



Briefing “Book” on Montana K-12 Education Issues

Introduction

After the Montana legislative session in 2023, League members voted to have a state League working group study and potentially make recommendations to update the LWV Montana’s position on education. These briefing materials and recommended update of position language are the result of the work of this group over the past 18 months. Contributing members of the League of Women Voters of Montana Working Group on Education:

Joye Kohl, Bozeman; Jan Benham, Bozeman; Cheryl Crawley, Helena; Cheri Bergeron, Helena; Bob Jones, Helena; Celeste Jazwinski, Helena; Ann Gilkey, Helena; Gerrie Beck, Bozeman; Nancy Leifer, Missoula; Rosanne Nash, Bozeman. Special thanks to Joye Kohl and Jan Benham for authoring the briefing papers.

Why is LWV MT concerned about public education? The League is committed to the provision of a high quality, free public education for all. As noted by the League of Women Voters US:

“A quality public education is essential for a strong, viable, and sustainable democratic society and is a civil right.” (Impact on Issues, 2020-22, p. 124)

And, as noted in the Montana Constitution, Article X, Section 1 (1):

“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.”

The post-election transition to the new administration at the federal level has added urgency to the need to understand issues affecting public education. The agenda of Project 2025 is moving into the mainstream, promising to dismantle the federal Department of Education and thereby reduce funding and remove federal oversight of public schools for compliance with federal regulations on equity and inclusion.

Dismantling the federal Department of Education could very well affect a number of existing programs, including: programs of inclusion for special education students (many of whom languished in institutions prior to federal intervention); English language instruction for non-speakers; the hot lunch program; girls’ athletics; the 60s-era poverty programs that work to ensure equal educational opportunity for all students including those struggling in math or reading; and more recent regulations that address disproportionate discipline and support for homeless students living in cars or couch-surfing with classmates.

Moving into the future, state legislatures, which have always been major players in determining educational standards and programs for the states, will likely have wider latitude and greater fiscal and statutory responsibility to determine the course of public education.

Our schools are already struggling with student engagement, lower test scores, funding and teacher shortages. The Covid pandemic school closures led to more parents looking for alternatives to public schools, and to more students being homeschooled. Parents are seeking the best education for their children, but when that seeking turns to widespread private schooling, our democracy is at risk. Public schools provide the opportunity for students of varied backgrounds, cultures and economic strata to learn together. Public schools ensure that all children have the opportunity for a good education, measured not just in test scores but also in exposure to and appreciation of diversity.

There is a movement across state legislatures to undermine public education through increased privatization. This movement also embraces opposition to diversity, equity and inclusion and to teaching the history of oppressed people in this country. Montana is not immune from legislation that would further this movement here. [For more about this movement, see this column on Project 2025 and Education by Heather Cox Richardson.](#)

The intention of these Education Issue Briefing materials is to facilitate understanding and discussion of the critical nature of funding and the complexity of early education and K-12 schooling issues in today's society, in preparation for taking action on proposed legislation during the 2025 Montana legislative session and for updating the League's education position.

This set of briefing documents seeks to identify, describe, analyze and critique various educational terms, programs, delivery systems, and policies, so that, as concerned League members, we have some common baseline understanding from which to discuss the education of all of Montana's youth. Most of the materials focus on financing education, the challenges facing school districts from inadequate funding, and the programs that divert public funds into private providers. The paper on teacher licensure, supply and certification provides background on public school teacher licensing requirements and how inadequate teacher salaries have contributed to teacher shortages. Teacher shortages in turn may result in the potential for eroding or eliminating teacher license requirements and subsequently reducing teacher quality. The article on student rights provides background for student rights' concerns that may arise under our DEI position.

Sometime in early 2025, each local League will have a League membership meeting to discuss the questions in the Study Guide, and see if, after discussion, League members generally agree with the proposed changes to update the LWV Montana's education position. The proposed position changes reflect not only concerns raised by the 2023 legislative session, but also updated language to deal with the future threat of massive diversion of public funds away from the public school system and into the private sector. Were such diversions to become law, public schools would see their funding depleted at a time when the vast majority of Montana school districts are struggling with teacher shortages, fueled in part by low salaries.

How to Use These Materials

Each local League will have a meeting early in 2025 to discuss the materials linked to this email. Please read through the articles and papers connected through the links in the Table of Contents below and consider for yourself the questions at the end of each of the four White Papers before the local League meeting on Education Issues in January. Our intention with these briefing documents is to provide you with factual information, policy consequences, relevant League positions, and thought-provoking questions to help League members consider various issues and approaches regarding the education of all of our young people.

You will have two opportunities to take action. First, it will be up to you, as an individual, as you study and discuss funding and the programmatic approaches, to determine whether you will take action and contact legislators during the session as you get action alerts about legislation that supports or counters existing League positions on Education.

Second, the Working Group is proposing changes to update the LWV MT existing education position in light of what is happening now. The Study Guide includes suggested changes to the Montana position and questions for League members to discuss at their January and determine in each local League if there is a consensus to adopt the proposed updated position. If there is support for the proposed changes, they will be introduced as part of the LWV Montana 2025 Convention process, for consideration for adoption.

Below is the Table of Contents for these Briefing Materials on Education Issues.

Please note: Nearly all of the information below relates in some way to financing of public education for pre-school through 12th grade. Without a more thorough study, the working group felt it should focus on financing issues and implications as did those who worked on the LWV Montana position in the past. There are many other issues in public education concerning curriculum, student rights, etc. that we only touch on briefly here. The Working Group found that the most pressing issues concern finance, and so focused on finance issues.

Thank you for investing the time to read through these materials, and for taking the time to learn more about the fundamental threat to our education system that is unfolding across the country.

LWV Montana Education Working Group
November 2024

Contact: montanalwv@gmail.com

Table of Contents of Briefing Materials on Issues in Public Education PreK-12 in Montana

1. **Study Guide and Proposed Changes to LWV Montana Education Position**

[Study Guide with Proposed Changes](#)

2. **The connection between Democracy and Public Education**

- a. Brookings Institute Article on School Vouchers and the History of Education in the U.S.

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-new-and-radical-school-voucher-push-is-quietly-unwinding-two-centuries-of-u-s-education-tradition/>

3. **General School Funding**

Montana is facing a shortage of public pre-school-K-12 funding to provide a high-quality education and provide enough pay to retain teachers. Below are links to a summary of how Montana's school funding works, and to *Montana Free Press* (MTFP) articles on teacher shortages and what the Legislature's Interim Committee on Education is proposing.

- a. Report on General School Funding: A summary of how education funding works
[White Paper on Montana General School Funding](#)

- b. Link to MTFP article on school funding:

<https://montanafreepress.org/2024/02/19/visual-guide-to-montana-public-school-budget-formula/>

- c. Article from *Montana Free Press* on Legislative Interim Committee proposals:

https://montanafreepress.org/2024/09/18/state-lawmakers-zero-in-on-education-funding-opi-spending/?utm_medium=email

4. **Teacher Shortages and Certification Standards**

To help schools address the lack of enough certified teachers, a variety of steps have been taken to allow positions to be filled by people who have not met the requirements to be fully certified teachers. Lower standards for teachers in turn affect the quality of education and forces tradeoffs to ensure there are adults in classrooms.

- a. Issue paper on Teacher Shortages and Certification Standards:
[White Paper on Montana Teacher Licensing and Supply Issues](#)

- b. Link to MTFP article on Teacher Retention:

<https://montanafreepress.org/2024/06/18/teacher-retention-and-wages-hot-topic-as-state-education-officials-meet/>

5. School Vouchers for Private Schools

There is a national movement to create an education voucher system that would divert funds from public schools to pay for students in private schools. Montana has a small program currently in place for students with disabilities that allows for education savings accounts, ESAs, that function in the same way a voucher does. In other states, limited programs like Montana's were expanded over time to include much wider eligibility, with severe impact to public school funding. See the summary of what happened in Arizona, Item B below.

- A. [White Paper on Montana's Existing Education Savings Account Program for Disabled Students](#)
- B. [Summary of the evolution of the special needs savings account program in Arizona: Arizona ESA Vouchers and the Process for Universal Eligibility](#)

6. Tax Credits for Education

Another Form of diverting public school funding to serve the interests of wealthy families is tax credit programs. Montana has two tax credit programs in place that have grown from a modest \$2 million to reach over \$10 million in 2024 and could reach \$20 million by 2028. New legislation could alter the eligibility criteria for these programs, which in turn could divert even more revenue from the general fund. See the article Item B below on what happened in Indiana, where the program expanded from \$15.5 million in 2011 to a forecast \$600 million this year.

- a. [White Paper on Montana Education Tax Credit Programs](#)
- b. Link to article on impact of vouchers in Indiana:
https://www.aol.com/voucher-dilemma-taxpayer-cost-jumped-091234942.html?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR2EXvvkZAApiMegjdDiOafzROTjpO8xTeU5_ZilVaYHuT-HMezSKq7DphM_aem_CK0WndkgqxbpCH7PzGDb0w&ai=

7. Protection of Human Rights

Montana saw many bills in the 2023 Legislature that attempted to control freedoms of diverse students to be themselves. There will likely be more bills limiting freedom of expression in the next session. While the Working Group did not look at these aspects of education policy in Montana, this website offers essential information on what student rights are now. The League's policy on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion would allow LWV Montana to oppose bills that violate student rights.

- a. Link to website from *Americans United on Separation of Church and State* on existing religious and personal freedom in schools:

<https://www.au.org/knowyourrights/?emci=b9394e74-3066-ef11-991a-6045bdd9e096&emdi=f68113dc-fc69-ef11-991a-6045bdd9e096&ceid=11077023>