

Panel Discussion – School Innovation

EDUCATION INTERIM COMMITTEE NAME
PAD MCCracken – JUNE 2026

CONTEXT – THE INNOVATION AND EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION WORKING GROUP

The [2025-2026 School Funding Interim Commission](#) was tasked with not only examining Montana's school funding formula, but first with examining Montana's educational system as a whole and *develop[ing] recommendations, objectives, and an implementation plan... to improve the basic system of free, quality, public elementary and secondary schools*. This work was often referred to as "Phase I" of the Commission's work but was formally the Innovation and Excellence in Education Working Group or IEEWG. The Commission contracted with the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) to facilitate this aspect of the Commission's work, and Janice Case and Matthew Bachand from NCEE presented a [summary](#) of the [IEEWG's final report](#) to the Education Interim Committee on March 16, 2026, highlighting several recommendations for the committee to consider exploring. Several of those recommendations related to school innovation, and today's panel discussion will focus on two:

1. Ensure flexibility for strategic staffing structures
2. Resolve and reconcile competing definitions for learner-centered design

STRATEGIC STAFFING

In a nutshell, strategic staffing means deploying resources (mainly educators) in a manner different than the traditional one-teacher, one-classroom model. In March, Molly Gold with NCSL [presented](#) on strategic staffing at the joint meeting of the Education Interim and Education Interim Budget Committees. A few members of the Education Interim Committee saw an example of strategic staffing on a visit to [Bishop Carroll High School in Calgary in 2023](#). The reasons for strategic staffing include benefits to:

- Students
 - Access to a greater variety of quality educators
 - Interdisciplinary learning
 - Greater student agency/ownership
 - Increased engagement
- Teachers
 - More collegiality; less isolation
 - More satisfaction; less burnout
 - More planning time; less repeated direct instruction

A number of national organizations are championing strategic staffing approaches, including:

- [Education First](#)
- [The National Center on Education and the Economy](#)
- [Next Education Workforce](#)

LEARNER-CENTERED DESIGN TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

There are a lot of different terms used in conversations about learner-centered design. For example, proficiency-based, competency-based, and mastery-based all appear to mean roughly the same thing: basing student advancement on the clear demonstration of knowledge and skill rather than on arbitrary seat time requirements. Some may dismiss concerns about the lexicon we use as mere semantics, but people are sensitive about educational reform and unnecessary resistance can emerge when people are confused by terminology and definitions.

In Montana we have used “proficiency-based learning” but currently have two different definitions between statute and administrative rule. We also use the following terms, sometimes without clear definitions: personalized learning, learner-centered system, and transformational learning.

PANELISTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following individuals will be participating in a panel discussion on middle school CTE:

- Krystal Smith, Opportunities and Innovative Learning Senior Manager, OPI
- McCall Flynn, Executive Director, Board of Public Education (BPE)
- Heather Hoyer, Superintendent, Great Falls Public Schools
- Matt Jensen, Superintendent, Kalispell Public Schools
- Pam Wright, Director of Transformational Learning, Missoula County Public Schools
- Todd Wester, Curriculum Director, Livingston Public Schools

The panelists were asked to address the following as part of the panel discussion:

- Are there regulatory (or other) barriers to strategic staffing? [NCSL slides](#) presented to the committee in March listed several that have come up in other states:
 - Teacher of record
 - Class size; student: teacher ratios
 - Instructional time
 - Data systems
- Do we have examples of strategic staffing happening in MT?
- Do Transformational Learning 2.0 grantee districts plan to experiment with strategic staffing? What would support them in this?
- Would Transformational Learning and Proficiency-based learning benefit from terminology alignment/better messaging?
- What other ways could the state better support school innovation?