Graduation Matters Billings

STRATEGIC PLAN

September 2014

Thank you to the following partners for their contribution to the
Graduation Matters Billings Strategic Plan:

Graduation Matters Founding Partners
Education Foundation for Billings Public Schools
Billings Public Schools
Billings Area Chamber of Commerce
Montana State University Billings
Rocky Mountain College
United Way of Yellowstone County
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Teacher Volunteer: Glenda McCarthy

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Julie Whitworth, Susan Maier, Krista Hertz, Erin Zimmer: Education Foundation for Billings Public Schools
Meg Rude, Dan Benge: Montana State University Billings
Brian Dennis, Annie Hasiak, Tabatha Kraack: Boys and Girls Clubs of Yellowstone County
Becky Webber: Big Brothers Big Sisters
Kathy Kelker: Headstart
Tiffany Sherman: Youth Court Services

Graduation Matters Leadership Team
Terry Bouck: Billings Public Schools
John Brewer: Billings Area Chamber of Commerce
Rolf Groseth: Montana State University Billings
Jim Duncan: Billings Clinic
Scott McCullough: Billings Education Association
Alan Halter: Board of Trustees, School District 2
Carol Burton: United Way of Yellowstone County

Graduation Matters Montana
Denise Juneau, Montana Superintendent of Schools
Deb Haliday, Policy Advisor, Community Learning Partnerships
Montana Office of Public Instruction

Our community will support, inspire, and empower all youth to graduate and be successful in work and life.

Our children are supported every step of the way

At home

In school

In their neighborhood

Executive Summary

About 200 students in School District 2 who start high school in ninth grade drop out before twelfth grade. Economically disadvantaged youth have graduation rates that are well below the district average.

According to a study produced by the National Dropout Prevention Center[1], and backed up locally by conversations with over 300 students, parents, and school personnel: "**The evidence clearly shows that dropout is always the result of a long process of disengagement that sometimes begins before the child enrolls in kindergarten.**"

The goals of Graduation Matters Billings are to increase graduation rates and to close the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged youth. Students spend the majority of their hours out of school and some of the strongest influences for student disengagement are not school-related. Reducing dropout requires the entire community working together.

To achieve its goals Graduation Matters Billings will bring people, programs, and resources together to:

1. **ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES of school dropout**. The primary strategy here will be a Grade Level Reading Campaign. This campaign addresses three issues to ensure that all children will read on grade level by third grade: school readiness, attendance, and the summer slide.

2. **HELP TEENS NOW.** To help middle school and high school students right now, GMB will support the school district with their credit recovery efforts, and the transition from 8th to 9th grade. In addition GMB will: 1) Explore Alternative Graduation Pathways; 2) Implement an Early Warning and Response System; and 3) Engage high school students as problem solvers through Pure Performance.

3. **INCREASE ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT.** Graduation Matters Billings will use three strategies to increase engagement and support: 1) The "Solutions" program, will provide a mechanism for programs, parents, students, or businesses to join the GMB team as "Part Of The Solution." 2) The GMB team will engage in appropriate advocacy efforts to support effective policies and laws to increase graduation rates; and 3) The GMB team will seek to educate about the causes and effects of school dropout.

Goals

Increase cohort graduation rates in Billings School District 2 from 82.5% in 2013 to:

- 85% by 2015
- 87% by 2016
- 89% by 2017
- 91% by 2018

Increase the cohort graduation rate for economically disadvantaged youth in Billings so it is in line with the district average.
- Baseline Year 2013: 67% of economically disadvantaged youth graduated with their class compared to 82.5% for a district average.

Decrease chronic absenteeism.
- Definition and measure to be established.

Increase third grade reading proficiency.
- Targets to be set. See page 10 for current proficiency rates.

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[1] *C. Hammond, J. Smink, & S. Drew.* Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report. National Dropout Prevention Center. D. Linton: Communities In Schools, Inc. May 2007. Accessed at http://www.dropoutprevention.org/sites/default/files/uploads/major_reports/DropoutRiskFactorsandExemplaryProgramsExecutiveSummary5-16-07.pdf .

THE CHALLENGE

Every year close to 200 students in Billings do not graduate with their class.

Billings Class of 2013

- ■ Graduates
- ■ Did not graduate
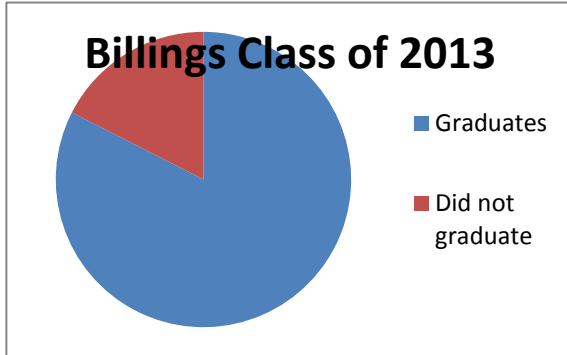
ACADEMIC

Although academic difficulty was not cited by most students as the main reason for dropping out, it appears to be significant.

ATTENDANCE AND MOBILITY

Students who dropped out were likely to miss significant amounts of school prior to dropping out, and were very likely to have experienced a lot of transition in elementary school as well as high school.

BEHAVIOR INCIDENTS

Two-thirds (61%) of students who dropped out had zero to 10 behavior incidents on their records

Official Reason for Drop-Out[2]	
5%	Academic Difficulty
29%	Attendance Difficulty
54%	GED Related
8%	Unknown
4%	Other (employment, corrections, over compulsory age)

Indicators of Falling Of Track[3]	
Academic	
57%	Had a final math grade of F
60%	Had a final English grade of F
39%	Repeated 9th grade
Attendance	
62%	Missed school almost one-third of the time: • One and half days or more per week • One week or more every month
41%	Multiple entries and exits to high school.
31%	Attended multiple elementary schools.
Behavior	
14%	Zero
47%	1-10
24%	11-25
11%	26-50
4%	More than 50

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[2] Data from class of 2011 (all three Billings High Schools). *High school administrators make every attempt to interview every student who drops out. These are the official reasons given to administrators by the students who were dropping out.*

[3] School District 2 Data for students from the class of 2011 who dropped out.

The Achievement Gap

There are some populations in the Billings school system with graduation rates well below the district average of 82.5%.

2013 Billings Four Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate

	Graduates	Cohort Graduation Rate
All Students	1097	82.5
American Indian/Alaska Native	54	58.10
Asian	20	100
Black or African American	17	70.8
Hispanic or Latino	52	68.4
Native Hawaiin or Pacific Islander	*	*
White, Non-Hispanic	953	85.6
Special Education Students	111	75
Limited English Proficient Students	20	54.1
Economically Disadvantaged	314	67

According to trend data from the U.S. Census, between 2000 and 2010:

‣ The Hispanic population under the age of 20 increased by 42.1% in Yellowstone County and 51.5% in Montana
‣ The American Indian population under the age of 20 increased by 35.6% in YC and 3.3% in Montana
‣ The White population under the age of 20 decreased by 1.7% in Yellowstone County and 5.4% in Montana

Other communities in the United States, through concerted collaborative efforts have closed their achievement gaps. Billings can do the same.

> "The first step to closing that gap is to believe, as I do, that high expectations are for all students. I believe intelligence is equally distributed throughout the world, but opportunity is not. And the same is true within our own country."
> *President William J. Clinton, 2000, Remarks at the White House Strategy Session on Improving Hispanic Student Achievement.*

The Perspective of Parents, Students, and School Personnel

In 2011-2012 Graduation Matters Listening sessions were conducted with over 300 participants in the Billings Public Schools: students, teachers, parents, and administrators. They were asked why students struggle with attendance and why students don't pass their core courses freshman year. They were asked what works to encourage attendance and academic success and what does not work. Finally, at the end of the session they were asked: If you could only do one thing to improve the situation, what would you do?

Attendance

Across the board, students, parents, teachers, and administrators agreed:

Number One Recommendation to Improve Attendance

Revise current K-8 Attendance Policy so it has more real consequences for failure to attend.

- Attendance patterns begin long before high school
- There are no real consequences for poor attendance from Kindergarten through 8th grade
- Real consequences, such as losing credit or having to repeat a class, only start in 9th grade
- Feelings of hopelessness contribute to poor attendance: "I'm never going to pass anyway, so why come?" "I'm so behind, it won't matter." " I have never understood this subject ever and one more day listening to something I don't get at all won't help."
- Feelings of not belonging contribute to poor attendance: "My teachers don't care," " my classmates don't know I exist," "I have bigger problems at home and being at school is a distraction."
- Family and other out of school factors play a large role on student attendance (for example, a parent who did not have a good experience in school themselves).

What one action step would you take?

The number 1 recommendation from all participants:

- Revise current K-8 Attendance Policy so it has more real consequences for failure to attend.

Other consistent themes:

1) Focus on proficiency requirements not attendance requirements.
2) Create schedule options for students: for example, have a track where kids can attend school from 10 – 5 instead of 8-3.
3) Create curriculum options for students: for example, practical math options, more flexibility with English texts, more access to online and college options for all students, the ability to test out of classes (receive credit for demonstrated proficiency).

Academic Success

Across the board, students, parents, teachers, and administrators agreed:

- Academic failure, in most cases, begins long before high school.
- From grades K-8, students in School District 2 progress to the next grade whether they have met core academic proficiency or not.
- Family and out of school factors play a large role in student academic success (especially family values about education).
- There is only one way for most students in SD2 to get high school diploma. Alternative pathways that exist are excellent but, in the case of the Career Center, students can only access those programs after they have succeeded in 9th and 10th grade. In the case of programs like Credit Recovery, Transitions, or Frameworks, students can only access them after they have experienced significant difficulty with the traditional pathway. In most cases they have to have already failed to gain access.
- If students had more access to alternative options earlier, they would be more likely to succeed, be engaged, and stay in school.
- We should think about things like:
  - The structure of the school day: does everyone have to go to school from 8-3? This is a hardship for students who work.
  - The sequence of classes -- can we get more elective options in the freshman year? The freshman year is heavy on core courses while by their senior year most students have a lot of room for electives in their schedule. Would more students make it to senior year if they could take a class freshman year that was engaging to them, like art or construction?
  - Can we create options for students to test out of some classes and receive credit based on their current knowledge (like AP credit in colleges – but for high school)?

What one action step would you take?

The number 1 recommendation from all participants:
- Address the issue of social promotion in the early grades. Retention does not work but neither does social promotion.

Other consistent themes:
- Create more flexible, relevant curriculum options for students. For example, more "Career Center" type options, more online options, ability of students to test out through proven mastery, add seventh period to the day to create more room in schedule for electives.

- Be driven by content mastery not seat time.
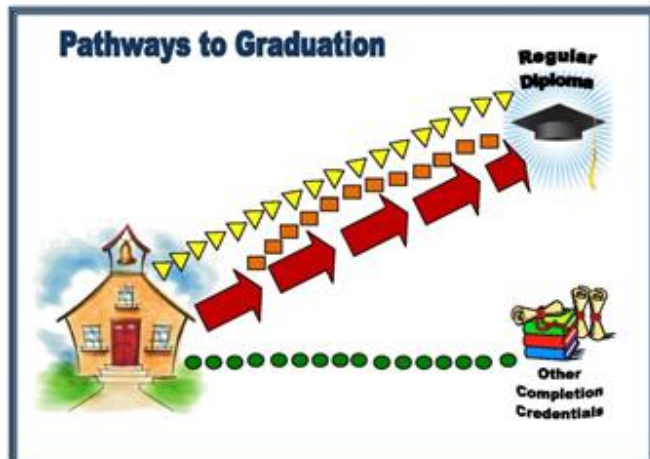
RELATED RESEARCH

KEY FACT: Research consistently shows that the riskiest times for youth are the hours when they are not in school, and youth spend the majority of their time *OUT of school*.

How Youth Spend Their Time
One Year = 8,760 Hours

- 3,285 hrs = Asleep
- 1,200 hrs = In School
- 2,355 hrs = Ideally With Family
- 1,920 hrs = ? Hrs Not Accounted For
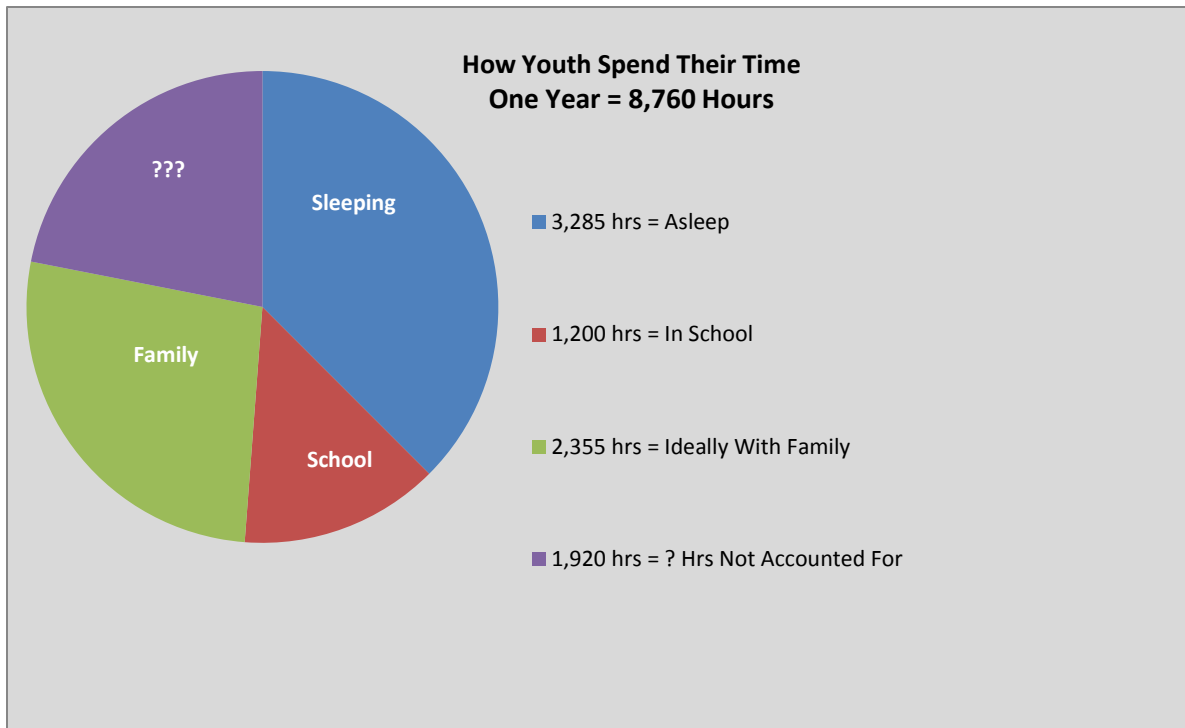
The action recommendations from the Listening sessions center on school-related activities; however participants consistently cite "out of school" factors as critical. The research supports the perspective of Listening Session Participants. Risk factors for dropping out[4] include many powerful individual and family risk factors including:

- No extracurricular participation
- High risk peer group
- High number of work hours
- Low parent contact with school and low educational expectations from parents
- Low socioeconomic status
- Parent education level

An effective plan to increase graduation rates must include programs which address risk factors in the family, community, and individual domains, in addition to school. The four risk factors which are consistent across all grade levels are:

- Low achievement
- Poor attendance
- Retention/Over age for grade
- Low socioeconomic status of family
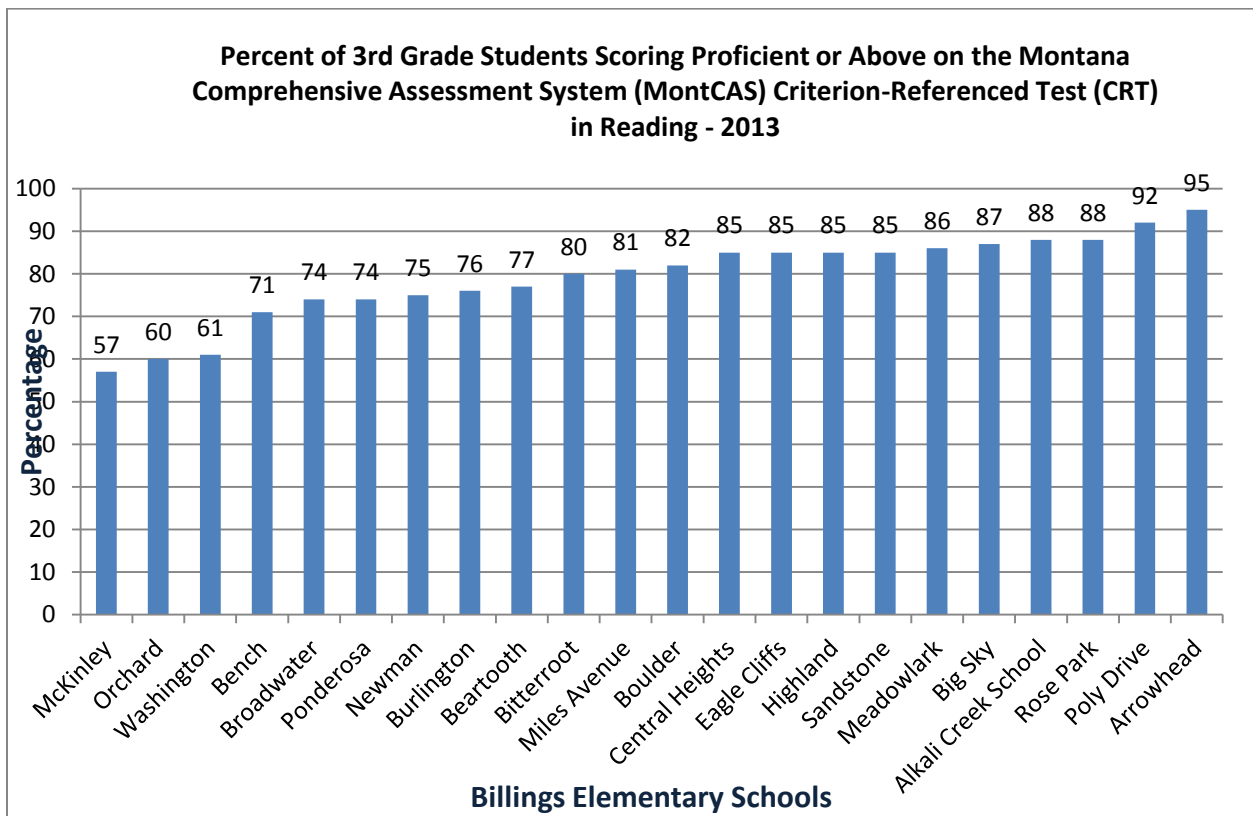
[4] 2007. Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report. *National Dropout Prevention Center/Network at Clemson University in collaboration with Communities in Schools.* For a complete list, see Appendix 4, page 22.

RELATED RESEARCH

KEY FACT: Third grade reading is the single strongest predictor of future academic success. According to The Campaign for Third Grade Reading, c**hildren who do not read on grade level by the end of third grade are 13 times more likely to drop out of school than their peers who read on grade level.** Society pays a price for dropout. High school dropouts have significantly lower income than high school graduates over their lifetime. In addition the unemployment rate for dropouts is generally 4 percentage points higher than the national average. It's estimated that half of all Americans on public assistance are dropouts and 80 percent of the incarcerated population is high school dropouts[5].

In Billings there are correlations between our schools with lowest reading proficiency and highest poverty rates.

Percent of 3rd Grade Students Scoring Proficient or Above on the Montana Comprehensive Assessment System (MontCAS) Criterion-Referenced Test (CRT) in Reading - 2013

| School	Percentage
McKinley	57
Orchard	60
Washington	61
Bench	71
Broadwater	74
Ponderosa	74
Newman	75
Burlington	76
Beartooth	77
Bitterroot	80
Miles Avenue	81
Boulder	82
Central Heights	85
Eagle Cliffs	85
Highland	85
Sandstone	85
Meadowlark	86
Big Sky	87
Alkali Creek School	88
Rose Park	88
Poly Drive	92
Arrowhead	95

Billings Elementary Schools

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[5] Lynch, Matthew, Ed.D. "High School Dropout Rate: Causes and Costs." Huffington Post, posted 5/30/2014. Downloaded July 30, 2014, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-lynch-edd/high-school-dropout-rate_b_5421778.html
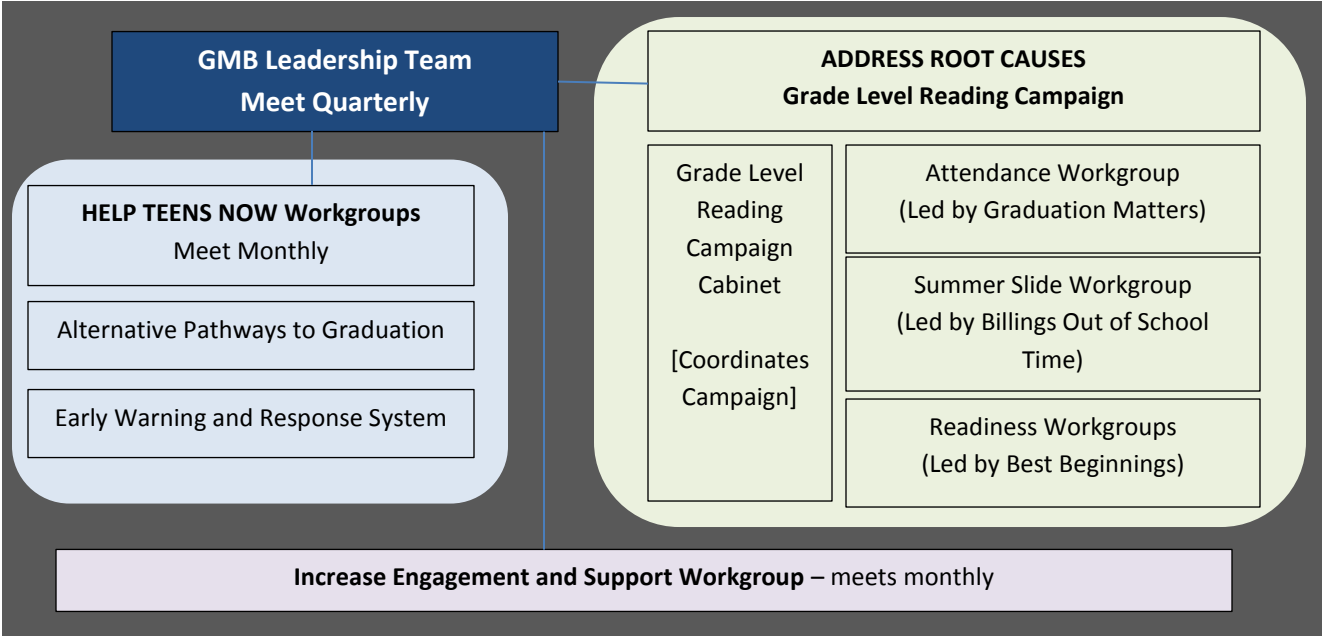
The Graduation Matters Billings Plan

Graduation Matters Billings will interrupt the process of student disengagement from Billings schools. Over time we will close the achievement gap for Native American, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged Youth in our community. We will increase our graduation rates to be the best in the state.

The community plan to increase graduation rates for Billings students has three initiatives: 1) Help middle and high school kids today; 2) Address root causes of dropout; and 3) Increase engagement and support. Each initiative will be attentive to strategies designed to reach one of the following populations: 1) All students; 2) Students who are struggling; 3) Students who need intensive intervention[6]. Frequently drop-out prevention plans only target students in the secondary or tertiary tiers; however research strongly supports coordinated strategies in all three tiers.
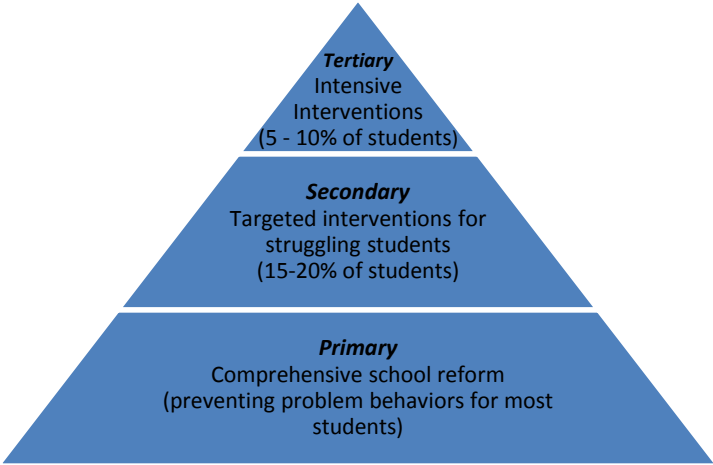
A Graduation Matters Coordinator at United Way of Yellowstone County will provide support to the organizational structure below to implement the Graduation Matters Billings Plan.

Tertiary
Intensive Interventions
(5 - 10% of students)

Secondary
Targeted interventions for struggling students
(15-20% of students)

Primary
Comprehensive school reform
(preventing problem behaviors for most students)

GMB Leadership Team
Meet Quarterly

ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES
Grade Level Reading Campaign

HELP TEENS NOW Workgroups
Meet Monthly

Alternative Pathways to Graduation

Early Warning and Response System

Grade Level Reading Campaign Cabinet

[Coordinates Campaign]

Attendance Workgroup
(Led by Graduation Matters)

Summer Slide Workgroup
(Led by Billings Out of School Time)

Readiness Workgroups
(Led by Best Beginnings)

Increase Engagement and Support Workgroup – meets monthly

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[6] Mac Iver, M. A. & Mac Iver, D. J. (2009). Beyond the indicators: An integrated school-level approach to dropout prevention. Arlington, VA: The Mid-Atlantic Equity Center, The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education, page 23.

The three initiatives of Graduation Matters Billings are described in the tables below.

HELP TEENS NOW		
Goals Increase cohort graduation rates in Billings School District 2 from 82.5% in 2013 to: 85% by 2015…………87% by 2016…………89% by 2017………… 91% by 2018		
Strategies	**Activities**	**Milestones**
Explore Alternative Graduation Pathways	• Establish Alternative Pathways Workgroup • Work group Meets Regularly • Workgroup Product: Report for Billings School Board and Billings School District 2 with recommendations for Alternative Graduation Pathways	• Workgroup in place by Oct 30, 2014 • Report to School District and Board by June 30, 2015
Implement Early Warning and Response System (EWRS)	• Establish Early Warning and Response System Workgroup • Work group Meets Regularly • Workgroup Product: Functional Early Warning and Response System for middle and high schools	• Workgroup in place by Oct 30, 2014 • EWRS Plan in place by April 2014 • EWRS funding secured, June 2015 • EWRS training, Aug 2015 • EWRS activated Sep 2015
Engage high school students as leaders through Pure Performance	• Pure Performance Student Training • Pure Performance Graduation plans • Pure Performance mini-grants	• PP Training by Oct 2015 • PP Plans by Nov 2015 • PP Minigrants by Feb 2015
Support the School District work on credit recovery programs and the transition from 8th to 9th grade.	• Support district needs to expand funding for Transitions, HiSet, Frameworks, Summer School and other effective alternative programs for credit recovery.	As needed grant writing and advocacy.
In all strategies be attentive to effective strategies and cultural competence for Native American, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged youth		

ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES

Goals
Decrease chronic absenteeism for children in grades K-3 by xx% by May 2018.
Reading proficiency goal To BE DETERMINED (ultimately – all third graders read on grade level)

Strategies	Activities	Milestones
Join forces with Best Beginnings and BOOST to implement the Grade Level Reading Campaign (GLRC)	- Establish an Attendance Work Group. - Work Group meets regularly. - Work Group Product: Action plan to increase attendance in grades k-3. - Work with BOOST and BEST Beginnings to activate a Grade Level Reading Campaign Cabinet that coordinates the attendance focus with the school readiness and summer slide strategies being championed by Best Beginnings and BOOST.	- Workgroup in place by Oct 30, 2014 - GLRC Attendance plan in place by February 2014 - GLRC attendance, school readiness, and summer slide plans coordinated into one grade level reading campaign plan by Jun 2015. - GLRC campaign implemented Jun 2015
Join force with Best Beginnings and BOOST to write a Promise Neighborhood Grant.	- GLRC workgroups create Promise Neighborhood plans. - Promise Neighborhood grant is submitted.	- Funding proposal draft ready April 2015 - Funding proposal submitted June 2015
Be attentive to effective strategies and cultural competence for Native American, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged youth.		

INCREASE ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Goals
Increase the number of individuals, businesses, and non-profits formally connected to Graduation Matters Billings efforts.
Increase community awareness about Graduation Matters goals, issues, and programs.

Strategies	Activities	Milestones
PR Team	Recruit a PR team to create a plan based on the following ideas.	- Team in place by January 2015 - Plan in place by Feb 2015
IDEAS		
Community Updates	- Quarterly Celebrate and Connect Events - Annual "Progress Update" meeting - Appropriate press releases related to workgroups	TBD
GMB Membership Drive	Implement GMB "Solutions" program where individuals and organizations can formally connect to become "Part Of The Solution" (Solutions options include volunteer, program, and/or financial commitments)	- Solutions Program launched at event Sep 30, 2014 - Member Pledges collected on an ongoing basis and renewed annually.

Appendices

Key Findings
Issue
Attendance[7]
The majority of youth who drop out have missed one third or more of the time. That is one and a half or more days a week, or about one week or more every mon. For almost one third (29%) of dropouts, attendance difficulty was the main reason they dropped out.
Days Enrolled[8]
- 8% of the students who dropped out in 2010/2011 were enrolled in the high school they dropped out from for 150-180 days (there are 180 days in the school year).
- 11% were enrolled for 120-149 days.
- 32% were enrolled from 60-119 days
- 49% were enrolled less than 10 to 59 days (less than one third of the school year). Of these 24% were enrolled less than 10 days.

Indicators of Falling Off Track[9]:
- 57% of students who dropped out had a final math grade of F, and 60% had a final English grad of F
- 41% multiple entries and exits to High School
- 31% Attended multiple elementary schools
- 39% repeated 9th grade

Official Dropout Reasons[10]:
- 5% Academic Difficulty
- 29% Attendance Difficulty
- 53.6% GED Related
- 8% Unknown
- 4% Other (employment, corrections, over compulsory age…)

Reading and Math Proficiency[11]
- 40% of students who dropped out were proficient in English, and another 16% were nearing proficiency.
- 21% of students who dropped out were proficient in Math, and 33% were nearing proficiency

Behavior Incidents[12]
- Nearly two-thirds (61%)of the students who dropped out had zero-ten behavior incidents. 14% had zero. 47% had one-ten.
- About one quarter (24%) had between 11 and 25 behavior incidents.
- 11% had between 26 and 50
- 4% had more than 50%

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[7] School District 2 records for students who dropped out in the 2010/2011 school year.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] AIM data on 2010/2011 students, from the Office of Public Instruction.
[11] 2010/2011 CRT Data
[12] School District 2 records for students who dropped out in the 2010/2011 school year.

APPENDIX 2: **POLICY AUDIT: WHO MAKES THE DECISION?**

(This is Tool 13 from Grad Nation: A Guidebook to Help Communities Tackle the Dropout Crisis, Commissioned by America's Promise Alliance)

Policy	Policy Determined By				
	State Legislature	District School Board	District Superintendent	School-Based Decision Makers	Other OPI/regents
1 Sets legal school leaving age	x	X3120			
2 Sets other conditions for leaving school legally	x	x			
3 Defines the codes and practices that are used in the data system to track students who exit high school with or without graduating				x	X OPI
4 Defines the pupil progression policy (promotion/retention) grades K to 8	X	X2421		x	Parental
5 Defines the pupil progression policy (promotion/retention) grades 9 to 12	X	X2421		x	
6 Defines criteria for awarding high school credit per course, including summer school and credit recovery programs		x		x	
7 Defines "weights" for high school course grades				x	
8 Defines minimum GPA needed to participate in sports, extra-curricular activities, etc.				x	xMHSA
9 Defines attendance and tardiness policies		X3120 P2		x	
10 Defines relationship of attendance and tardiness policies to official "count" for daily membership				x	xOPI
11 Defines relationship of attendance, tardiness, and behavior marks to students' grades				x	
12 Defines "truancy" (chronic, habitual, sanctions and supports)	x	x		x	
13 Defines conditions for in- and out-of-school suspensions		X3300		x	
14 Defines sanctions associated with in-school suspensions				x	
15 Defines sanctions associated with out-of-school suspensions				x	
16 Defines support for "off-track" students				x	
17 Defines conditions for assignment to juvenile justice system					xYoutCourt police
18 Defines age of eligibility for GED programs relative to legal age for leaving school	x				xFED OPI
19 Defines high school graduation requirements (courses and credits; examinations)		x		x	xBOE
20 Defines admission requirements for Career Center (course and credits; examinations)				x	
21 Defines admission requirements for two-year colleges (course and credits; examinations)					xregents
22 Defines admission requirements for state four-year college and university system 9courses and credits; examinations)					xregents
23 Other important policies GED count toward grad rate					x

Policy Audit: Next Steps

What are the top five policies that would be most helpful to change the graduation rate?

Policy	Specific aspect of policy that should be reviewed	Action Steps for Graduation Matters Billings
Legal school leaving age	Unfunded mandate	
Conditions for leaving school legally		X standardized exit interview
Defines the codes and practices that are used in the data system to track students who exit high school with or without graduating		
Pupil progression policy (promotion/retention) grades K to 8	Social promotion	x
Pupil progression policy (promotion/retention) grades 9 to 12		
Criteria for awarding high school credit per course, including summer school and credit recovery programs	Nova net online	x
"Weights" for high school course grades		
Minimum GPA needed to participate in sports, extra-curricular activities, etc.		
Attendance and tardiness policies	Make effective	x
Relationship of attendance and tardiness policies to official "count" for daily membership		
Relationship of attendance, tardiness, and behavior marks to students' grades		
"Truancy" (chronic, habitual, sanctions and supports)		
Conditions for in- and out-of-school suspensions		
Sanctions associated with in-school suspensions		
Sanctions associated with out-of-school suspensions		
Support for "off-track" students		Xdistrict wide policies
Conditions for assignment to juvenile justice system		
Age of eligibility for GED programs relative to legal age for leaving school		
High school graduation requirements (courses and credits; examinations)		X alternative diplomas
Admission requirements for Career Center (course and credits; examinations)		
Admission requirements for two-year colleges (course and credits; examinations)		
Admission requirements for state four-year college and university system 9courses and credits; examinations)		
Other important policies		

What is a "Listening Session?"

The GMB Founding Partners learned a lot about the drop out issues in our community from school data, but were missing the stories behind the numbers.

To dig deeper into the causes of drop out in our community Graduation Matters partners were trained to conduct listening questions around identified issues.   The sessions were not a research study.

The purpose of "listening sessions" was to:
1. Understand the story behind some of the numbers in the hard data. For example: students who drop out are more likely to have attendance problems. In the listening sessions we asked why.
2. Learn about community thoughts/perceptions and desires regarding school success.
3. Lay the groundwork for identifying specific goals and actions for Graduation Matters.

Listening Session #s:
- Twenty individuals were trained to facilitate sessions and take notes.
- Each listening session had one facilitator and one note-taker.
- The sessions were not recorded, so the record of the data relies on the notes and the memory of the facilitator.
- The following listening sessions were conducted
  - 26 sessions with teachers (all high schools and middle schools, as well as Lincoln Center programs)
  - 7 sessions with students (Skyview, Senior, West, GED program)
  - 4 sessions with principals (Elementary, Middle School, and High School)
  - 4 session with parents (Skyview, Senior, West)
  - 1 session with staff (Lincoln Center)
  - 2 sessions with counselors, social workers, Tumbleweed staff etc. (Senior, West)
- Over three hundred individuals participated in the Listening Sessions.

Listening Session Analysis
- The notes from the Listening Sessions were analyzed using qualitative analysis software (NVIVO) by a data analyst at United Way of Yellowstone County who did not participate in any of the sessions.
- In addition, Kristin Lundgren, who conducted many sessions reviewed the notes and analyzed them thematically.
- The results were combined and reviewed with other Listening Session facilitators and note-takers to double check the findings.
- Summary of the results are on the following pages.

Themes from Graduation Matters Billings Listening Sessions

Identified Issue: ATTENDANCE

A look at Billings school data shows that many youth who drop out of school are more likely to have attendance problems. The majority have missed one third or more of the time – that is one and half or more days a week, or about one week or more every month….

1. In your experience, why do students struggle with attendance?

Parents/guardians not engaged:	• Don't value education – no prior role models • Have had a bad experience with education…. • Mental health issues, substance abuse
Students are not engaged	• Coursework is irrelevant, do not feel teachers care • Do not feel they belong with peers. • No hope to catch up • They already failing • Substance abuse, mental health, family problems, physical illness…

Students don't believe there will be a consequence, and K-8 there *is* no real consequence.

Some high school students work late and 8 AM is too early of a start time.

2.   What school policies/procedures/practices are helpful at encouraging attendance? Not helpful?

What works	• Options (in scheduling as well as curriculum) such as Career Center, Gradpoint, Transitions… • Credit Recovery option at West and Career Center where kids who failed due to attendance but were passing otherwise can recover credit the next semester if they miss seven days or less. • Incentives such as Senior's Incentive Day. • Late In on Wednesdays (extra sleep or extra time with teachers) • Small class size (low ratio of students to teacher) • Attendance clerk… and personnel to follow up
What doesn't work	• Lack of K-8 Attendance Policy. Patterns get established early and are hard to break. • Lack of option for the majority of kids (Career Center not an option for many, Gradpoint only available to kids who have failed etc.) • Large class size: teachers cannot teach to all levels; kids who need help less likely to ask for help and more in need of asking for help, etc. Both teachers and students feel overwhelmed and powerless. • No attendance clerk or personnel to follow up • Ten-Day rule was cited as not helpful by struggling students and its efficacy questioned by administrators and counselors. *Teachers consistently bemoaned the lack of Bridges. They felt it was an effective deterrent. Kids stayed in school and passed classes because they did not want to go to "summer school." According to teachers it was the most effective tool they had to get 8th graders to attend and pass classes.*

3.   What family policies/procedures/practices are helpful at encouraging attendance? Not helpful?

What works	• Parent expectations that you must go to school. • Consequences for failing or skipping (take phone away for example) • Not planning vacations during school

- Teacher communication to parents – in some cases

What doesn't work
- Parents who decide to "homeschool" rather than accept responsibility for child's attendance
- Parenting which tolerates skipping school.
- Parents who feel powerless over middle or high school behavior.
- Parents who don't check up on their kids
- Parents who cannot check up on kids: substance abuse, mental health, illness

4. If there was one thing you could do to improve attendance, what would you do?

Most consistent response is: Revise current K-8 Attendance Policy so it has more real consequences for failure to attend.

Other themes:

4) Focus on proficiency requirements not attendance requirements.
5) Create schedule options for students: for example, have a track where kids can attend school from 10 – 5 instead of 8-3.
6) Create curriculum options for students: for example, practical math options, more flexibility with English texts, more access to online and college options for all students, the ability to test out of classes (receive credit for demonstrated proficiency).

Identified Issue: FAILED CORE CLASS

A look at school data shows that many youth who drop out of school are more likely to have failed freshman math or English

1. In your experience, what are the reasons students fail a core course?

- They were already behind when they started (due to mobility, social promotion, lack of parental support…)
- Freshman especially, due to past experience, don't truly believe that failing matters (in the past they were able to pass from grade to grade irregardless of attendance or grades)
- Students are not engaged in the subject (especially Freshman English and Math) – feel they are not relevant
- Extenuating circumstances: poor mental health, substance abuse, illness (in student or parent)
- Large class size

2. What school policies/procedures are helpful at encouraging a passing grade? Not helpful?

What works
- Early identification of problems and ability to track students (for example, Read 180)
- Flexibility with curriculum (ability to tailor texts, for example, to students in the class)
- Curriculum that connects to the real world of students (for example, business math, or extracurriculars like photography)
- Caring teachers
- Small class size
- Availability of tutoring

Not helpful
- Inability to identify and track early on or in high school (especially in math)
- Lack of flexibility with curriculum (i.e. cannot chose texts to adapt to students, cannot provide a "test out option," cannot provide online options to most)
- Irrelevant curriculum (especially freshman year, students are taking all core classes – no room for engaging electives… and core classes are very standard – no diversity of options with texts)
- Large class size (students less likely to seek help, ask questions; teachers overwhelmed)
- Inconsistent grading practices (if a teacher weighs homework heavily, a student who understands the content but does not turn in the homework will fail; in a course where a teacher weighs tests heavily, a student who understands the homework, but is a poor test taker may fail..). It is up to every individual

teacher what constitutes passing – not up to a standard measurement of knowledge.

- Teachers who don't care – for example, teachers who are not supportive of extracurricular activities; teachers who make disparaging comments about students; teachers who are unavailable for extra help

3. What family policies/procedures are helpful at encouraging a passing grade? Not helpful?

What works

- Families who are familiar with and use powerschool.
- Parents who have expectations that children succeed.
- Parents who communicate with teachers.

What doesn't work

- Parents who decide to "homeschool" rather than accept responsibility for child's grades or attendance
- Disengaged Parents: mental health, substance abuse issues, illness
- Disengaged Parents: failed school themselves and they are fine
- Disengaged Youth: mental health, substance abuse, illness, family problems

4. If there was one thing you could do to make sure every student passes their core courses, what would it be?

- Address the issue of social promotion in the early grades. Retention may not work but neither does social promotion.
- Create more flexible, relevant curriculum options for students. For example, more "Career Center" type options, more online options, ability of students to test out through proven mastery. This could include adding a seventh period to the school day.
- Be driven by content mastery not seat time.

APPENDIX 4: **Significant Risk Factors by School Level**[13]

Risk Category and Risk Factor	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Individual Background Characteristics			
• Has a learning disability or emotional disturbance		✓	✓
Early Adult Responsibilities			
• High number of work hours		✓	✓*
• Parenthood			✓*
Social Attitudes, Values, & Behavior			
• High-risk peer group		✓*	✓
• High-risk social behavior		✓*	✓
• Highly socially active outside of school			✓
School Performance			
• Low achievement	✓*	✓*	✓*
• Retention/over-age for grade	✓*	✓*	✓*
School Engagement			
• Poor attendance	✓*	✓*	✓*
• Low educational expectations		✓*	✓*
• Lack of effort		✓	✓
• Low commitment to school		✓	✓*
• No extracurricular participation		✓	✓*
School Behavior			
• Misbehavior	✓	✓	✓*
• Early aggression	✓	✓	
Family Background Characteristics			
• Low socioeconomic status	✓*	✓*	✓*
• High family mobility		✓*	
• Low education level of parents	✓	✓	✓*
• Large number of siblings	✓		✓
• Not living with both natural parents	✓	✓	✓*
• Family disruption	✓		
Family Engagement/Commitment to Education			
• Low educational expectations		✓*	
• Sibling has dropped out		✓	✓
• Low contact with school		✓*	
• Lack of conversations about school		✓*	✓

Key: ✓ indicates that the risk factor was found to be significantly related to dropout at this school level in one study. ✓ indicates that the risk factor was found to be significantly related to dropout at this school level in two or more studies.

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