Minutes
Montana Board of Education
November 21, 2025 | UM-Missoula

Friday, November 21, 2025

Members present: Lieutenant Governor Juras, Chair, Board Member Tharp, Board Member Maxwell, Board Member Slinger, Board Member Schmidt, Board Member Nieskens, Board Member Quinlan, Board Member Rasmussen (online), Board Member Comstock, Board of Regents Chair Buchanan, Regent Bough, Regent Dombrouski, Regent Southworth, Regent Hoyer, and Regent Jasper. Ex Officio members present: Superintendent Hedalen and Commissioner Christian.

Members excused: Regent Folkvord

Opening by Lieutenant Governor Juras | 00:00:22

Lieutenant Governor Juras called the meeting to order and took attendance.

Approval of 2024 Board of Education Minutes | 00:1:41

Lieutenant Governor Juras asked for any corrections or additions to the minutes. There were none so the minutes were approved.

Adoption of the 2025 Board of Education agenda | 00:02:14

Chair Tharp moved and Regent Jasper seconded adoption of the agenda. It was unanimously approved on a voice vote.

Welcome and Opening Remarks by Lieutenant Governor Juras | 00:04:05

Lieutenant Governor Juras thanked the members for their service and for the long hours and resources they devote to improving educational opportunities for Montana students. She recognized the Board of Public Education's work implementing public charter schools. She also recognized the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Educations work expanding apprenticeships, career education, and opportunities to earn credit while working. She said that she and the Governor share a goal of ensuring every Montana student has a path to reach their full potential. The Lieutenant Governor then highlighted education legislation from the 2025 session and said she anticipated another busy session for education in 2027.

Remarks by Superintendent Hedalen | 00:07:26

Superintendent Hedalen said the boards share many common goals and are collaborating well to increase opportunities for students across Montana. The Superintendent described visiting schools to see early literacy programs in action and emphasized that students reading by third grade is critical to improving academic outcomes. The Superintendent also noted that charter schools are helping to increase the teacher pipeline. She discussed data modernization, including new digital tools for educators and opportunities to partner on research with the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education and other agencies. The Superintendent thanked the Digital Academy for its leadership in producing AI guidance for schools and noted that the Digital Academy Frontier Learning Lab at UM is helping schools integrate AI into classrooms. Mental health was identified as an area needing continued work, based on feedback from student panels and teachers. The Superintendent also spoke about opportunities for students in college, career, or the military and recognized Board Member Nieskens as a champion for military students.

Remarks by Chair Buchanan | 00:10:58

Chair Buchanan thanked the Lieutenant Governor for her leadership in education and said that the collaboration among the boards has reached a high level since the Board of Education was created 53 years ago. He said that the overarching theme of the Regents' meeting this week was resident student access, particularly how to increase the rate at which Montana resident students enroll in college, noting that national enrollment and degree attainment projections are bleak while Montana's projections look better. He called this the Board of Regents' highest priority because when Montana succeeds in this area, workforce needs are met and families gain opportunity and living wages. He thanked the Governor and Lieutenant Governor for their appointments. He reported on the Regents' discussions with faculty regarding dual enrollment and expressed optimism about data modernization with Superintendent Hedalen. He noted that the Regents met with the legislative Education Interim Committee earlier in the day and acknowledged the Legislature's and Governor's strong investment in the MUS. He concluded by noting that the Regents unanimously endorsed the joint resolution on FAFSA completion and direct admissions.

Remarks by Chair Tharp | 00:14:53

Chair Tharp said serving as chair of the Board of Public Education has been the deepest honor of his long career in education. He praised the Board and its staff, noted that it is the smallest state agency, and thanked current and past board members. He discussed the unprecedented level of partnership among the Board of Public Education and the Regents, the Office of Public Instruction, the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, the Department of Labor and Industry, and the Legislature. He noted

that this week provided time with legislators, including the Education Interim Committee, and visits to charter schools to see the results of their funding and policy decisions. He recognized Board Member Slinger's invaluable perspective on the Board of Public Education and urged everyone to capitalize on the current cooperation. Chair Tharp spoke about the importance of mental health supports, applauded the Legislature's efforts to increase training requirements, and described the QPR, Mental Health First Aid, and CISM trainings he teaches across eastern Montana. He shared a personal connection to the issue and his commitment to reducing the stigma around mental health challenges.

Joint Resolution Supporting FAFSA Completion and Direct Admissions | 00:20:13

Lieutenant Governor Juras said that the Board of Regents and the Board of Public Education each passed the joint resolution unanimously this week and asked for a motion to approve it. Regent Buchanan moved and Board Member Tharp seconded the joint resolution.

Regent Hoyer spoke on behalf of K-12 education, describing a district with about 62% poverty and stating that FAFSA completion and direct admissions remove barriers for low-income students and students whose families have not had the opportunity to attend college.

Superintendent Hedalen thanked Commissioner Christian and the OCHE team, shared results from other states implementing similar efforts, and said that letters will be sent to students notifying them of the opportunity to attend Montana's universities, colleges, and other programs, with the help of education organizations in aligning messaging to school leaders.

Chair Tharp described his surprise at Montana's low FAFSA completion rates, highlighting the impact of direct admission letters on students who never saw themselves continuing after high school, and the many possible pathways for education beyond high school. He thanked the Office of Public Instruction and the Governor's Office for finding language acceptable to all parties and fully supported the resolution.

Regent Southworth recalled a survey of perceptions of higher education showing that the lowest-income Montanans overwhelmingly viewed college as unaffordable, while $9 million in FAFSA aid was left unclaimed that same year, and noted that data modernization is coming together with this effort. No public comment was received. The motion passed unanimously on a voice vote.

General Public Comment | 00:28:49

Rob Watson, Executive Director of School Administrators of Montana, spoke about House Bill 252, which increased teacher salaries and created the Future Ready payment, an incentive for districts to expand dual enrollment, career and technical education, and work-based learning. Watson noted that the Office of Public Instruction, the Department of Labor and Industry, and the Commissioner of Higher Education's office are collaborating on implementation. He said a recent webinar drew about 200 district leaders, and that students counted for the first payments in 2028 are current seniors in the class of 2026. Watson thanked the three agencies for their work.

Meeting Adjourned | 00:32:58