



MFPE Members and the School Funding Interim Commission: A Study in Organized Action

Prepared by MFPE Public Policy & Research Director Kim Popham
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A Note from MFPE President Melissa Romano



Two years ago, MFPE members at the Annual Conference passed a New Business Item committing our union to leading work around the School Funding Interim Commission.

Well, it's over (in a good way)!! **The School Funding Interim Commission had its final meeting on August 13th and have forwarded over \$200 million of new school funding recommendations to the governor and 2027 Legislature.** Over the last 15 months, MFPE members helped commissioners tackle a huge amount of good work.

We now have the clearest, data-driven financial picture of how much additional investment is required from the State of Montana to meet our uphold our students' rights. As one of the twenty commissioners, I want to give an extra special shout out to our other fellow MFPE members Sen. Sara Novak and Rep. Eric Matthews for their immense efforts.

I know the three of us were so proud to stand with each and every one of you. Together, MFPE members have taken time out of busy schedules to write comments, attend town halls with commissioners, and testify in person and over Zoom. **It makes a huge difference for the commission to hear directly from those of you directly impacted by this work.**

MFPE Director of Public Policy & Research Kim Popham was there—standing with you—over the past 15 months. She's produced the following report, and I encourage you to take some time to read through it.

To be clear, securing needed funding is not guaranteed. The SFIC recommendations will be competing with the governor's wishlist items of tax breaks for the top 20% of households and possibly universal school vouchers. **It will take every MFPE member to make sure Montana continues to do right by students, parents, families, and all of us.**

Here's to a hopeful fight for the future!

Melissa

Melissa Romano
MFPE President

INTRODUCTION

As a former educator of 28 years in Montana's Public Schools, I understand the impact the lack of state funding has on classrooms and educators across the state.

This work is personal to me; I know without a doubt MFPE members continue to innovate and provide a high-quality education for Montana's students despite the fact that many of us are working extra jobs, buying our own supplies, and working in buildings which may be falling down around you.

I am proud of the work we accomplished—by using our voices and experiences—over the past 15 months. Work that was defined by two key phases, one surrounding what it takes for students to succeed and the second on what resources Montana needs to allocate. As always, reach out to me at kpopham@mfpe.org with any questions, suggestions, or ideas on how to win your local legislators' vote for public education.

-KP

PHASE I: WHAT MONTANA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM SHOULD LOOK LIKE

The commission started their work by establishing the Innovation and Excellence in Education Working Group (IEEWG) as outlined in **HB 153 (FOUND HERE)** from the 2025 session. They spent several months examining characteristics of successful school systems with the help of The National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) to consult and lead their discussions.

The discussions were based on the **NCEE's Blueprint – Designing Systems That Work (FOUND HERE)**. NCEE compared the education policies of Montana to policies of high performing systems both domestically and internationally and developed recommendations to adapt the policies of those high performing systems to Montana's public education system. In the course of this work, they learned about the challenges facing our public schools as well as hearing about the amazing work our schools are doing to support the future of Montana: our students.

During this phase, YOU showed up. The commission heard directly from MFPE members through in-person, Zoom, and written testimony, as well as through panel discussions where members were invited to share their expertise and experiences at the table.

One panel focused on what is working in early learning and/or preparing students for graduation and policies that are constraining our efforts. Lance Edward, English teacher and Billings Education President, Val Pachl, Special Education teacher and Miles City Education Association President, and Liz Deshner, School Psychologist and Belgrade Education Association member participated in this panel. The commission also looked to award-winning MFPE members, Catherine Matthews (Bozeman), Linda Rost (Baker), and Jake Warner (Helena), to learn how to ensure we have high capacity, forward-looking educators for Montana's students. **As Phase I progressed, the commission began to develop a shared vision for what Montana students should know and be able to do by the time they graduate from a public school.**



PHASE II: WHAT SHOULD BE FUNDED, MFPE MEMBERS SHOWED UP, & WHAT THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDED

Once the Phase I work was complete, the commission was presented with a **final report (FOUND HERE)** from NCEE. The report included recommendations focused on four topics: Transforming Teaching, Early Learning, Pathways to Graduation and Learner-Centered Design.

In January 2026, the commission's work shifted away from the system of public education and toward how to pay for it. The first part of this phase of the commission's work was focused on how our existing funding formula works. Montana's funding formula is known as one of the most confusing and complicated formulas in the country.

If any of you have ever tried to understand school funding, you might agree. The commission hired a consulting firm, APA Consulting out of Denver to help direct this phase of the work. Their work was focused on the funding of a successful school district. They used a data driven approach which relied on "readily available data to estimate the resources needed for students, teachers, schools, and districts to meet state standards." Their process identified a set of "successful" districts and examined the spending of those districts to estimate the amount needed for all districts to succeed. They applied the following steps:

1. Identify Success Criteria
2. Run Data to Select Districts Meeting Criteria
3. Examine Spending of Selected Successful Districts
4. Apply Efficiency Screens
5. Estimate Resources Needed for All Districts

Their study identified an approximate \$213 million gap between current funding strategies and what is deemed adequate leading to recommended changes to our funding formula.

Again, MFPE members from across the state showed up. We shared our stories of failing facilities, lack of resources and teachers and support staff who have to work extra jobs just to make ends meet. On June 17, thirty-five MFPE members from across the state came to Helena to make our voices heard. Members who care deeply about kids and our collective values shared their stories and sat down together over lunch to discuss further what is actually happening in our schools. And our legislators listened! The very next day, legislators referenced the stories they had heard from MFPE members during the previous day's discussions.

All of this work culminated in several proposed bills that, if passed, will infuse approximately \$213 million dollars into our public schools. The chart on the next page explores each recommendation:



ABOVE: MFPE members (& families) having lunch conversations with commissioners **BELOW:** Members testifying



The School Funding Interim Commission's Package of School Funding Bills for the 2027 Legislature

The commission found the state should fund \$213 million of additional investment to meet our constitutional obligations



Bill #	Fund/Program	Description	Potential Increase – statewide	Action on Aug 13
 —	Statement of Adequacy	SFIC Consultants' recommendation regarding adequate funding needed.	The finding stated that MT was \$213 – 433M behind what is needed for adequacy.	Passes 12-8
 PD9	Inflationary Cap	Remove the cap, redefine how inflation is calculated, calculate inflation each year of biennium.	? Unknown – based on inflation	Passes 14-6 Carrier: Muszkiewicz
 PD13	State Special Ed Fund	Would increase the allowable cost – money received from the state for special ed.	\$56M	Passes 16-4 Carrier: Bedey
 PD10	Special Ed High-Cost Pool (New fund – does not currently exist)	Create a high-cost pool that would cover costs for high-cost services. District would cover first \$35K.	\$20M	Passes 19-1 Carrier: Novak
 PD11	Major Maintenance Fund	Increase amount per student for the major maintenance account. Some reporting required – facility inventory.	\$14M	Passes 15-5 Carrier: Barker
 PD08	Decennial Study	Bill would require that SFIC meet more often (every 6 years). Also, would require that the commission meet again in the 2027 Interim Session (2027-2029) with the specific purpose of revising the current formula.	\$100K – 300K	Passes 16-4 Carrier: Mathews

Bill #	Fund/Program	Description	Potential Increase – statewide	Action on Aug 13
 PD15	Increase the at-risk payment	Redefines how to count number of at-risk students statewide. Increase the amount for each student.	\$160M (proposal is that it will be phased in, so only ½ in the first year.)	Passes 14-6 Carrier: Fern
 PD11	EL Funding (New fund – does not currently exist)	Create state fund for EL students – appropriated based on the number of EL qualified.	\$10M	Passes 15-5 Carrier: Mathews
 PD12	6th Grade Funding	Provide HS funding for 6th graders who are attending a MS or JH program.	\$18M	Passes 14-6 Carrier: Muszkiewicz
 PD9	American Indian Achievement Gap Payment	3 times the current amount given per American Indian Student.	\$10M	Did not Pass: 9-11
 PD8	Indian Education for All Payment	Increase the district minimum from \$100 to \$1000.	\$63,000	Passes 16-4 Carrier: Morigeau
 PD16	High-Quality Instructional Materials (New fund – does not currently exist)	Create a statewide allocation for materials and professional development.	\$5M	Passes 13-7 Carrier: Muszkiewicz



**ESTIMATED
TOTAL
INCREASE**

\$203M
in the
first year

\$283M
in
subsequent
years.



The final report will be posted in September. When it is, we will let you know.

FINAL THOUGHT: THIS IS FAR FROM A DONE DEAL!

The final report will be posted in September. When it is, we will let you know.

MFPE members will support these bills in the 2027 session, and it will take every member's participation to get them passed. Make sure you are part of the **Rapid Response Team** to be engaged in this work. Start talking to your legislators now about the need to get these bills passed.

The future of Montana, our students, depends on the work we all do.



Winning at the Legislature: It's up to us.

