



Research Agenda

Establishing the Education and Workforce Data Governing Board (HB 949; 2023), the Legislature found that “the utilization of education and workforce data holds great promise for developing the full educational potential of Montanans and in maximizing the effectiveness of state investments in education and workforce systems.” (20-7-136(1)(a), MCA)

The Legislature tasked the Board with the development of education and workforce research agenda to:

- improve alignment across existing programs and systems;
- support student success in K-12 education, higher education, and the workforce;
- increase the efficiency and effectiveness of state education, training, workforce, and financial aid programs; and
- equip local and state policymakers with information about education and workforce development. (20-7-138(7)(b), MCA)

The Education and Workforce Data Governing Board contributing agencies, the Office of Public Instruction (OPI), the Office of the Commission of Higher Education (OCHE), and the Department of Labor and Industry (DLI), will work collaboratively to meet the agenda’s priority areas and questions, sharing, linking, and utilizing longitudinal and point-in-time data to respond to agenda items. The Research Agenda reflects a shared commitment among contributing agencies to engage in partnerships in order to improve the interconnection between education pathways and employment opportunities in Montana.

The agenda is focused on the following priority areas:

Pathways and Pipelines: Study of the entry, transition, and exit points students take through specific education, service, and labor sectors. The focus of pathway and pipeline studies are typically descriptive to identify patterns or inform interventions rather than identification of causal relationships. Questions for this agenda item include, but are not limited to:

- How might Montana establish a direct college admissions program to inform soon-to-be high school graduates before they apply that they are already accepted to in-state institutions based on their academic profile?
 - ✓ *Supportive evidence and value to Montana:* Providing preemptive information to students takes the risk out of the college application process (getting in is now a ‘sure thing’) and helps students who may not feel they are college material know that they are. Using existing data and commitments to share this information is much more cost-effective than college marketing campaigns.



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- How might Montana structure and communicate a college cost commitment to lower-income students based on existing eligibility for means-tested programs, addressing a primary barrier to college attendance?
 - ✓ *Supportive evidence and value to Montana:* In a recent survey of Montanans, 65% agreed that there is not a lot of help to pay for college and 89% felt that “the cost to attend college is too high for many in my community”. Simultaneously, Montana typically ranks in the bottom third nationally for FAFSA completion, with each high school class leaving an estimated \$10m in federal grant aid on the table annually (NCAN). Because of Montana’s low-cost colleges, a commitment to eligible students can address the primary concern of students and families considering college, cost, while ensuring they make use of their share of federal college aid.
- How might Montana structure apprenticeship and other work-based learning programs to target K-12 students who have not matriculated into the Montana University System?
 - ✓ *Supportive evidence and value to Montana:* Improving access to work-based learning, and other non-college training programs for K-12 students who choose to enter the workforce after graduation. According to MTDLI, the Montana Registered Apprenticeship program graduates more apprentices each year than the average two-year or community college in the Montana University System. From 2018 to 2023 an average of 295 apprenticeships have been completed each year. These graduates earned an average annual salary of \$65,930—\$11,400 higher than the statewide average wage, highlighting the value in improving access to and success in these opportunities.
- Through what pathways do nontraditional students return to educational and training opportunities in Montana? What are common characteristics of individuals who return to complete K-12 equivalencies and individuals that return to postsecondary offerings? How do their workforce outcomes change?
 - ✓ *Supportive evidence and value to Montana:* The evolving needs of the workforce requires individuals to add skills, retrain, and continuously evolve to new in-demand skills. Identifying characteristics of individuals who return to education from the workforce and how their workforce outcomes differ can help institutions facilitate and support those individuals to complete their training programs and improve workforce outcomes.

Educational, Training, and/or Workforce Outcomes: Study of student-level and/or institutional-level characteristics and the importance of these characteristics in predicting outcomes. Questions for this agenda item include, but are not limited to:

- Which students from K-12 matriculate to colleges or universities, whether in Montana or out of state, and which students do not? Of the students not



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matriculating, are they leaving the state for education and/or workforce opportunities or are they staying in Montana?

- ✓ *Supportive evidence and value to Montana:* The MUS, Reach Higher Montana, and private philanthropy makes substantial investments annually to improve college access. Improved analytics would help us to target and evaluate interventions.
- Does the attainment of a postsecondary degree result in improved workforce outcomes relative to a high school diploma? How do the returns to educational attainment vary by program of study or other characteristics of the student (age, race, gender, etc.)?
 - ✓ *Supportive evidence and value to Montana:* The Postsecondary Workforce Report finds increasing returns to higher levels of education. However, this analysis has not included a comparison to high school graduates. Understanding the value for student of postsecondary education will help them make more information decisions about investments in their education.
- What impact does the K-12 education system have on workforce development efforts in Montana? Do graduates from the state's K-12 education system stay in Montana for work? Where do graduates move after leaving the K-12 system? Do high school graduates earn more than those without a high school diploma?
 - ✓ *Supportive evidence and value to Montana:* The Postsecondary Workforce Report finds 75% of graduates from the state's postsecondary education work for a Montana employer within ten years of graduation. Expanding this analysis to include all high school graduates will help identify the K-12 systems contribution to workforce supply in Montana. This information can help policymakers, educators, and students better understand the value of education and the K-12 system's contribution to workforce development efforts across the state. This data, when made available to the public, can help inform student and family decisions about educational paths.
- Does workforce data on educator outcomes provide a better picture of why educators remain or leave their positions, focusing on those educators that leave the education workforce?
 - ✓ *Supportive evidence and value to Montana:* Quality education environments define student's opportunities to learn. Crucial to this context is the choice of educators to persist in their role, advance to a new role, or leave the system entirely.
- What is the connection between K-12 salaries and educator workforce outcomes?
 - ✓ *Supportive evidence and value to Montana:* Educator salaries show how systems value teachers. Teachers that feel valued are more likely to persist in their role and contribute to positive classroom environments (Francis,



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2022). Does salary predict workforce outcomes to a greater degree than educator soft skills such as gained through instructional coaching?

Program and Policy Evaluation: Program and policy evaluation is intended to determine whether a given program or policy has been successful. The evaluation may be used to improve program effectiveness, efficiency (distribution of costs and benefits), and/or equity and to inform policy or program changes (including reforming or discontinuing programs), program renewals and/or program expansions. Questions for this agenda item include, but are not limited to:

- Do specific non-college career preparation activities improve workforce outcomes? For example, industry-delivered CTE courses, apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeships, work-based learning activities, or other career exploration activities?
 - ✓ *Supportive evidence and value to Montana:* Understanding which career preparation activities are most impactful for job attainment, retention, and wages/wage progression informs where investment in career preparation and training has the greatest ROI. The legislature, governor and agencies have championed and funded several initiatives to enhance career exploration and preparation that could benefit from improved data to evaluate program components and impact, including Jobs for Montana Graduates, the Montana Advanced Opportunities Grant, and the Montana Career Information System.
- Do targeted K-12 intervention, immersion, and learning programs improve education and workforce outcomes? How do short and long-term trajectories change for K-12 students enrolled in these programs compared to those who are not?
 - ✓ *Supportive evidence and value to Montana:* Essential to the K-12 environment, providing multi-faceted supports so that all students can achieve the highest levels of academic readiness. Montana has invested in specific programs such as the Gifted and Talented State Grant (2021-2023, \$700,00), Indian Language Immersion Program (2020-2021, \$145,440), and Early Literacy Targeted Intervention (2024, \$1.5 million appropriation). Ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of these targeted K-12 programs can inform state policymakers, district officials, and educators regarding best practices.