are completely unaccountable to parents.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Many of these red flags have not gone unnoticed. There have been efforts to repair Montana's declining K-12 education system and even introduce school choice. Among the hundreds of bills considered each year, several promising initiatives passed. Here are five recent examples:

1. Teacher Recruitment & Retention.

In 2021 the state legislature passed a bill incentivizing local school districts to increase salaries for teachers in their first three years. In 2023, those incentives were expanded to include educators with provisional licenses working toward full certification.³ Montana made it easier for retired teachers to return to work without risking their pensions and even extended eligibility for student loan assistance to newly hired teachers.⁴

Why it's not working: Funding for public schools has reached all-time highs, yet money is still not trickling down to the classroom. Instead, precious funds are spent on administration and facility costs. When districts are not accountable for student learning, they do not allocate their resources to teachers and classrooms. Thus, the state is experiencing severe teacher shortages every August.

2. Expanding Open Enrollment.

In 2023, Montana altered its open enrollment policies. Parents no longer have to pay tuition to send their child to a school outside of their assigned district. The cost of educating a student in a different district remains with the district where the family resides. Because the funding is tied to property taxes, essentially the sending district now has to pay the receiving district the cost for educating open-enrolled students.

Why it's not working: The sending district must now issue a non-voted levy on their own taxpayers to cover the cost for open enrollment students. These changes don't fix the problem because funding practices remain unnecessarily complicated and insensitive to families' needs. Instead of encouraging families to find the school that works best for their children, Montana's open enrollment policies increase the overall price to educate transferring students while generating distrust and confusion.⁵

³ [Montana Free Press - 2023 Capitol Tracker](#)

⁴ [Legislature tees up big changes for public schools](#)

⁵ [Frontier Institute - They are all our children](#)

3. Private School Choice Expansion.

In 2015, Montana enacted a tax-credit scholarship program. The program allows individuals and corporations to claim a 100% tax credit for contributions to approved student scholarship organizations (SSOs), nonprofits that provide scholarships for private school and tutoring.⁶ The cap on annual scholarships was recently increased from \$2 million to \$5 million.

Why it's not working. Total scholarships cannot exceed \$5 million annually. Thirteen of the 14 student scholarship organizations (SSO's) only provide scholarships to one school and implement their own eligibility rules. These scholarship restrictions and single school SSOs greatly prevent the program from offering meaningful choice to a cross-section of Montana families.

According to EdChoice, only 1,050 students took advantage of tax-credit scholarships during the 2022-23 school year with the average scholarship being \$2,190. Despite raising the statewide cap, this program could only serve 2,283 students, just 1.3% of all Montana students.⁷ Additionally, this limited access is not significant enough to spur the growth of private education providers, leaving few seats for students with scholarships.

4. District Charter Schools.

Montana's HB549 allows school districts to offer charter schools, meaning these schools will operate under the management of the local district while having some flexibility. The intent is to provide new programs to address students' academic, career, and behavioral needs within their communities while maintaining district control.

Why it's not working. In October 2023, the Montana Board of Public Education received 25 applications from district schools to organize programs as charter schools. These programs fall under the same regulations and will be managed by the same district system that many families want to escape. Why should Montana expect different outcomes from district schools by another name?

Five of the 25 districts are proposing new charters for students they are struggling to serve, including refugees, students at-risk of dropping out, and students with disabilities. The obvious question is whether starting new schools brings new solutions to the table or simply segregates these underserved populations into 'separate but unequal' settings.⁸

5. Community Choice Schools

HB562 allows for Community Choice Schools to be authorized by an independent Charter Commission, which provides greater autonomy than local school districts. These independent charter schools would operate outside the traditional district system, thus fostering innovation, competition, and a diversity of options.

Why it's not being allowed to work. The legality of Community Choice Schools is being challenged by the Montana Quality Education Coalition, a partnership between Montana's teacher union, school board association, and school administrators association. An injunction has been placed to stop independent charter schools from being established and serving students for the 2024-25 school year. Thus, school districts remain the only public school option in Montana.

⁶ [EdChoice - Montana Tax Credit Scholarship](#)

⁷ [EdChoice - Montana Tax Credit Scholarship](#)

⁸ [Frontier Institute - Dawn of education freedom in Montana](#)

6. Education Savings Accounts.

The Special Needs Equal Opportunity Education Savings Account (ESA) gives families with special needs students a savings account with up to \$8,000 to spend on education services and resources. Eligible students must have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and be qualified as a “child with disabilities.” The student must also have attended public school in the previous school year or be newly eligible to attend public school in Montana.

Why it's not working: Prior to the ESA law being passed, many families were already paying out of pocket for education programs and services outside of the district school system. The ESA law purposely excludes families that have already switched out of public schools before the law was passed, reducing accessibility. The state received 43 applications, 23 met the eligibility requirements but only 19 contracts were signed.

Education Freedom in Montana

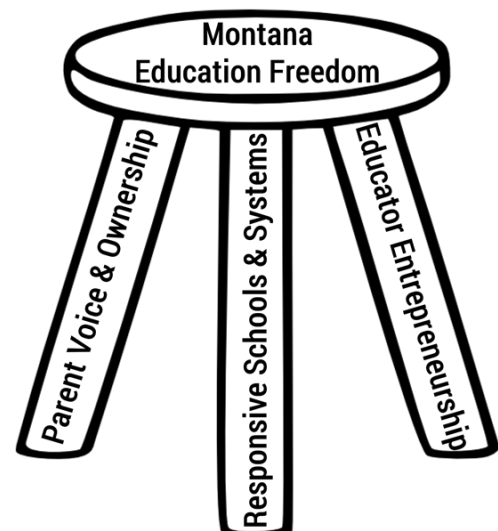
The future of Montana education cannot be more of the same where school choice is restricted by family income, stifling regulations, and monolithic administrator associations. Education freedom in Montana must be responsive to the needs and preferences of Montanans. However, moving towards such a future depends on a significant shift in mindset and regulatory realities.

In the 1980's, the widely accepted framework to improve the nation's school systems prioritized a combination of state standards, accountability, and school choice. Each acted as one leg of a stool to support the improvement of heavily standardized, uniform systems of public education. Many states enacted rigorous standards and criterion-referenced exams to evaluate student learning. Interventions were staged in low-performing districts including closing failing schools. School choice, beginning with open enrollment laws and public charter schools, was permitted in many states because it was still subjected to state standards and accountability systems.

Under the Federal *No Child Left Behind* and the *Every Student Succeeds Acts*, the U.S. Department of Education funded, supported, and encouraged these reforms. Student achievement increased across many states and cities. In the Mountain West region, those states that embraced these measures – such as Arizona, Colorado, and Utah – have experienced widespread growth. Unfortunately, other states in the region – such as Montana, Oregon, and Washington – have remained stagnant because of entrenched resistance. These states, which now rank among the bottom in the region, took steps to protect their public schools from change rather than expanding parent choice, innovation, and competition.

For Montana, building the momentum to improve will require adopting an education freedom paradigm. Under this paradigm, Montanans must embrace a new three-legged stool that prioritizes: (1) parent voice and ownership; (2) educator entrepreneurship; and (3) responsive schools and systems. To support this paradigm, the state legislature must take bold action so that parents can begin to exercise more choices and educators gain the entrepreneurial initiative and freedom to serve students and communities outside district systems.

Let's unpack each leg of the stool more deeply.



1. **Parent Voice & Ownership.** Over the past 40 years, the school-age population has become extraordinarily diverse nationwide. Today, most parents actively choose schools that meet their children's individual needs – that are responsive to their aptitudes, gifts, talents, disabilities, family values, and household realities. Education freedom is supported by providing parents with access to quality choices and trusting them to secure the learning resources their children need.
2. **Responsive Schools & Systems.** To meet the changing needs of students and families, schools must transition away from one-size-fits-all and towards being more responsive and specialized. In high performing states, this transition is being accomplished through open enrollment, micro-schools, online programs, home school co-ops, charter schools, magnet schools, and education savings account (ESA) programs. Instead of requiring that every school be uniform and standardized, states and districts encourage them to deliver distinct, quality options to meet the needs and preferences of different learners and families.
3. **Educator Entrepreneurship.** Just as we trust parents to choose, education freedom must extend to educators themselves. By giving entrepreneurial educators the opportunity to design and launch their own programs, we can tap their vision, expertise, and ingenuity. Instead of forcing them to use the same daily schedule and input-based accreditation methods, we can empower them to design flexible models that best match the students and communities they are serving.

The great virtue in building an education freedom landscape is that it is dynamic and ever improving. With personal agency, parents and educators will be motivated to improve teaching-and-learning through choice, innovation, and competition, no longer captive to assignments within mediocre school systems.

So, which is it? Montanans can learn from the NFL and make changes in players, playbooks, management, and ownership. Or Montanans can continue to take the same monopoly approach that has proven to result in unimpressive, declining outcomes. We encourage you to learn from the Arizona Cardinals.

Authors



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