



Research Agenda

Revised & Approved: 7-16-2026

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 & Workforce Data Governing Board publishes a research agenda describing research areas and priority questions. 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) individually sponsor the agenda questions and work collaboratively to address the agenda, sharing, linking, and utilizing longitudinal and point-in-time data. 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 research areas:

Pathways and Pipelines: Study of the entry, transition, and exit points students and individuals take through specific education levels, services and programs, and labor sectors. Questions for this agenda item include, but are not limited to:

1. 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?
 - ✓ *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.
 - ✓ *Sponsor:* Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education
2. Through what pathways do nontraditional students return to educational and training opportunities in Montana? What are common characteristics of individuals



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who return to complete K-12 equivalencies and individuals that return to postsecondary offerings? How do their workforce outcomes change?

- ✓ *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.
 - ✓ *Sponsor:* Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education
3. Does Montana provide K-12 completers, specifically students and individuals with special needs, validated programmatic opportunities for success in the post-secondary and workforce environment?
- ✓ *Value to Montana:* About 14% (over 21,000) of Montana PK-12 students are receiving special education services under IDEA. Federal and state laws require additional services and transition plans to prepare special education students for success after high school. However, there are major disparities across the state in terms of transition services provided and the success rate of these young adults in careers or college after they graduate. In addition to federal and state obligations to ensure every student is prepared for success, Montana's economic demands require our state to intentionally engage all potential workforce development sectors.
 - ✓ *Sponsor:* Office of Public Instruction

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:

4. 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 matriculating, are they leaving the state for education and/or workforce opportunities or are they staying in Montana? Of particular interest are outcomes of students with special needs, students classified as low socioeconomic status, and students of American Indian classification.
- ✓ *Value to Montana:* The MUS, Reach Higher Montana, and private philanthropy makes substantial annual investments to improve college access and opportunities. Improved analytics would help us target and evaluate interventions.
 - ✓ *Sponsor:* Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education
5. What is the relationship between K-12 CTE concentrators and entrance and immediate success in a Montana Department of Labor & Industry apprenticeship program, work-based certificate program, or industry-recognized credential



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program, or entrance and immediate success in a Montana University System college-level certificate program?

- ✓ *Value to Montana:* The state has long sought to coordinate K-12/MUS/and DLI data and initiatives to reduce silos and better prepare young people for success in their careers and post-secondary studies after high school, in a way that aligns with the state's economic demands. Studying CTE concentrator data to ensure alignment with market demands and post-secondary or college training pathways will better inform state CTE policies, program investments, and initiatives.
 - ✓ *Sponsor:* Office of Public Instruction
6. What workforce outcomes result following the attainment of a postsecondary degree or credential? How do the returns of postsecondary attainment vary by program of study or other characteristics of the student?
- ✓ *Value to Montana:* Montana post-secondary institutions are one important component of workforce training, and therefore it is essential to understand if post-secondary students are graduating in fields that align with workforce demand. Understanding the returns to postsecondary attainment in the Montana workforce will help educators, students, and policymakers make data-driven decisions about investments in postsecondary education.
 - ✓ *Sponsor:* Department of Labor & Industry
7. How might Montana identify short-term education and training programs that qualify for Workforce Pell under federal rules, and what data and methodological approaches can the state use to address small sample sizes when assessing program outcomes such as completion, employment, and value-added earnings?
- ✓ *Value to Montana:* Workforce Pell creates new opportunities for Montanans to access short-term, in-demand training, but many Montana programs will have small cohorts that complicate outcome measurement. Identifying which short-term programs qualify for Workforce Pell and developing sound methods to evaluate outcomes with limited sample sizes will help the state implement these new rules.
 - ✓ *Sponsor:* Department of Labor & Industry

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:

8. How might Montana establish improved data connections across K-12 and higher education to support student success in federally funded programs that span K-12 through higher education?



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- ✓ *Value to Montana:* Montana embraces the positive goals that federally funded programs such as Perkins, Gear Up, and Talent Search aim to bring to student outcomes. Advancing connections across K-12 and higher education will identify where improvements in student supports are needed in areas such as matriculation, completions, transitions between education levels, and program parameters.
 - ✓ *Sponsor:* Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education
9. What is the relationship between K-12 math completion and academic entry and success in the Montana University System?
- ✓ *Value to Montana:* The State Board of Education, through joint initiative of the Board of Public Education and Board of Regents, passed a resolution in November 2024 calling for additional secondary/post-secondary coordination and alignment in addressing math proficiency in high school. Lack of proficiency in math has long been recognized as a problem for the state. The 69th Legislature passed HB 338 adding numeracy to the state's targeted early intervention programs. As a pressing PK-20 issue acknowledged by multiple state agencies, the connection between secondary and post-secondary math achievement should be examined in parallel with early intervention strategies. Strengthening this bridge could reduce the need for academic support upon entry into the Montana University System (MUS) and promote on-time graduation.
 - ✓ *Sponsor:* Office of Public Instruction
10. How has teacher compensation in Montana changed in response to the incentives created under the STAARS Act?
- ✓ *Value to Montana:* Significant investments in public schools were made under HB 252, including incentives to raise entry-level teacher pay and to expand career and technical education opportunities for middle and high school students through Future Ready payments tied to opportunities validated through a new credential registry. Researching whether the legislation is effective in achieving its stated objectives will help inform future policies and investments in Montana's public education system.
 - ✓ *Sponsor:* Department of Labor & Industry