



# Montana Quality Education Coalition

*Quality Public Education ... Montana's Constitutional Guarantee*

Why should a school district and/or a statewide education-based organization consider becoming a member of the Montana Quality Education Coalition (MQEC)? At times, school trustees, education-based organizations, and, even, individual donors want to know why it/they should pay a membership fee to belong to MQEC. A legitimate question to be sure.

In response, the answer would be that MQEC has fought for the interests of children in Montana's public schools since its inception in 2001. And, based on actions taken by the recently concluded 68<sup>th</sup> Montana legislative session, the importance of MQEC's cannot be overstated. MQEC has, historically, been the "tip of the spear" in accepting the responsibility for protecting the language contained in Article X of the Montana Constitution. By becoming a MQEC member, a school district, an education-based organization, and, even, an individual donor will help MQEC to be in a constant state of readiness to pursue solutions in whatever venue required, whether that be before the Montana Legislature, the Montana Court system, or through engagement with the public to support Montana public education.

The Montana 68<sup>th</sup> legislative session came to a close during the first week in May, 2023. Difficult as it was and will continue to be through the legal process, MQEC, along with the Coalition of Advocates for Montana Public Schools and the Montana Federation of Public Employees, was able to assist in the passage of some significant positive public education bills. For example, bills such as:

1. **HB 15 - Implement K-12 Inflation.** Sustains a 10 consecutive year streak in which school funding is determined early in a legislative session, compared to previous trend where school funding would be determined last.
2. **HB 117 - Expand working retiree options under TRS.** This removes red tape from the process of qualifying a person for working retiree status and expands coverage to administrative positions, which had previously been excluded from this flexibility.
3. **HB 214 - Revise education laws related to remote instruction.** This bill revises educational definitions to distinguish in-person offsite instructional settings and as opposed to remote instruction.
4. **HB 257 - Expand funding for advanced opportunities program.** CTE funding is now at \$6 million per year, with \$4 million of the funds administered through advanced opportunity grants. This is an all-time high in CTE funding.
5. **HB 321 - \$73 million transfer to school facilities trust.** The school facilities trust will now be \$200 million and interest generated off of that trust will be used to GTB-subsidize major maintenance levies and debt service payments on bonds approved by voters.
6. **HB 332 - Health Insurance Trust.** This bill provides for \$40 million for startup funds for statewide school health trust. The trust must qualify no later than June 30, 2026 to claim these funds.
7. **HB 352 - Implement targeted interventions starting at age 4 to support 3rd grade reading proficiency.** This is groundbreaking for Montana in providing early childhood education on a

formula basis focused on early literacy. Options include any combination or all of a home-based program (\$1,000), summer “jumpstart” program (120 hours for ¼ ANB) and a classroom program that can be either half-time or full-time starting with children who turn 4 years of age on or before September 10<sup>th</sup> of the year of service.

8. **HB 408 - Expand innovative education tax credits and broaden permissible expenditures.** This bill expands the innovative education tax credit from \$2 million to \$5 million and now allows expenditure on equipment and facilities supporting innovative educational programming.
9. **HB 549 - Authorizing establishment of public charter schools.** MTSBA drafted this bill in collaboration with Representative Fred Anderson (Great Falls) and the Coalition of Advocates for Montana’s Public Schools. The bill is constitutionally compliant with schools supervised and controlled by popularly elected trustees and subject to general supervision by the Board of Public Education.
10. **HB 587 - Increase transparency and expand tax relief through 95 mills.** This bill ensures that the 95 mills are specifically and transparently devoted to supporting K-12 education funding. The 95 mills now fund the general fund GTB program (262% ratio) and provides \$30 million in permanent local property tax relief for countywide retirement levies. The bill also provides for a contingent spill over to further support GTB support for major maintenance levies and debt service payments due to voter approved bonds.
11. **HB 588 - Expand TEACH Act.** This bill ensures the eligibility of Class 5 provisional certified staff and to ensure that the “first three years of career” does not count for years when an individual is working under an emergency authorization.
12. **HB 749 - Expand Montana Digital Academy.** This bill provides funding for nationwide educational clearinghouse. The \$950,000 increase in funding will exponentially expand student access to high quality distance learning opportunities, all accessed through enrollment in a resident public school on a part-time or full-time basis.
13. **HB 833 - Establish teacher residency program.** This program funds approximately 70 new teachers each year in rural and isolated communities to help address recruitment and retention.
14. **HB 949 - Revise education laws related to data governance.** This bill creates a transparent education and workforce data governing board with authority over the linkage between education and workforce data gathered and maintained by state agencies to ensure that the data is used to benefit the people of the state in a secure manner and only for appropriate purposes.
15. **SB 70 - Quality Educator Loan Assistance.** This bill establishes rules to qualify for the Quality Educator Loan Assistance Program to help address recruitment and retention. Removes red tape from the process of qualifying a person for loan repayment by removing the content-specific criteria and qualifying anyone working in a rural or isolated school for loan repayment.
16. **SB 373 - Alternative Teaching Credentialing.** This bill provides for alternative teacher credentialing to help address recruitment and retention.
17. **SB 444 - Unpaid Internships.** This bill protects unpaid internships related to work-based learning. To ensure student access to work-based learning partnerships and avoid a requirement that a work-based learning partner must pay a student intern while that student is gaining credit for the work. Aligns with existing practice for unpaid internships consistent with federal law.

All seventeen of the previously mentions bills, were good bills for Montana public education. MQEC was a major player in getting these bills passed. That is why school districts, education-based organizations, and, even, individual donors should pay a membership fee to belong to MQEC. MQEC exists to support Montana public education. MQEC “fights the fight”.

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