
Graduation
Matters
Montana
gmm.mt.gov



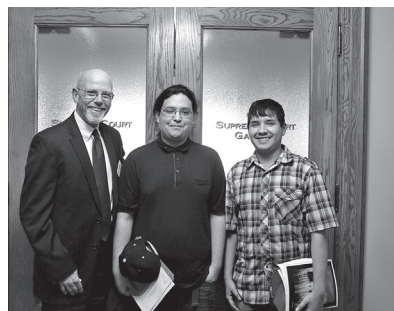
Graduation Matters Montana Progress Report

In today's economy, a high school diploma, at minimum, is necessary for Montana's young people to have an opportunity for economic success. In 2010, State Superintendent Denise Juneau launched Graduation Matters Montana (GMM), an initiative to reduce Montana's dropout rate and to ensure students are graduating from high school prepared for their next steps in life.

Since launching GMM in 2010, the state's graduation rate has increased from 80.7 percent in 2009 to 85.4 percent in 2014, and the dropout rate has decreased from 5 percent in 2009 to 3.7 percent in 2014. More than 700 fewer students dropped out in 2014 than in 2009, representing a \$4.3 million annual boost to the local economy. Fifty-three communities now have a GMM initiative, representing more than 75 percent of Montana's high school students. A key strategy of Graduation Matters Montana is to encourage local communities to develop strong partnerships with schools, students, families, local businesses and community leaders.

Private Sector Partnerships

Since 2011, Graduation Matters Montana has raised more than \$1.2 million in private funds to grant directly to school-community efforts to raise graduation rates and improve college and career preparedness. The Dennis and Phyllis Washington Foundation helped establish the GMM Challenge Fund with an initial donation of \$450,000. In 2014, they renewed their commitment to Graduation Matters Montana by giving another \$450,000 donation. Other foundations and businesses have generously contributed to Graduation Matters Montana including: State Farm Insurance, Steele Reese Foundation, First Interstate Bank Foundation, Northwestern Energy, Optimum Cable, Applied Materials, AT&T, IBM, MEA-MFT, DA Davidson, and the Going to the Sun Rally Foundation.



College Readiness Partnerships

In 2012, GMM created the GMM-SAF College Readiness Fund through a partnership with the Student Assistance Foundation, which has granted GMM \$50,000 each year for a total of \$150,000 to increase completion rates for college student financial aid applications, called the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Last year's GMM grantees brought in an additional \$2.7 million in federal grant funding for Montana students and families.

Career Readiness Partnerships

The Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) Railway Foundation supported GMM last year with a \$50,000 contribution to support high school college-career pipelines in four Bakken-impacted communities in eastern Montana (Glasgow, Glendive, Sidney, and Wolf Point) GMM teams are developing partnerships with local colleges and businesses to offer or expand dual credit, financial literacy, career exploration, and certification programs.

Key Strategies in Graduation Matters Communities

GMM communities leverage local resources and build partnerships to help every student graduate from high school prepared for their next steps in life. Each initiative is unique as GMM is “locally designed, locally implemented, based on what works in Montana” GMM communities share what is working in their efforts through regular communication with the Office of Public Instruction and through the annual GMM Summer Summit.

Here's a look at some successful GMM initiatives and practices designed to help Montana students succeed.

1. GMM Communities are piloting new interventions and improving implemented strategies.

- **Graduation Matters Laurel:** The Laurel High School staff recognize that freshman have a difficult time transitioning from junior high to high school. Through GMM, the GM Laurel team learned about GM Polson's peer mentoring program called “Link Crew,” a freshman mentoring program that helps students transition into high school. This year, the GM Laurel High School has 35 mentors and 154 mentees working together in their school community through a beginning of the year orientation and activities throughout the school year.
- **Graduation Matters Thompson Falls:** Students must have four years of English to graduate from Montana high schools, and the GMM Thompson Falls team found through analyzing their data that too many students had too few English credits. Last year, GM Thompson Falls offered its first summer session English credit recovery class for 30 students. The program incorporates a multi-dimensional team of a school counselor, a special education teacher and

an English teacher. The goal for the 2015 summer session is to double the number of students participating to 60 students.

- **Graduation Matters Arlee:** The YES program, an alternative approach to credit recovery, supports at-risk students through individualized coursework provided by Acellus and the Montana Digital Academy. The eight week program is open for 12 hours each week and led by a certified teacher. Eight students graduated in 2013 because of the YES program and student demand for the program is increasing. This summer, 26 students recovered credits and are on the path to graduate.

- **Graduation Matters Billings:** The Billings School District, in coordination with the OPI, implemented the Montana HiSET (formally the GED) Options program as another pathway for students to obtain a high school diploma. The students who participate in this program have the capability to complete high school but are behind in credits and are at risk of leaving school without a diploma. GM Billings helped 15 participants in the HiSET Options program graduate. They plan to double their enrollment in the program for the 2014-2015 school year.

2. **GMM teams are involving students from the beginning which gives the team critical insights into the experiences of students and what works to keep more students in school.**

- **Graduation Matters Livingston:** Park High School is redesigning their high school. GM Livingston had students participate in a school evaluation process, in which students were interviewed and asked to remember a time when they felt very successful in learning or teaching. After their thoughts were captured, GM Livingston was able to evaluate patterns in the stories. It was striking how many students recalled being a teacher through mentoring or coaching. GM Livingston learned that Park High School students value highly interactive, hands-on learning opportunities, as well as valuing environments where they feel connected and accepted in. This information helped GM Livingston improve their school redesign.

- **Graduation Matters Great Falls:** Last year GMM Great Falls started a student forum which meets quarterly to discuss how to improve graduation rates and academic outcomes for all students in Great Falls. Fifty students from middle and high school grades identified five-main barriers that deter students from succeeding: substance abuse, home - life problems, learning disabilities, limited motivation and bullying. This year, the group is creating an action plan for how students can address these issues and help their peers stay on the track to graduate. Students in this group reach out to their peers and community through a partnership with Star Radio, which donates time for a student run radio show. Student DJs choose their own songs and talk about the negative impacts of not graduating from school. Often students call in to make song requests or to ask questions about the challenges and solutions to staying in school.

- **Graduation Matters Frazer:** GM Frazer has created a student council that weighs in on school improvement efforts, school policies and practices, and new school programming efforts. The student council manages their own budget and polices, and facilitates their meetings in accordance to Robert’s Rules of Order. A student representative sits on the district’s school improvement team and advises adults on what’s working and not working for the student body. In 2013, 100 percent of Frazer seniors graduated.

3. GMM communities are involving businesses, community leaders and parents. A central strategy of GMM is community collaboration. Local Graduation Matters initiatives invite non-educators to the table to discuss community challenges and to find opportunities to work together to support every student graduating from high school.

- **Graduation Matters Kalispell:** GM Kalispell is partnering with Big Brothers & Big Sisters of Flathead County to launch a mentoring program for struggling high schools students. In its first year, 12 community mentors worked with students; they are actively recruiting more mentors for the upcoming school year.

- **Graduation Matters Browning:** The Graduation Matters Browning team realized that community involvement happens in two ways: involve more parents and community members inside the school; and help students become more involved in their community outside the school. With this in mind, students hosted a fundraiser to help community members struggling with homelessness. The event was a Montana State University Bobcat vs. University of Montana Grizzly themed drop-out prevention pep rally. The pep rally raised \$3,000 for the Families in Transition housing program.

- **Graduation Matters Lincoln:** GM Lincoln is making their school more welcoming to parents because they know when parents are more involved, students succeed. One of their strategies is to increase parental participation in Open Houses and parent-teacher conferences through student incentives. Students are eligible to win an iPad that features an engraved GM Lincoln logo. Students qualify when parents attend Open Houses and parent-teacher conferences and visit with teachers. The more teachers a parent meets with, the more times that student has their name put in the raffle bowl. At the meetings, teachers discuss the requirements students need to graduate. GM Lincoln has increased parent and student turnout and created an expectation that all Lincoln High School students will graduate.

4. **GMM communities are analyzing graduation data and student-level data to target their efforts.**

- **Graduation Matters Hardin:** The GM Hardin team uses their student data to identify trends in students at risk of dropping out of school. By evaluating their data, the GM Hardin team honed in on students who are falling behind in their freshmen year and are more likely to dropout. The team started a Freshmen Academy that is serving 22 at-risk students. The Academy provides students with additional supports to help students accumulate credits to set them on the road to graduate.
- **Graduation Matters Lockwood:** Through shared data discussions with the Billings School District, GM Lockwood (a K-8 school district) recognized that too many of their students were not successfully transitioning into the larger Billings district high schools. The GM Lockwood team is planning to implement an adult mentoring program to improve connections and support from local Lockwood volunteers. Their goal this first year is to match 10 students with local mentors.

- **The Office of Public Instruction Early Warning System** An Early Warning System (EWS) uses readily available school, student, and other live data to identify students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Students are identified early on so that action can be taken to help keep the student in school. Following a three-year pilot with 13 Montana communities, the OPI has connected its EWS to the secure section of the OPI's GEMS data website. To access the EWS for a local school, a permission form must be submitted and approved. To learn more about this incredible FREE resource contact Eric Meredith at emeredith@mt.gov or 444-3642.
- **Graduation Matters Livingston:** Freshman transition is a focus for Park High School. By using the data collected through an Early Warning System (EWS), they are better equipped to identify students struggling with transition. School staff can now implement interventions to prevent students from leaving school. Approximately 240 eighth graders and 120 ninth graders benefit from transition work annually. They hope to increase the impact of these efforts this year.

5. **GMM communities are tracking American Indian graduation rates and implementing innovative strategies to help all American Indian students succeed.**

- **Graduation Matters Missoula:** The Missoula County Public Schools' (MCPS) Indian Education department hired three American Indian Specialists to work throughout the school district. The personal connections, targeted outreach, and positive cultural connections are helping more American Indian students graduate. To help build community and support for students, the Indian Education Department hosts powwows, social events, and presents to classes on the importance of American Indian heritage. Sunday FunDay is an opportunity for

students to get help with homework, use computers, eat lunch, and learn skills in beading and art. Since 2007, the graduation rate of American Indian students in MCPS has gone from 57 percent to 82 percent.

- **Graduation Matters Columbia Falls:** GM Columbia Falls is implementing strategies to meet the needs of students who have experienced trauma in their lives with a particular focus on homeless students and on American Indian students who are at risk of dropping out of school. They are working with the University of Montana's National Children's Trauma Center to develop trainings for staff and program interventions to benefit students who are impacted by trauma.
- **Graduation Matters Rocky Boy:** GM Rocky Boy is reaching out to students' family members to support American Indian students' completion of the college financial aid application, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The GM Rocky Boy team has a goal of 100 percent of their senior class completing the FAFSA, filling out a college application, and being prepared to attend college.

Next Steps for Graduation Matters Montana

As communities learn more about who is at risk of leaving school and why, they are adapting strategies to help all students succeed. OPI strives to support these efforts through public-private partnerships, the sharing of effective practices, and targeted support to local GMM teams.

Graduation Matters Montana is focusing on addressing these opportunities and challenges:

- **Credit Recovery:** Many schools have implemented credit accumulation interventions to support students staying on the path to graduation. Increased flexibility and understanding of home life responsibilities that students have has made these programs even more successful. Continuing to offer credit recovery options for students who are credit deficient is essential. This is an area that can be strengthened by continued collaboration and improvement of Montana Digital Academy and growing the shared community learning network of GMM.
- **American Indian Achievement Gap:** American Indian students continue to drop out in disproportionate rates compared to non-Native students. OPI is working with districts, advocacy organizations and communities to implement strategies to address the challenges these students confront. OPI's Schools of Promise Initiative is one of several interventions. The Schools of Promise initiative improves leadership, management, instruction, and incorporates cultural values of the community into the school. Students are brought into the process to offer their perspective on the initiative.

- **College and Career Readiness:** The OPI has forged partnerships with the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE), Student Assistance Foundation and Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) Railway to increase the impact of Graduation Matters Montana. In addition, the OPI is committed to supporting the implementation of Montana’s Common Core Standards to provide a grade-by-grade pathway to a high quality education for all students.

- **Dual Credit Courses:** Montana is making great progress to increase dual credit opportunities for students. In a partnership with OCHE and local school districts, dual credit opportunities are more accessible and more high school students are earning college credits while still in high school. Since the spring of 2012, dual enrollment has increased 96 percent. That means that more than 1,000 additional students earned college credits while still in high school.
- **Universal ACT:** Through a collaboration with OCHE’s GEAR UP program, every high school junior in Montana can take the ACT at no cost to them or their families. In the past two years, more than 28,000 students have taken the ACT and Montana is getting a complete picture of how well the K-12 public education system is preparing all students for life after high school.

Graduation Matters Communities

North West

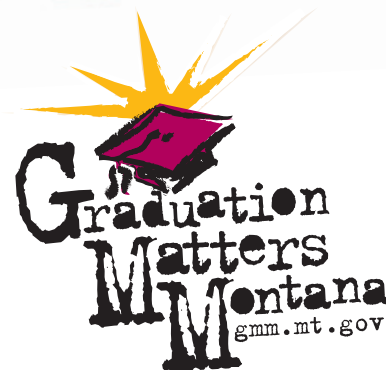
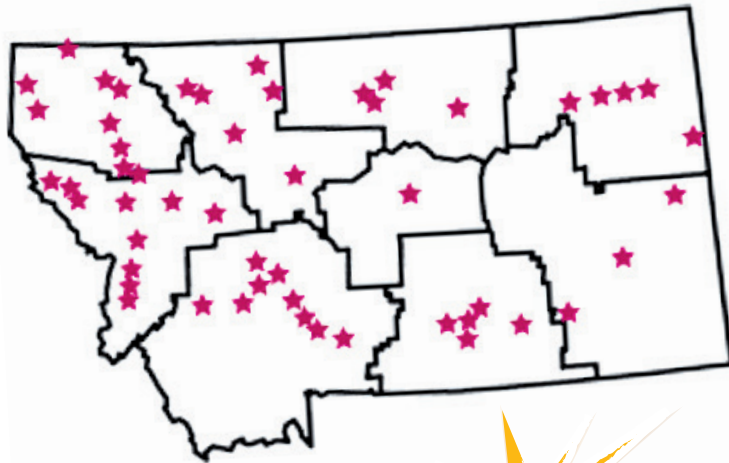
Eureka
Columbia Falls
Kalispell
Libby
Polson
Troy
Whitefish

North Central

Browning
Cascade
Cutbank
Great Falls
Heart Butte
Shelby

Hi-Line

Box Elder
Harlem
Havre
Hays Lodge Pole
Rocky Boy



North East

Frazer
Glasgow
Poplar
Sidney
Wolf Point

South East

Glendive
Lame Deer
Miles City

Western

Arlee
Corvallis
Hamilton
Hot Springs
Lincoln
Missoula
Plains
St. Ignatius
St. Regis
Ronan
Stevensville
Thompson Falls

Central

Lewistown

South Central

Billings
Hardin
Laurel
Lockwood
Pryor

Four Rivers

Anaconda
Belgrade
Bozeman
Boulder
Butte
Livingston
Helena
Three Forks
Townsend



For more information about Graduation Matters Montana, email graduationmatters@mt.gov or visit our website, <http://gmm.mt.gov>

