



Education Interim Committee

69th Montana Legislature

PO BOX 201706
Helena, MT 59620-1706
(406) 444-3064
FAX (406) 444-3036

SENATE MEMBERS

DANIEL EMRICH
SARA NOVAK – Vice Chair
MATT REGIER
SUE VINTON

HOUSE MEMBERS

LEE DEMING
SHELLY FYANT
RANDYN GREGG
LINDA REKSTEN - Chair
MELISSA ROMANO

COMMITTEE STAFF

PAD MCCracken, Lead Staff
LAURA SANKEY KEIP, Staff Attorney
BECCA BROWN, Staff
ANIA ALDUENDA, Secretary

Public Comment for EDIC June 15, 2026

Name	City/State	Representing	Time & Date	Subject	Comment
Erin Solem	Culbertson, MT	Self	2:24 PM 6/14/2026	Montana Safe Schools Center-VAST	See Attachment 2
Jaylea Olson	Richey, MT	Self	9:34 PM 6/12/2026	Montana Safe Schools Center-VAST	As a rural Montana school, we've really benefited from the VAST program. It has strengthened our day-to-day school operations by giving us reliable support when student needs arise. In a small, frontier setting where resources are limited, having access to VAST has made a real difference. Most importantly, it's helped improve student well-being. Students are able to get timely support, which has led to better attendance, stronger engagement, and improved emotional regulation in school. It's also eased the load on staff and helped families feel more supported and connected to resources in the community. We appreciate the impact VAST has had on our school and strongly support continued funding for the program.
Melissa Tovaas	Bozeman, MT	School Services of Montana	10:54 AM 6/11/2026	School-based Services and Reversal of	See Attachment 1

				Free Care Rule (for Medicaid billing)	
Teri Wing	Missoula, MT	Self	1:32 PM 4/28/2026	School funding sources	I worked in the Missoula schools in a number of capacities for 14 years. During all of that time, the Legislature has put together a patchwork of bills to fund public schools. There has been no sustainable formula for funding sources. Lawsuits have played a major part in forcing the Legislature to act, the 1985 finding on the equality of educational opportunity, concluded by the Lobel decision in 1988 and HB28 in 1989 to adjust the funding formula for public schools. More lawsuits in 1991, 2002, and 2011. In response, rather than being proactive, our Legislatures over the years have reacted to adjust pieces and parts of the funding system. In 2026, districts around the state are asking voters, crushed by inflation, to approve more local money to fund the basics of school functioning. It is TIME for the state to proactively demonstrate their adherence to the requirements of the Montana Constitution and finally provide stable, legal, and durable funding for Montana's public schools!

Attachment 1



School Services of Montana
4055 Valley Commons Dr., Suite H
Bozeman, MT 59718
lwateman@mt-schools.org, mtovaas@mt-schools.org
(406) 272-0073, (406) 272-0021

June 11, 2026

Montana Education Interim Committee (EDIC)
1301 East 6th Avenue
Helena, MT 59601

RE: Support for reversal of Free Care rule (to increase school-based services)

Dear Members of the Committee:

On behalf of School Services of Montana (SSoM), we are writing to express our strong support of reversing the Free Care rule, which aims to increase mental health supports and services to students through schools by expanding Medicaid-reimbursement eligibility to any Medicaid-eligible student, instead of only the students on an IEP with a medical disability type.

As an organization dedicated to strengthening Montana schools and communities by serving as trusted partners in building capacity through professional learning, evidence-based guidance, and expanded access to resources, we see firsthand the challenges this legislation addresses. Every day, our team works with school districts across Montana, including districts of varying size and demographics. We understand that mental health is a priority in Montana's schools and communities, and we believe this legislation is a necessary step toward a practical solution.

Our organization, along with our national partner, RELAY, Inc., is uniquely positioned to help achieve its goals. SSoM has been successfully providing Medicaid billing assistance to Montana schools since 2014, including:

- Partnering with school districts to assist them with implementing SSoM's HIPPA-compliant, cloud-based Relay Medicaid Billing program, including ongoing training.
- Submitting eligible claims for psychological and social work services along with other direct care services included in a student's IEP for students with Medicaid through the online Relay Medicaid billing program.
- Coordinating with school districts and state-level agencies like OPI/DPHHS to help districts understand the rules, get set up for electronic billing, and confirm forms are correct for billing compliance.
- Tracking of Medicaid eligibility of students and help for school administrators to track claim details for budgeting purposes.

With Medicaid reimbursement expansion to any Medicaid-eligible student, SSoM would partner with RELAY, Inc., DPHHS, and the Office of Public Instruction, to identify any adjustments needed to the

School Services of Montana
PO Box 3193, Bozeman, MT 59772
www.mt-schools.org



software to assist school districts with this process. SSoM would recommend piloting with a few districts of different sizes to evaluate workflow needs and capacity before a statewide implementation. The Relay Medicaid billing program would need minimal changes to allow school districts to bill for mental health services to Medicaid-eligible students that are not participating in a district's IEP program.

Allowing schools to request reimbursement for all Medicaid-eligible students would generate an increase in annual revenue for schools. In turn, this revenue could be used in a number of ways to support students. For example, schools could hire professionals that are able to provide student behavioral health services to any student that needs the support. With predictable reimbursement revenue, these professionals could be employed by the school system rather than a 3rd party provider. Having a school employee fulfill this need means that the program will be designed locally to meet the unique needs of the students within that community. As we have seen in other states who have taken this step, this would allow sustainable, predictable funding going forward to provide this type of support in all schools.

We welcome the opportunity to sit down with you or your staff to discuss how we can act as a resource as this issue moves forward. Thank you for your leadership and for your continued dedication to Montana's schools, youth, and communities.

Sincerely,

Lisa Waterman

Lisa Waterman
Medicaid Billing Manager
School Services of Montana

Melissa Tovaas

Melissa Tovaas
Executive Director
School Services of Montana

Attachment 2

Dear Education Interim Committee,

I am writing this letter in support of the VAST program through Montana Safe Schools.

As a school counselor in rural Montana, I strongly support the continued funding and expansion of the VAST program. Access to mental health services can be extremely limited in rural communities, and VAST has helped bridge that gap by providing our students with free, confidential counseling services.

The impact of VAST on our students has been significant. Through their work with VAST counselors, students have learned valuable coping skills that help them manage stress, anxiety, family challenges, and other difficulties that can interfere with their academic and personal success. Students have also developed stronger self-advocacy skills, learning how to express their needs, seek support, and take an active role in their own well-being. As the school counselor, I have found it beneficial for the VAST counselors to communicate with me about the skills students are working on, so we can reinforce those skills through our weekly guidance class or in the classroom with their teachers.

One of the most important benefits of VAST is that students have access to a trusted adult outside their immediate community and school environment. In small rural communities, students often know everyone around them and may hesitate to discuss sensitive issues with someone they see every day. VAST provides a confidential space where students can speak openly with a caring professional who is not directly connected to their daily lives. This often allows students to build trusting relationships and engage more fully in the counseling process.

The positive effects extend beyond individual students. When students receive the support they need, they are better able to focus on learning, build healthy relationships, and contribute positively to the school climate. VAST has become an important partner in supporting student wellness and helping our school meet the growing mental health needs of our students.

For many rural Montana students, VAST provides access to services that would otherwise be unavailable due to distance, provider shortages, transportation barriers, or financial limitations. The program has made a meaningful difference in the lives of our students, families, and school community.

I strongly encourage continued investment in VAST so that students across Montana, especially those in rural communities, can continue to access these critical mental health supports.

Sincerely,

Erin Solem

Erin Solem

K-12 school counselor in rural Montana

Emailed Public Comment

June 12, 2026

Education Interim Committee

Montana Legislative Services Division
PO Box 201706
Helena, MT 59620

Chair and Members of the Education Interim Committee,

I am writing in support of the Montana Safe Schools Center and the continuation of its work serving schools across our state.

As a local emergency management professional, I have seen firsthand the importance of having trusted statewide expertise available to support school safety efforts. School districts face increasingly complex challenges related to emergency preparedness, threat assessment, crisis response, and safety planning. Many Montana communities, particularly rural districts, do not have the staffing, resources, or specialized expertise necessary to address these challenges independently.

The Montana Safe Schools Center fills a critical gap by providing guidance, training, technical assistance, and coordination that helps schools, law enforcement, emergency management agencies, and other partners work together more effectively. Their support strengthens local capabilities while helping ensure a consistent, evidence-based approach to school safety across Montana.

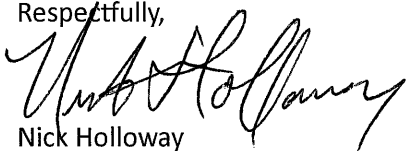
The Center's work in emergency operations planning, threat assessment, crisis response support, and professional training directly contributes to safer learning environments for students and staff. These services are especially valuable in rural and frontier communities where access to specialized school safety resources is often limited.

Montana remains one of the few states without a state supported Safe Schools Center. The expertise and relationships developed through the Montana Safe Schools Center should not be lost due to the expiration of grant funding. Sustainable support is essential to maintaining and expanding these critical services.

School safety requires ongoing attention and support. The Montana Safe Schools Center has become an important resource for schools and communities across Montana, and I encourage continued investment in its long-term sustainability.

Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to the safety and well being of Montana's students, educators, and communities.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nick Holloway", written over a horizontal line.

Nick Holloway

Missoula County Office of Emergency Management
Deputy Disaster and Emergency Services Coordinator