

MONTANA AND SCHOOL CHOICE

by Sharyl Allen, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Candidate

The new driver behind Montana school choice is the 2023 legislative session approval of:

- A public school district charter school. (This has been an option in Administrative Rule Ch. 55 for years.)
- A community choice charter school (being litigated).
- And new open enrollment options for all students with tuition paid by the district of residence.

Public School District Charter Schools – HB 549

Public charter schools -- legislative findings and intent. (1) The legislature finds that:

Parents desire education options for their children;

Expanding educational opportunities for K-12 education within the state is a necessary and valid purpose; and

Creating options that assist parents and encourage students to develop their full educational potential is vital to the economic competitiveness of the state.

It is the legislature's intent to establish public charter schools that are under the supervision of trustees who are elected by qualified electors pursuant to Article IV, section 2, and Article X, section 8, of the Montana constitution for the purposes of:

- (a) enhancing Montana's system of education to develop the full educational potential of each person
- (b) enabling parents to make decisions on how best to educate their children;
- (c) providing other public educational opportunities for all students, especially those at risk of academic failure;
- (d) encouraging and inspiring the use of different models of teaching, governing, scheduling, and providing instruction in both public charter schools and non-charter public schools to meet a variety of student needs;
- (e) (e) advancing Montana's commitment to the preservation of American Indian cultural identity, pursuant to Article X, section 1(2) of the Montana constitution, and to the elimination of the American Indian achievement gap by encouraging students, parents, and community members in Indian country to pursue alternative educational opportunities through public charter schools; and
- (f) ensuring accountability to the qualified electors and taxpayers in the community where the charter school is located.

It is the legislature's intent to create innovative and high-performing public charter schools under the general supervision of the Board of Public Education and under the supervision and control of trustees of the governing Board who are elected by qualified electors in the community where the charter school is located.

HB 203 - REVISING OUT-OF-DISTRICT AND TUITION LAWS TO INCREASE EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

Out-of-district attendance by parent or guardian request with no extenuating circumstances. (1) A child may be enrolled in and attend a school in a Montana school district that is outside of the child's district of residence at the request of the child's parent or guardian as described in this section. If the trustees of attendance approve of the child's attendance in a school of the district, the parent or guardian may be responsible for transportation. The district of residence is responsible for paying tuition fees to the district of attendance.

Few things matter more to parents than having their child's future more bright and filled with opportunities than their own. It often begins with the choice of their child's education.

Current Montana Options

Homeschooling – continues to be on the rise in our nation and our state. Homeschool Collectives exist around the state.

Private Schooling – increased possibilities where ESEA accounts exist, that regardless of zip code, children could access high-quality private schools, including religious ones. Montana has various private schools, Church-sponsored private schools, Democratic Free Schools, Community Schools, a Sussex School, and various residential private schools.

Public Charter Schools – Public choice schools funded with taxpayer funds. Montana has expanded this choice through school district-sponsored charter schools and added legislative funding. Several school districts have applied for and have approved charter school applications. Charter schools open in the fall of 2024 in their school districts. They could be an option for open enrollment under HB 203.

Open Enrollment Expansion allows parents to enroll their children in the public school district of their choice and have the district of residence pay state-approved tuition rates.

Tax Credit Scholarships – The Supreme Court Decision in Espinoza vs. Montana Department of Revenue said it best; "The supreme law of the land condemns discrimination against religious schools and families whose children attend them. They are community members too, and their exclusion from the scholarship program here is odious to our Constitution and cannot stand." This case from Montana parents set new uses for ESEA Scholarship programs.

SHARYL'S AGREEMENT STATEMENTS

As you read these statements, look for those statements that resonate with you as truth, and highlight, checkmark, and add your own "agree statements." The purpose is that you, too, can reflect upon what school choice means for Montana families and kids.

I concur with this statement from the America First Policy Institute, *"I do not believe in co-parenting with the government, and I never will. Parental rights are a God-given blessing. I am deeply saddened to see our country even debating who should have the right to raise our children."* - Lou Holz, AFPI Chair of the Center for 1776

I agree the English philosopher Bertrand Russell and the American philosopher John Dewey were correct when they said that *conventional authoritarian schools offer the choice of becoming either submissive or rebellious – and that neither provides a good preparation for living in a Republic or being responsible for your own life*. It begs the question of why we continue to promote and perpetuate the authoritarian, factory model schools of the past. What are your thoughts?

I agree: "Parents have a right to determine their child's education however they see fit. Perhaps it is the local public school with its standards, rules, and educational goals set by a local board. Maybe they will choose a private school with access to tax credit scholarship funds to help offset the cost. Another parent may seek a public charter school focusing on their child's strengths and potential, while some select homeschooling for various reasons. Whatever they choose, it is the responsibility of the onlookers to honor that it is a parental right.

The Supreme Court recognizes that this role includes the right to help steer their child's education, whether it is the right to learn a subject or the right to learn in religious schools.

I agree that there are excellent public schools with capable teachers. This past weekend, I listened to a senior pay tribute to his favorite teacher at his public school, a woman in technology and automotive teaching relevant skills and life lessons. This example occurs over and over in public schools across our state. In the throes of choice, the best choice could be your community's public school.

I also agree that there is not a right way to become "educated." There are as many ways as fingerprints, and the 21st century, with a COVID pandemic and explosion of technology, is opening paths never before imagined. Student-centered learning that builds on strengths is the new standard, not the exception, with each student blessed with talents and abilities that are different from others. This learning requires us to move away from schooling and embrace genuinely educating. This author believes that Great Falls School District's Paris Gibson Educational Center is Montana's best student-centered, individualized learning model.

I agree that school has become too vital a jobs project, contract-giver, and protector of the social order to allow itself to be "re-formed." We still use an authoritarian, factory model of education established in the mid-1800s, and reforms have come and gone without changing much.

I also agree that it takes a different type of reformer who sees learning needs met through methods that speak to every student's need and is willing to run risks for students to soar with their learning path and a hopeful future.

I agree that there has been a failure in our country's public education system from K--20. Ignoring the successes of our nation under God, teaching identity ideologies, failing to protect children's hearts and minds against false philosophies, and accepting mediocrity of student learning results are examples of failure. At the same time, I agree that parents and schools have confused responsibilities, which has aided in failures in the public education system.

I agree it is the responsibility of parents to raise their children, not government or government schools! It is the responsibility of teachers to provide an excellent education where students experience rigor, relevance, meaningful learning without "woke culture-degradation promoted and learning challenges that prepare them for their future.

I agree that the wrong things are measured in determining the success or failure of children. For example, a single-point-in-time test to determine student success or failure is flawed. Comparing children against other children misses the critical element of a human being's unique and different abilities – another flaw. Failing to measure a child against themselves and their growth is criminal.

I agree the public education system was created for two essential purposes: (1) – to educate our nation's citizens on what it would require to hang on to our Republic and (2) to provide an equal path to the American Dream for all children regardless of family origins or zip code.

I agree that teaching is a most honored and vital profession and that effective and valuable teachers will always be necessary for the Republic of our nation to flourish.

I agree with Russell Ackoff, "The only thing that is harder than starting something new is stopping something old." Parental dissatisfaction is the biggest driver of starting something new in their child's education options.

School choice exists because it is a parental right, and for decades, some Montanan parents who have chosen paths other than public schools still paid taxes that supported the public schools their children did not attend. Today's thinking has shifted to include:

- Parental choice beyond Public School and homeschooling
- Vouchers - Per pupil funding to follow the student to a school of choice
- Expanded Public Charter Options
- Expanded online options
- Education that meets student's diverse needs in various ways outside the traditional schoolhouse walls.
- Tax Credit Scholarships
- Education Savings Accounts
- Meaningful public schools

Finally, I believe the choice of school that crosses state lines is on the horizon. If a parent wishes to have their child enroll in the Khan World Academy at Arizona's ASU Prep, a Sudbury School in Idaho or Trinity Prep in Orlando is next. What if your son/daughter wanted to attend the top rodeo school or Australia's world-renowned animation school? It is about linking hopes and dreams to learning. I see the money following the student within the state and across state lines soon. What do you see?

CONCLUSION

I get asked often these days if I support school choice. I ask, "What do **you** mean by school choice?" As you can see from this response, beyond yes or no, the question deserves a more comprehensive answer than just district-run charter schools. I hope you can now answer others when asked where Sharyl Allen stands on school choice. Remember, the answer rests in parental rights of choice for their child's education – seeking the best because every child deserves no less.

I look forward to engaging with you through your comments, ideas, and other views.

Until next time, God be with you and yours,

Sharyl

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