graduationmatters.mt.gov

Starting a Graduation Matters Montana Initiative in Your Town

A Toolkit for **Community Leaders, Business Owners, Educators, Families** and **Students**

Superintendent Denise Juneau believes we need to set an expectation for every child in Montana to graduate from high school. In today's global economy, a quality education is the key to economic prosperity for our young people. More than 2,000 Montana students drop out of school each year – an average of five every day.

We can do better.

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TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WHAT ***YOU*** CAN DO, PLEASE VISIT THE **GRADUATION MATTERS MONTANA** WEBSITE.

graduationmatters@mt.gov

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August 2011

Dear Montana Student Advocate,

Imagine a day when every child in Montana graduates from high school. It's not that far off. Every year, approximately 2,000 students drop out of high school in Montana – that's about five every day. We can do better.

I believe in confronting our challenges when we discover them. In response to our dropout challenge, I have launched Graduation Matters Montana, a multi-pronged, statewide effort to ensure Montana's public schools are meeting the goal of graduating more students ready for college and careers.

In today's global economy, a quality education is the key to economic prosperity for our young people. As parents, taxpayers, business owners and educators, we cannot ignore the long-term economic consequences of students not graduating from high school. As Montanans, we need to work together graduate more students from high school.

I am committed to working with educators, parents, communities and businesses to help meet this goal.

The Graduation Matters in Your Town toolkit is designed to help you increase the graduation rate in your community. The toolkit provides sample tools, links to resources, staff you can contact for assistance and research-based best practices and effective strategies for reducing the dropout rate.

I hope you will commit to starting a Graduation Matters task force in your community. Please let us know about your efforts, and we will publicize your work as part of the statewide initiative. Should you need assistance planning your initiative, please don't hesitate to contact my staff at graduationmatters@mt.gov.

Best Regards,

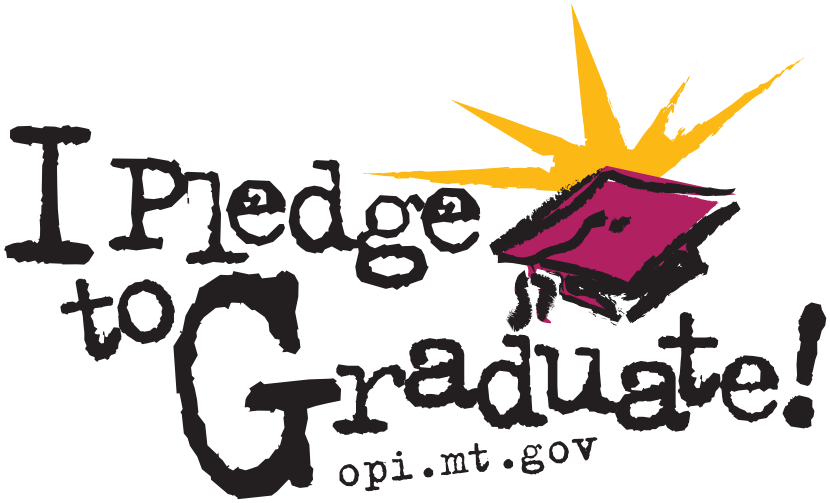
Denise Juneau

Denise Juneau

Superintendent of Public Instruction

The effects of dropping out are damaging to our state. High school dropouts make up 75% of incarcerated men and women. Tens of millions of dollars are spent each year in supportive services and remediation for adults who do not have a high school diploma. If the male high school graduation rate increased by just 5%, Montana's economy would see a combination of crime-related savings and additional revenue of $19.6M each year.

Source: Alliance for Excellent Education, www.all4ed.org


I Pledge
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Facts and Figures You Can Use

What is at stake?[1]

- Dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to be in poor health, living in poverty, on public assistance and single parents to children who also drop out of high school.
- Dropouts are eight times more likely to be in jail or in prison than high school graduates.
- Dropouts are four times less likely to volunteer than college graduates, are twice as less likely to vote or participate in community projects, and represent only three percent of actively engaged citizens in the United States today.
- In addition, workers who did not graduate from high school have an unemployment rate that is twice as high as someone who has a high school diploma.

How does not addressing Montana's dropout rate impact our economy?

- Nearly 80% of male inmates and 75% of female inmates at Montana State Prison are high school dropouts.[2]
- The lost lifetime earnings in Montana from dropouts in 2010 alone total nearly $830 million. [3]
- Montana would save more than $29.8 million in health care costs over the lifetime of each class of dropouts.[4]
- Almost 30% of Montana's high school dropouts meet the federal definition of low-income, which is twice the rate of high school graduates. Montana's high school graduates on average earn 22% more than high school dropouts after controlling for differences in age, gender, and race. Those with some college earn 27% more and those with a bachelor's degree or higher earn 66% more.[5]
- The average high school dropout is earning $5,868 less per year than they would if they graduated. The total cost to Montana's economy that results from reduced taxable earnings amounts to $216 million annually.[6]
- Each prevented dropout will result in an estimated $32,402 in benefits to the state over that individual's lifetime. By permanently cutting the dropout rate in half, each class of new high school graduates will yield over $32 million in direct gross economic benefits to the state. By completely eliminating dropouts, the state stands to save $65 million annually.[7]

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[1] *The Alliance for Excellent Education, http://www.all4ed.org via America's Promise Grad Nation toolkit*
[2] *Montana Department of Corrections 2009 Biennial Report*
[3] *The Alliance for Excellent Education, http://www.all4ed.org*
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] *Springer, D. A. (2010). Montana's High School Dropouts: Examining the Fiscal Consequences. Indianapolis: The Foundation for Educational Choice.*
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Ibid.*

Checklist for Launching a Graduation Matters Initiative in Your Town

1. Check out the "What YOU Can Do" Graduation Matters Action Sheets for Students, Educators, Families, and Communities/Businesses/Local Governments

2. Hold Community Forums/Conversations with:

☐ School administrators and teaching staff

☐ Local business leaders and community organizations to:

- Secure their commitment to be involved by displaying the Graduation Matters logo in their place of business and by joining the Graduation Matters team
- Discuss strategies to create career-oriented hands-on learning opportunities for local students through service-learning, internships, job shadowing and career mentoring

☐ Students

- Form a Student Advisory Board that includes a diverse group of students who can provide different viewpoints and advice

☐ Families and concerned community members

- To better understand what support is needed, talk with families of students who have dropped out or who are at-risk of dropping out (Note: these conversations may be more successful in private settings rather than in public forums)

3. Create a Graduation Matters Team to Implement Best Practices in Dropout Prevention

☐ Know your data

- Examine student-level dropout data – account for every student
- Survey students who have dropped out about their reasons for doing so
- Look at school policies to ensure that they are flexible and responsive to students (especially students who are on the verge of dropping out) and parents
    - Be prepared to respond to the needs of student-identified barriers that you might not have anticipated
- Examine the My Voice™ Aspirations Survey, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, and Prevention Needs Assessment data
- Institute an early-warning system to identify students at-risk of dropping out
- Establish an On-Track to Graduate program at your middle and high school – teachers and staff identify five to six students each who are at risk of dropping out and make concerted efforts to engage with, account for and encourage those students one-on-one

- Acknowledge and incorporate the work of school staff and community organizations in your town who are currently involved in reducing the dropout rate
- Launch an "*I Pledge to Graduate*" campaign

4. Heighten Awareness

☐ Publicize your efforts

- Place poster/flyers/social media/billboards/logos in participating businesses
- Issue press releases and invite media to Graduation Matters and *I Pledge to Graduate* campaign kick-off events. Continue to update the media about your programs and progress
- Invite Superintendent Juneau to your community to help kick off your Graduation Matters initiative
- Make sure the OPI website includes your community and materials as part of the statewide initiative
- Meet with your newspaper's editorial board; include community partners
- Submit Letters to the Editor
- Speak at the city council, county commission, Tribal Council, Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club and other civic and business-related meetings and luncheons to connect with other community leaders

What YOU Can Do— Students

GET INVOLVED IN **GRADUATION MATTERS MONTANA**

graduationmatters.mt.gov

1 TAKE THE PLEDGE TO GRADUATE AND ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO JOIN YOU

2 STAY ON THE RIGHT TRACK

- Know the graduation requirements for your school as well as the requirements for college or career training.
- Do your homework, study hard and don't miss school.

3 GET INVOLVED

- Participate in extracurricular activities at school or through a youth organization in your community.
- Volunteer, get an internship or find a part-time job that gives you skills that will benefit you in the workplace or college.
- Participate in the I Pledge to Graduate campaign at your school or start one if your school doesn't have one.

4 PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE

- Challenge yourself academically and plan out your future.
- Talk to your school counselor and family about your goals and college or career training.
- Find a mentor who can help you plan for your future.
- Take advantage of college preparation and career readiness resources and opportunities.

5 MAKE A DIFFERENCE

- Support your peers to make healthy and safe choices.
- Participate in service learning.
- Consider tutoring or mentoring a peer or younger student.
- Be kind and treat others with respect.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WHAT ***YOU*** CAN DO, PLEASE VISIT THE **GRADUATION MATTERS MONTANA** WEBSITE.

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What YOU Can Do— Families

GET INVOLVED IN GRADUATION MATTERS MONTANA

1 ENCOURAGE THE STUDENTS IN YOUR FAMILY TO TAKE THE PLEDGE TO GRADUATE

2 START OR JOIN COORDINATED GRADUATION MATTERS MONTANA EFFORTS

- Create or join a task force of local businesses, parents, caregivers, students and community leaders to focus on graduation.

3 PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

- Talk with your student about the credit requirements for a high school diploma and their plans for after graduation.
- Have them explore career and college options and collect as much information as possible.

4 GET INVOLVED IN THEIR EDUCATION

- Ask them about their homework and talk to their teachers.
- Volunteer in their classroom or school.
- Start or join a parent-teacher organization (e.g. PTA).
- Attend their school events and get to know their teachers, coaches, mentors and friends.

5 MAKE A DIFFERENCE

- Volunteer at your local after-school program or youth organization.
- Support other parents and caregivers.
- Encourage others to make a difference too.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WHAT ***YOU*** CAN DO, PLEASE VISIT THE **GRADUATION MATTERS MONTANA** WEBSITE.
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What YOU Can Do– Educators

GET INVOLVED IN GRADUATION MATTERS MONTANA

1 START OR JOIN LOCAL GRADUATION MATTERS MONTANA EFFORTS

- Create or join a task force of local businesses, parents, caregivers, students and community leaders to focus on graduation.

2 IDENTIFY AND ENGAGE STUDENTS AT-RISK OF DROPPING OUT

- Institute an early warning system using indicators such as attendance, behavior and credit deficiency to identify students at-risk of dropping out and create a strategy for re-engaging them.
- Help kids understand the financial impact of dropping out.
- Make sure every student has one caring adult in their life.

3 CREATE A CULTURE OF HIGH EXPECTATIONS

- Set the goal of a 100% graduation rate.
- Launch an I PLEDGE TO GRADUATE campaign in your school.
- Incorporate college and career planning into classroom curriculum, provide scholarship and loan information and organize college tours and career fairs.

4 KNOW WHERE TO PUT EXTRA EFFORT

- Examine your school and district-specific data related to dropout rates, risky behaviors and school climate.
- Identify and change policies that may prevent students from staying in school.
- Invite in student voices – engage diverse perspectives on school climate and barriers to reaching graduation.

5 OPEN YOUR DOORS TO THE COMMUNITY

- Promote volunteer opportunities that engage families and community partners at your school.
- Be an advisor to a student group and incorporate service-learning activities into your curriculum.
- Connect with youth-based community organizations.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WHAT ***YOU*** CAN DO, PLEASE VISIT THE **GRADUATION MATTERS MONTANA** WEBSITE.
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graduationmattersmontana.mt.gov

What YOU Can Do— Communities/ Businesses

GET INVOLVED IN GRADUATION MATTERS MONTANA

1 START OR JOIN LOCAL GRADUATION MATTERS MONTANA EFFORTS

- Create or join a taskforce of local businesses, parents, caregivers, students and community leaders to focus on graduation.
- Encourage your Chamber of Commerce to take an active role in supporting K-12 education.
- Display Graduation Matters Montana materials in your workplace.

2 INVEST YOUR TIME AND RESOURCES

- Volunteer time to a local school district's Graduation Matters Montana efforts.
- Offer student discounts or set up scholarships for students graduating from high school or receiving their GED.
- Adopt a local classroom or school.
- Fund a classroom project of interest to your business or community group.

3 PROMOTE SCHOOL & COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

- Connect employees with volunteer opportunities at local schools.
- Establish a workplace mentoring program for local youth.
- Run a book or supplies drive for a local school.

4 PROVIDE CAREER READINESS OPPORTUNITIES

- Offer internships, externships or job shadowing.
- Collaborate with teachers and career counselors to create service-learning and other real world learning opportunities.
- Participate in a career fair or host an industry field trip.

5 SHARE YOUR STORY WITH US

- If you're engaged in partnerships with your local school, tell us how your work is helping your community, your workplace and students.

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Start your own Graduation Matters Team

Forming a Multi-Stakeholder Team

Reducing the dropout rate is an opportunity for the entire community to work together. It affects the entire community. The National Dropout Prevention Center has developed a resource titled "Beyond the Bully Pulpit: The Mayor's Role in Dropout Prevention" that highlights the importance of gaining involvement at every level of the community: http://www.dropoutprevention.org/sites/default/files/uploads/webcast/slides_20101012.pdf

Examples of stakeholders that could make up your team

1. People experiencing needs that should be addressed (target population)
   ☐ *Students, teachers, parents/guardians, principals, counselors, librarians, coaches, community leaders, business owners*

2. Government officials/decision-makers
   ☐ *Superintendents, administrators, school board members, mayor, commissioners, sheriff, chamber of commerce, juvenile justice/youth court system, child welfare/group home representatives*

3. Health and human service providers
   ☐ *Mental, emotional, physical health doctors/psychologists*

4. Community leaders
   ☐ *Coaches, youth group leaders, youth ministers (churches), volunteer groups such as Lyons, Kiwanis, or the Rotary Club, Boy Scouts/Girl Scouts, local and state professionals*

5. Community organizations
   ☐ *Community-based organizations and nonprofits (Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Club, United Way, Jobs for Montana's Graduates, GEAR UP), adult education centers, GED testing sites, local community colleges and universities*

6. Businesses, especially those that employ young people
   ☐ *Where do youth like to go? Cafés/coffee shops, clothing stores, restaurants, etc.*

Make sure the team is composed of people who are:	Things to think about:
1. Enthusiastic, with time and energy and are interested in the issue 2. A cross-section of the community (racial, socio-economic classes, age, skills, etc.) 3. Recognized leaders 4. New, upcoming leaders 5. Experienced in education 6. Skilled (in writing, fundraising, nonprofit experience, communication, technology, etc.) 7. Able to implement the plan 8. Media	1. Think in terms of the assets of team members 2. Look for diversity in experience and expertise 3. Make sure to include the target population 4. Rate stakeholder's importance in helping or hindering the success of the plan 5. Think about the current level of support (or anticipated level) 6. What issues are important to each stakeholder? 7. Why would they want to be involved? 8. What strategy might work to ensure support? 9. What are the benefits this person could receive from this plan? 10. What are the skills and talents they could bring to the project? 11. How will you approach them? (letter, call, meeting, etc.) 12. Who can best approach this person?

Source: Adapted from "the Community Tool Box" http://ctb.ku.edu/en/default.aspx

Sample Letter of Invitation to Join Graduation Matters

[DATE]

Dear [NAME],

Graduation Matters Montana is coming to [YOUR TOWN], and we want you to join in the effort! Launched by Superintendent of Public Instruction Denise Juneau, Graduation Matters [YOUR TOWN] is a multi-pronged, coordinated effort of businesses, educators, parents, students and community members from every sector working to reach the goal of a 100% graduation rate. We are seeking a variety of individuals of all ages, professions and interests.

Graduation Matters is a long-term, community campaign to ensure more students graduate ready for college and careers. With the belief that everyone in our community can play a role in helping kids stay and succeed in school, we seek to form a partnership between [YOUR TOWN] Public Schools and the [YOUR TOWN] community. We recognize many in the community have worked for some time to keep students in school and address the reasons students drop out. This campaign is a broad-based effort and looks to rally every sector of the community to work together to encourage students to stay in school and help them succeed.

Your involvement in Graduation Matters [YOUR TOWN] will be the difference that supports students staying in school and the overall well-being of the community. Give me a call or email to let me know if you are interested in hearing more about how you can help. Thank you for taking the time to consider supporting this community-wide effort.

For further information on Graduation Matters [YOUR TOWN], contact [CONTACT PERSON] at [PHONE #], from 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m., Monday – Friday or visit the Graduation Matters Montana website at www.graduationmatters.mt.gov.

Sincerely,

[CONTACT PERSON]

[TITLE]

[ORGANIZATION]

[PHONE]

[EMAIL]

Sample Business/Community Organization Engagement Request

Missoula Businesses Making a Difference

Thank you for considering helping with the Graduation Matters Missoula initiative by providing students with the opportunity to explore their interests in a variety of job settings in and around Missoula. Graduation Matters Missoula is a community-wide initiative designed to help kids stay and succeed in school. With the help of our entire community, we can help students realize their potential by staying in school, graduating, and going on to become skilled and important members of the work force.

In order to best match your needs and the needs of students, please fill out the following form and return it to [CONTACT PERSON]. Please check any and all possibilities for you or anyone at your business.

☐ **Job Shadowing**: A one-day experience where a student observes you or one of your employees in an everyday work experience.

- If offering a job-shadowing or internship opportunity, please describe the opportunity in detail, including the project, location, schedule, skills to be taught, and expectations of the student. Please address the following questions:
  - What do you hope a student will learn?
  - How many hours/days will this experience be?
  - Will this experience be highly supervised or more of an independent learning experience?
  - Can you accommodate a student with special physical needs?
  - Are there any safety precautions a student would need (safety goggles, gloves, close-toed shoes, special clothing, etc.)?
  - Will you be able to offer any type of incentives, discounts or pay? (If so, please describe.)
  - Are there any particular skills the student needs for this experience (e.g., driver's license, computer skills, customer relation skills, ability to lift, etc.)?

☐ **Internships**: Paid or unpaid internships are a longer-term experience, with the employer designating work-related assignments for students to complete. Internships generally are a longer-term experience, with the employer designating a work-related assignment for the student to complete over a certain time period. This involves teaching the student the skills needed and what is expected. Because of the time commitment, internships must take place after school hours or on weekends. This is a great opportunity for a student to get real experience in the workplace and a sense of why education will help them.

☐ **Mentor Relationships**: Several nonprofit programs in Missoula offer opportunities for caring adults to make a difference in the lives of young people. You can be a Big Brother or Sister, tutor kids after school, or take advantage of other opportunities to be a mentor and role model for a young person.

☐ **Classroom Presentations**: presenting your experience as a businessperson and/or explaining why students might want to pursue a career in your field.

☐ **Other Opportunities for businesses**:

- Promote this initiative on your billboards, newsletters, Facebook, website, in your print ads, etc.
- Adopt a classroom
- Offer discounts or incentives for students who graduate or receive their GED
- Offer discounts or incentives for students completing a project or in conjunction with classroom teachers

Thank you for supporting students by volunteering your time to make a difference in their lives!

Your Name: _____ Business Name: _____

Phone: _____ ____Email: _____

Source: Borrowed from Graduation Matters Missoula http://www.graduationmattersmissoula.com

Sample Donation/Business Involvement Letter

[DATE]

Dear [LOCAL BUSINESS/COMMUNITY LEADER],

Did you know that in Montana there are over 2,000 students who drop out from high school every year? That's five students a day! In [YOUR TOWN], about [XX] students drop out annually, and we are working to confront the dropout rate and improve educational opportunities for all students by launching Graduation Matters [YOUR TOWN]. We are joining a statewide effort to improve graduation rates and ensure all our students are ready for college and careers. We are asking you to join our community-wide effort.

As future employers of these students, you already understand the difference between an employee who is prepared for the rigors of working at your business and one who is not. You also know how important it is that we have quality schools in order to attract families to our community.

A quality education is the key to economic prosperity for our young people. As parents, taxpayers, business owners and educators, we cannot ignore the long- term economic consequences of individuals not graduating from high school. As Montanans, we need to work together and share in the accountability of graduating more students from [YOUR TOWN'S] high school.

We also know that receiving a diploma is just one part of our work. In today's global economy, we need to ensure our students are graduating ready for college and careers. Montana students need to receive an education that allows them to compete not only with students across the country, but around the world.

There are many ways to get involved: join the Graduation Matters task force, provide students with internship and job-shadowing opportunities and voice support for Graduation Matters [YOUR TOWN] by linking your website to the Graduation Matters Montana website (www.graduationmatters.mt.gov), publishing the logo in printed and online communications and displaying a sign in your workplace indicating support for the initiative.

Lastly, a gift of $_____ would help with the launch/expansion of "x program" [INSERT LOCAL PROGRAM DESCRIPTION. Be specific.] Will you consider making an investment in this important work?

[GRADUATION MATTERS CONTACT] will be in touch with you soon to speak with you about our plan for Graduation Matters [YOUR TOWN]. Montana's future prosperity is tied to the success of today's students. We hope that you will consider joining us in this effort.

Sincerely,

Graduation Matters [YOUR TOWN] Task Force committee

Know Your Data

Go to the Source: Montana's Statewide Dropout and Graduation Report

The Office of Public Instruction has been making improvements to its processes for tracking student achievement, including graduation and dropout rates since 2007. These improvements include the implementation of a student information system, AIM-Achievement in Montana, which collects enrollment, demographic and program participation information at the individual student level.

The advent of a statewide student information system using data verified at the state and local level has improved the accuracy and reliability of Montana's dropout data. The Montana Statewide Dropout and Graduate Report for the 2009-2010 School Year reflects the third year of collecting and verifying data using Montana's statewide student information system. This report provides information on students who graduated or dropped out of Montana public, state-funded, and nonpublic, accredited schools during the 2009-10 school year. (http://opi.mt.gov/pdf/Measurement/DropoutReportFY09_10.pdf)

Contact Andy Boehm, Dropout Data Information Coordinator, at the Office of Public Instruction for further information related to your district-specific data: (406) 444-0375, aboehm@mt.gov.

How Do You Compare?

If your central task force hasn't already done so, comparing school, district, state and national graduation rates to each other for school years 2007-2010 can provide a sense of the overall trend of graduation rates in your town. The following NCLB Report Card http://www.opi.mt.gov/Reports&Data/nclb-reports.php can be helpful for collecting this information.

Estimated Graduation Rates	2007	2008	2009	2010
Our School				
Our District				
Montana1	82%	82.6%	80.7%	80.2%
United States2	73.9%	74.9%	*	*

*Data not yet available

Get a Complete Picture of Your Students' Needs

The Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)

The Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) assists educators and health professionals in determining the prevalence of health-risk behaviors as self-reported by Montana youth. In 1988, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) initiated a process to identify the leading causes of mortality, morbidity and social problems among youth: http://opi.mt.gov/Reports&Data/YRBS.html. For further information about the Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey, contact Susan Court at the Office of Public Instruction: (406) 444-3178, scourt@mt.gov.

[8] *NCLB Report Card: http://www.opi.mt.gov/Reports&Data/nclb-reports.php and "Trend Data for Graduation and Dropout Rates" http://www.opi.mt.gov/PDF/Measurement/11_3YR-Trend-Data-Graduation-Rates.pdf*

[9] *Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 1972-2008, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2011012, published Feb. 2011*

DPHHS Prevention Needs Assessment

The State of Montana has been conducting the Prevention Needs Assessment Community Student Survey (PNA) every other year since 1998. Participation by students throughout Montana has steadily increased with 15,893 students participating in 1998 to 20,578 students in 2010. Because trends over time are very important in prevention planning, this report contains the results of the past three survey administrations. School personnel and individuals charged with planning prevention services will be able to view the trends over time for alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, antisocial behavior, and levels of risk and protection. The PNA Survey is conducted by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Addictive and Mental Disorders Division, Chemical Dependency Bureau: http://prevention.mt.gov/pna/

My Voice™ Aspirations Survey

The My Voice™ Aspirations Survey analyzes the perceptions of young people in grades 6 through 12 to provide educators with detailed student data that can be used to improve teaching and learning. Montana schools who participated in this program in the fall of 2010 have been provided with school-level data.

For further information about how to use the My Voice™ Aspirations Survey, contact Steve York at the Office of Public Instruction: (406) 444-4434, syork@mt.gov.

Teen Pregnancy Numbers and Rates

Teen mothers are more likely to drop out of school, remain unmarried, and live in poverty. Only 40 percent of young mothers graduate from high school compared to 60 percent of mothers who gave birth at 20 years of age. These web pages include links to county specific data and resources for communities, educators, families, policymakers and healthcare providers.

- Unintended Pregnancy/Teen Pregnancy Prevention (Department of Health and Human Services Montana) http://www.dphhs.mt.gov/PHSD/Women-Health/teenpreg-index.shtml (click on "Teen Pregnancy Rates in Montana – County Data")

Trends in Teen Pregnancies and Their Outcomes in Montana 1991-2005, Published May 2008 http://www.dphhs.mt.gov/PHSD/Women-Health/documents/teenpregnancyreport.pdf

Ensure the Accuracy of Your Attendance Data

Graduation Matters Missoula's early successes in the first year of their initiative came from weekly tracking of unaccounted-for students. Each week, schools were required to submit a list of students who were no longer in attendance. Counselors and principals then worked to contact the students, track their whereabouts and encourage them to return to school if they had dropped out. During the first year of their initiative, in many cases, students were found to have moved to another district or another state entirely. Prior to the launch of this initiative, they would merely have been counted as a dropout. Through this approach and others also described in this toolkit, Missoula County Public Schools saw a 47% decrease in their dropout rate in one year alone.

Consult America's Promise Alliance Grad Nation Resources and Tools

The America's Promise Alliance published Grad Nation: A Guidebook to Help Communities Tackle the Dropout Crisis in February 2009 with assistance from State Farm, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Bank of America. The Guidebook offers a comprehensive road map for communities with the latest research, best practices, and key tools for meeting each community's dropout challenge. The guide helps communities develop specific plans for keeping students on-track to graduate from high school and to prepare for college, the workforce and active citizenship: http://www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Dropout-Prevention/Grad-Nation-Guidebook.aspx

Within this Guidebook are numerous very useful, ready-to-print, tailored tools that can help communities pinpoint their local dropout situation. Several tools that the Office of Public Instruction finds particularly useful for Montana's needs are the following:

1. State and Community Profile: http://opi.mt.gov/PDF/GradMatters/State&CommunityProfile.pdf[8]

   Used in concert with the Montana Kids Count Data Center, this State and Community Profile document can help you take stock of your community's resources and needs. The Montana Kids Count Data Center provides a range of data that is useful for developing a community profile relating to children, education, needs for services and employment: http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bystate/stateprofile.aspx?state=MT&loc=28.

2. Dropout Profiles Related to Attendance, Credits, Credit Accumulation, Age and Withdrawal[9]

   Understanding why and when students drop out helps to bring some students back and prevents other students from dropping out. Reviewing school transcripts and attendance records of recent dropouts is one method of ascertaining this information. Another way to assess when dropouts leave school can be used with this Excel spreadsheet that collects student-level data to construct a profile of students who drop out, withdraw or transfer in a given year: http://opi.mt.gov/PDF/GradMatters/DropoutProfile.xls.

3. The National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS:88)[10]

   Yet another, equally important method to understand why students drop out involves surveying them directly about their reasons for leaving school. The National Educational Longitudinal Survey is a survey of early dropouts, leaving school by the end of 10th grade. Consider discussing the NELS: 88 questions with last year's dropouts and the students you consider potential future dropouts. With this new learning, you will be better able to design a support system to keep students in school: http://opi.mt.gov/PDF/GradMatters/NELS88.pdf.

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[10] *Source: America's Promise Grad Nation Guidebook, Toolkit ResourceS*
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] *Ibid.*

Implement Specific Research-Based Strategies

Provide a Comprehensive System of Student Support

Research demonstrates again and again that students with well-developed adult and peer guidance systems are less likely to drop out. Increasing the number of skilled and committed adults who provide students support, increasing parental involvement and launching and maintaining a community-wide campaign to improve all students' attendance will allow your community to meet this goal.

America's Promise, in their Grad Nation Guidebook, has identified the following areas where research and experience indicate many students may need additional adult support:

1. School achievement
    a. Academic skills (developing core reading, writing and mathematics skills)
    b. Course performance (doing quality course work, completing assignments, doing well on tests, etc.)
2. School engagement
    a. Attendance (coming to school every day)
    b. Behavior (conforming to the expected norms of behavior)
    c. Effort (trying hard, participating in learning, not giving up)
3. Life outside of school
    a. Health supports for students and their families
    b. Child care (so older students do not miss school to provide emergency or fall-back child care to younger siblings)
    c. Homelessness
    d. Foster care

Institute Early Warning Systems and On-Track Indicators[11]

Educators have developed "on-track and off-track indicators" that help identify when a student is at risk of dropping out long before the student makes that choice. These indicators can be as simple as tracking grades and attendance. High schools, middle schools and elementary schools need to develop these early warning systems to identify students in need of extra academic or other support. With that information, districts, schools and parents can intervene to get students back on-track and increase their chances of graduating.

Elementary Years

For some students, dropping out can be traced to experiences at the start of elementary school. Existing research indicates three areas that communities should check:

- Early chronic absenteeism — Which students are missing a month or more of school in K–3?
- Acquiring basic reading skills — Which students enter 3rd grade without strong reading skills?

[12] *Source: America's Promise Grad Nation Guidebook (pages 65-66)*

○ Positive school experiences — Which students are having serious behavioral problems in K–3?

Middle and High School Years

It is during the middle grades and the first two years of high school, however, when we can identify the majority of students who — without sustained intervention — will likely not graduate. During these years it is particularly important to pay attention to the A, B, C's of dropout prevention—attendance, behavior and course performance.

- Attendance — 6th to 10th graders who miss 10 or more, 20 or more and 40 or more days of school are sending increasingly loud distress signals.
- Behavior — middle grade and high school students who get suspended need support to stay on-track to graduation, but so do students who consistently demonstrate mild misbehaviors or lack of effort, e.g. not completing assignments, not paying attention, acting out of place in the classroom.
- Course Performance — Students who receive an F, especially in math or English, or two or more F's in any class are off the graduation path. D's and very low GPA's are also cause for concern. Overall, course performance is much more predictive than test scores of a student's graduation odds.

Jobs for the Future has created an excellent hands-on toolkit for school districts designed specifically to help in the development of early warning systems, on-track indicators and credit recovery programs. While it is designed for many of the obstacles to graduation that are found in urban schools, it offers exceptional resources including research-based frameworks and continuums for intervention, insights on offering multiple pathways to graduation and useful tools for putting an early warning system in place in every school: http://opi.mt.gov/PDF/GradMatters/EarlyWarningSystems.pdf

Additionally, the National High School Center has developed the Early Warning System (EWS) Tool v2.0 which is a free Microsoft Excel-based program. The EWS Tool v2.0 identifies students who show early signs that they are at risk of dropping out of high school and relies on readily available student-level data. The EWS Tool v2.0 is available free on the National High School Center's website: http://www.betterhighschools.org/ews.asp.

Perform an Audit of Your School Policies

Review policies related to attendance, retaining and promoting students, grading and how or when it is recommended to a student to obtain their GED or attend an alternative school. What flexibility can be put in place for a student who must work a full-time job? Or a student with more than ten absences because she is raising a newborn? Or a student who struggles with reading or math? Examine your school policies and offer alternatives to help students in these types of situations remain in school and obtain their diploma.

Provide Positive Support and Recognition

Recognition and support are essential for gaining long-lasting involvement from community leaders and business owners. Additionally, teachers, parents, administrators and school staff deserve to be supported and recognized for their past efforts to lower the dropout rate and their on-going efforts to establish and promote a Graduation Matters initiative in your town. Lastly, and most importantly, students need positive support and recognition for choosing to stay in school and graduate. One way your community may engage and celebrate youth who make this commitment is through the launching of an *I Pledge to Graduate* Campaign (see the Appendix for the *I Pledge to Graduate* Toolkit).

Build Personal Connections with Students At Risk of Dropping Out

Consider establishing an On-Track to Graduate Teacher Team in your middle or high school(s) as an way to build important relationships with students at risk. Through this strategy, teachers and administrators identify students who are at risk of dropping out using indicators such as poor attendance, behavior and course performance. The committee members either "adopt" the students by making a concerted effort to engage with, account for and encourage those students one-on-one or they identify adults within the school who have already established a connection to the students.

Provide Service-Learning, Alternative, Experiential and Career and Technical Education Options

There is increasing evidence that experiential learning activities provide students with additional avenues to experience success and compelling reasons to come to school. Service-learning, alternative schooling, experiential education programs, and career and technical education-focused curriculum have all been credited with keeping students in school who otherwise would have dropped out. Below are some resources to help you initiate or enhance these types of programs in your community (see the Appendix for a Sample Business/School District Handbook for Job Shadowing and Internships).

1. Engaged for Success: Service-Learning as a Tool for High School Dropout Prevention
   http://www.civicenterprises.net/pdfs/service-learning.pdf
   Provides evidence of the power of service-learning, an educational technique that combines classroom learning with community service to keep at-risk students attending school and engaged in their classes.

2. Exemplary Practices in Alternative Education: Indicators of Quality Programming
   http://www.the-naea.com/files/1008/File/ExemplaryPracticesinAE.pdf
   The National Alternative Education Association (NAEA) is dedicated to information sharing, identification of best practices and advocacy for alternative learning and teaching. The framework is intended to promote viable new exemplary programs and evaluate the effectiveness of existing programs.

3. Montana Digital Academy (MTDA)
   http://montanadigitalacademy.org/
   The Montana Digital Academy provides unique educational opportunities to Montana students and schools. MTDA offers basic core classes that students may need to make up, challenging Advanced Placement classes and elective courses that may not be available in local schools. MTDA allows students to learn whenever they want and at their own pace, enabling more students to graduate on time.

4. Jobs for Montana's Graduates (JMG)
   http://wsd.dli.mt.gov/jmg/jmg.asp
   A school-to-career program positively affecting over 11,000 Montana students. JMG's mission is to keep young people in school through graduation and provide work-based learning experiences that will lead to career advancement opportunities. Ninety-five percent of students who participate in Jobs for Montana's Graduates programs graduate from high school.

For further ideas and resources, contact T.J. Eyer, Career and Technical Education Director at the Office of Public Instruction: (406) 444-7915, teyer@mt.gov.

Comprehensive Community Solutions – Take Inventory of "What Is"

The inventory below is modified from America's Promise Grad Nation Guidebook. It is a comprehensive inventory for you to use in analyzing your school district's use of many of the most effective research-based strategies that school districts across the nation are employing to lower their dropout rates.

Comprehensive Community Solutions to the Dropout Crisis			
In High Schools with High Dropout Rates and their Feeder Middle Schools	**In Place**	**Not In Place**	**In Place and Needs Work**
1. Ensure that policies and resources enable students to accomplish their graduation goals			
1a. Enabling policies support accomplishing goals			
1b. Aligned resources support accomplishing goals			
2. Enact across-the-board strategies for accomplishing goals			
2a. Offer a college- and career-ready curriculum			
• Rigorous curriculum requirements and expectations for quality student work are adopted			
• College-level, dual enrollment and Advanced Placement learning opportunities are provided			
• Strong teacher and student supports are provided for achieving high academic expectations			
• Service-learning, experiential, alternative and career and tech ed-focused teaching methods are incorporated into curricula			
2b. Support a multi-tiered dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery system			
• Early warning systems			
• On-track indicators			
• Positive support and recognition system			
• Transitional support systems that help students cross from middle grades into high school			
• Transitional support systems that help students cross successfully into college and careers			
2c. Develop human capital			
• Administrators are supported with coaching and professional development			
• Teachers are supported with coaching and professional development			
• Staffing ratios and teacher allocations are revised to benefit the most struggling students			
3. Create effective student support systems			
• A system is in place to target support for students' differing needs			

• School and district resources for the support system are supplemented by the work of community adults as mentors and tutors			
• The work of the school, district and community adults is complemented by wraparound supports provided by governmental and external organizations			
In High Schools with High Dropout Rates and their Feeder Middle Schools	**In Place**	**Not In Place**	**In Place and Needs Work**
4. Revitalize schooling in high schools with high dropout rates and their feeder middle schools			
4a. Enact comprehensive school improvement			
• School is organized into smaller academies and teams within larger school			
4b. Implement best practices in comprehensive school improvement			
• Solutions are data-based			
• Curriculum, instruction and assessment are infused with high expectations and relevance			
• Active engagement of parents and the community			
• Teachers and leaders frequently participate in professional development and collaborate			

Build Public Support and Keep the Community Informed and Involved

Volunteer Ideas for Families and Community Members at [YOUR TOWN]'s High School

You can volunteer your time at [YOUR TOWN] School District in a number of ways. Here are 20 ways you can volunteer right now:

1. **Read** to a classroom of students or one-on-one with a struggling reader
2. **Mentor** a student and help launch a mentoring project
3. **Host** a group of students for a visit to your company
4. **Counsel** a student on their high school or college application essays
5. **Act** as an interviewer for students practicing job or college entrance interviews
6. **Tutor** a student who needs help in a class he or she is taking
7. **Serve** on a school committee to help raise money
8. **Host** a fundraising social event with your friends
9. **Visit** a classroom and speak about your career
10. **Develop/Teach** a workshop for students on a relevant topic - e.g., resume writing, interview skills, presentations, dining/social etiquette
11. **Speak** to a teacher about what resources they might need in their classroom
12. **Provide** extra-curricular supplies for art projects or sports
13. **Run** a sports clinic
14. **Start** an internship opportunity at your business
15. **Hire** a high school student for a part-time job
16. **Organize** a tour or visit to your alma mater
17. **Teach** a skill you have to a student or students e.g., music, photography, art, etc.
18. **Start** a cleanup crew to help beautify playgrounds and common areas
19. **Help** a teacher with bulletin boards, re-shelving books, filing, or newsletter writing
20. **Chaperone** a dance or lend a hand on a class field trip or work project

Ideas for Raising Public Awareness of Your Efforts

It is recommended that Graduation Matters communities use the Graduation Matters Montana logo to assist in portraying a unified state-wide effort at lowering the dropout rate. The Office of Public Instruction will replace "Montana" with the name of your community. Please email graduationmatters@mt.gov to have the logo customized for your community. Other ways that you can raise public awareness of your efforts include:

- Hold a press conference for the official launch of your Graduation Matters or *I Pledge to Graduate* campaign and invite media, dignitaries and local stakeholders, including Superintendent Juneau. Make sure your speakers represent the wide range of support you have for your initiative.
- Sit down with your newspaper's editorial board to share your goals for Graduation Matters and explain how you're going to get there.
- Collect stories of success and share them with the Superintendent's office at the OPI, which will continually feature the work of local communities on the statewide website and in media outreach. Share pictures of your kickoff events and your initiative goals so the OPI can highlight the great work of Montana schools and communities. http://www.graduationmatters.mt.gov
- Present at city council, county commission, Tribal Council, Chamber of Commerce, Rotary and other community, civic and business-related organizational meetings to share information about your Graduation Matters initiative and reach out to other leaders in the community. Consider having a student present with you.
- Enlist students as spokespeople for this work. Empowering students to engage in your Graduation Matters campaign is an opportunity for their leadership development and tells the story of your community from the perspective of those most affected by your efforts.
- Ask business and community partners to display the Graduation Matters logo in their window, link to it on their website, "like" it on Facebook, feature your efforts on their signage/message boards and write about their efforts to partner with your school in newsletters and other communications.
- Submit letters to the editor or op-eds throughout your campaign to continue to inform and engage the community in your efforts. Ask students, parents, business partners, tribal elders and community leaders to write letters to the editor in support of Graduation Matters.
- Keep the community informed about your progress with regular press releases, website updates, newsletter articles, community events, etc. Don't forget to celebrate your successes and share the news of your good work with the community and media!

Additional Resource

America's Promise media toolkit: http://www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Grad-Nation/Building-a-Grad-Nation/Partner-Toolkit.aspx.

Sample Press Conference Invitation to Community Leaders

Graduation Matters [YOUR TOWN]

For further information
call [CONTACT PERSON] at
[PHONE NUMBER]

[DATE]

Dear Community Leader:

[YOUR TOWN] Public Schools is on the march to ensure academic achievement and high school graduation for all students. Our goal as a community must be academic success for all students and a 100 percent high school graduation rate from [YOUR TOWN'S] High School.

The [YOUR TOWN] School District has been working with prominent community leaders from local organizations to develop a lasting campaign to encourage students to stay in school through graduation. The organizations include service clubs, community nonprofit partners, and many businesses.

It is our hope that this process will instill the self confidence, intelligence, courage and desire for all students to complete high school and further pursue a variety of educational options after high school graduation. Through this collaborative effort we can ensure continued economic prosperity and a quality of life we all enjoy.

On [DATE AND TIME], we have scheduled a press conference and rally which will formally launch "Graduation Matters [YOUR TOWN]." The conference will be held at the [LOCATION]. The event will begin at [TIME].

Based on your involvement in the community, I would personally like to invite you to this very important press conference. Your presence at this event will speak volumes about its importance and potential impact on our city, county and state. If we have time, you may be asked to say a few words about the importance of staying in school, working hard and graduating, but overall just your presence will have significant impact.

This is a big moment for all of us. I realize you are very busy, but I hope you will make time to be a part of this very important effort.

I look forward to your valued participation and involvement in this important program. Please call or email if you have questions. An RSVP would be helpful to [PERSON] at [PHONE #], or [EMAIL ADDRESS].

Respectfully,

[NAME]
Superintendent, [YOUR TOWN] Public Schools

Source: Borrowed from www.graduationmattersmissoula.org

Sample Media Advisory for Graduation Matters Launch

If Superintendent Juneau is joining your community for the launch, please work with OPI's Communications Director to coordinate media outreach: (406) 444-3160.

Media Advisory for

[Date]

Contact: [CONTACT PERSON], [PHONE NUMBER]

[YOUR TOWN] Joins Statewide Effort to Graduate Students Ready for College and Careers

[YOUR TOWN] Public Schools is on the march to ensure academic achievement and high school graduation for all students. The [YOUR TOWN] School District has been working with prominent community leaders from local organizations to develop a lasting campaign to encourage students to stay in school through graduation. Graduation Matters [YOUR TOWN] seeks to graduate students ready for college and careers through collaborative partnerships with community organizations, businesses, families and youth.

[INSERT QUOTATION FROM COMMUNITY LEADER, SCHOOL OFFICIAL, ETC. ABOUT Graduation Matters YOUR TOWN].

[YOUR TOWN] is joining a statewide effort, Graduation Matters Montana, launched by Superintendent of Public Instruction Denise Juneau to increase the number of students who graduate ready for college and careers.

In today's global economy, a quality education is the key to economic prosperity for our young people. More than 2,000 students drop out of Montana schools each year. The combined economic effects of students not graduating from high school are devastating not only to individuals but to Montana communities.

WHO: [YOUR TOWN] School District, [GUEST SPEAKERS/COMMUNITY LEADERS]

WHAT: Press conference to launch Graduation Matters [YOUR TOWN]

WHEN: [Time]

WHERE: [Location]

###

Sample Letter to the Editor

[DATE]

Dear Editor,

In the United States, one in four students will not graduate from high school. In Montana, five students drop out of school every day. It can be easy to ignore this statistic if you don't happen to know someone who has dropped out, but America's high school dropout epidemic affects all of us.

The good news is that for the first time in a long while, there is a feeling that there is something we can do about it. According to Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Crisis, the U.S. graduation rate increased from 72 percent in 2002 to 75 percent in 2008 – about half of a percentage point per year. That may be a small percentage but it is huge in numbers of young people who are moving forward. If we as a community don't address this dropout crisis, we won't develop enough prospective employees with the skill-set American businesses need to compete in a global economy.

With this reality in mind, we are forming a coalition of school administrators, community leaders, business owners, educators, students and families here in [YOUR TOWN]. With the assistance of Superintendent of Public Instruction Denise Juneau, the Montana Office of Public Instruction and [LOCAL EDUCATION LEADER], our goal is to ensure that all students graduate from high school ready for college or a career. We invite you to be a part of Graduation Matters [YOUR TOWN] and the effort to raise the expectations we have for students.

These children are our future taxpayers, employees, employers and parents. We all have a stake in making sure that every one of them graduates from high school. We invite you to join us at the kick-off event on [DATE] at [TIME]. Please contact [CONTACT NAME, NUMBER, EMAIL] for more information.

Whether you are a community leader, business owner, educator, student or family member, your help is needed in ensuring students in [YOUR TOWN] graduate ready for college and careers.

[NAME]

[TITLE]

[ORGANIZATION]

Appendices

A. Sample Business/School District Handbook for Job Shadowing and Internships

Job shadowing is an unpaid experience where a student follows an employer for a short period of time to learn about a particular occupation or industry. This activity helps students explore the world of work and the range of opportunities found within an occupational area. It is popular with employers because it is a short-term activity requiring a limited investment. The student shadows one or more employees during the experience, trying to gain an understanding of what adults do in the world of work, how this is connected to their classroom experiences, and the process of career exploration.

Benefits of Job Shadowing

. . . FOR STUDENTS

Work-based learning provides opportunities to:

- Apply classroom learning, academic concepts and professional/technical skills
- Establish a clear connection between education and work
- Identify and analyze personal needs, interests, and abilities in terms of a future career
- Develop outlines of potential career paths and improve post-graduation job prospects
- Make decisions and plans to achieve goals and aspirations
- Understand the expectations of the workplace
- Be motivated to stay in school
- Establish professional contacts for future employment and mentoring

... FOR EMPLOYERS

Work-based learning provides opportunities to:

- Help create a pool of skilled and motivated potential employees
- Engage with the next generation of workers without making a major time commitment
- Reduce training/recruiting costs
- Help students make the link between learning and earning
- Encourage involvement in the curriculum development process
- Offer opportunities to provide community service
- Energize the current workforce as they discover new skills and talents by sharing their job skills

. . . FOR SCHOOLS

Work-based learning provides opportunities to:

- Expand curriculum and learning facilities
- Provide access to state-of-the-art techniques and technology
- Enhance ability to meet the needs of diverse student populations
- Provide opportunities for individualized instruction
- Promote faculty interaction with the community
- Contribute to staff development
- Make education more relevant and valuable for students
- Enhance student retention
- Increase student motivation to learn by developing their talent and interest areas

. . . FOR THE COMMUNITY

Work-based learning provides opportunities to:

- Create an environment of collaboration and cooperation
- Encourage respect and tolerance between different cultures or groups
- Build the foundation for a more productive economy
- Build confidence in the school system as practical results are observable
- Demonstrate a community-wide commitment to lifelong learning

Source: Adapted from the Oregon's and Vermont's Work-based Learning Manuals http://www.state.vt.us/stw/WBLMinfosheet.html

B. Setting Up a Job Shadowing Experience

1. Identify Student Interests

- Work with students to identify their career interests. Ask students to name five careers that interest them or administer interest inventories or surveys.

2. Develop Business Contacts

- Find employers who are willing to host students. Mail interest forms to different organizations within the community to establish a pool of possible sites or hold informational business forums to recruit employers/sites. In general, personal contact with potential job shadowing sites is the most effective method of recruiting shadow placements. Students and parents may also identify potential sites.

3. Prepare Students

- Thoroughly prepare students before they go out on a job shadow.

4. Prepare Employers

- **Advice for working with young people**. Many professionals are unaccustomed to the unique challenges of communicating and working with young people. They may be faced with student attitudes and expectations that may seem unrealistic in the workplace. Encourage them to try to provide as many active learning experiences as possible.
- **Use of academic and technical skills**. Encourage employers to emphasize the ways in which mathematics, language, science, writing, listening, and interpersonal skills are used in the workplace.

The shadowing experience is a chance for students to explore careers first-hand and observe the real-world aspects of business.

— National School-to-Work Office Shadowing Handbook

Connecting the Job Shadow to the Classroom

It is important to make the job shadowing experience meaningful by connecting it to classroom learning. Connecting activities can take many forms and should take place at all stages of the shadowing experience.

Pre-experience Activities

• Students research the general career fields and specific organizations in which they will be shadowing.

• Students write about their preconceptions and expectations for the job shadow.

• Students prepare questions based on their research and writings to ask their hosts.

• Students and teachers discuss professional standards for behavior and dress.

• Teachers emphasize practical applications of the concepts and skills they teach in class.

On-site Activities

• Students ask their hosts about the ways in which different academic subjects relate to their work.

• Students observe practical applications of academic concepts.

• Students ask their hosts about their career paths and suggestions they have for others who are interested in the field.

Post-experience Activities

• Students write about the differences between their expectations and the realities of the workplace.

• Students and teachers discuss the connections they see between classroom learning and the workplace.

• Students write, revise and send thank you letters to employers.

• Students continue their career research in light of what they have learned during the job shadow experience.

Source: Adapted from Oregon's and Vermont's Work-based Learning Manuals http://www.state.vt.us/stw/WBLMinfosheet.html

C. *I Pledge to Graduate* Toolkit

What is the *I Pledge to Graduate* Initiative?

Research shows that students are more likely to reach a goal if they commit to meeting it and identify their own motivations. In fall 2011, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Denise Juneau, in partnership with local school districts, is launching the *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative.

Envisioned by high school students on Superintendent Juneau's Student Advisory Board, the *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative will encourage students to pledge to graduate and to identify specific reasons why graduation is important to them. This initiative will focus statewide attention on supporting students to graduate, engage community and business partners, involve social networking and highlight student voices.

Why participate in *I Pledge to Graduate*?

A core goal of Graduation Matters Montana is to raise school and community expectations that every student graduate from high school, college and/or career-ready. Dropping out of school should not be an option, and keeping kids in school requires ongoing effort. The *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative is an effective way to rally your school and community to encourage everyone to graduate.

The *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative is part of Graduation Matters Montana, the Office of Public Instruction's multi-pronged approach to raising the graduation rate in Montana. Your school and community participation in the *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative will heighten public awareness of the dropout rate in your community and can serve as a catalyst for discussion and action about this important issue.

Who can get involved?

The *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative looks to engage students, teachers, families, businesses and community members to work to increase the graduation rate. This *I Pledge to Graduate* toolkit will help you to organize the initiative in your school.

Students from Superintendent Juneau's Student Advisory Board at the Spring Summit

Checklist for Launching an *I Pledge to Graduate* Initiative in Your Town

1. **Set Your Goal**
   - ☐ Commit to 100% of your targeted student population signing the pledge
2. **Gather Resources**
   - ☐ Know your graduation data
3. **Prepare and Plan**
   - ☐ Build an *I Pledge to Graduate* team at your school
   - ☐ Identify a student population the initiative will target
   - ☐ Suggest ways people can stay or become involved in the initiative
   - ☐ Get local "celebrity" involvement
4. **Take Action**
   - ☐ Have kick-off, on-going and end-of-year celebrations
   - ☐ Invite students to speak to the school and your community about their pledge to graduate
   - ☐ Offer incentives to students who pledge to graduate
   - ☐ Publicize your efforts
5. **Develop Strategies to Sustain Student Engagement**
   - ☐ Provide continuous support to students who have taken the pledge and might be at-risk of dropping out
6. **Evaluate Progress**
   - ☐ Reflect before, during and after each school year
7. **Celebrate and Recognize**
   - ☐ Celebrate successes
   - ☐ Communicate your successes
   - ☐ Keep the school and community informed of any outcomes and stories
8. **Consult Other Resources**
9. **Appendix**
   - ☐ The PLEDGE
   - ☐ Example: Missoula Mayor John Engen's letter
   - ☐ Obtaining incentive donations from larger corporations

This toolkit uses information from America's Promise Grad Nation Guidebook and the Global Youth Service Day Toolkit

Source: Checklist follows the Investigation, Preparation and Planning, Action, Reflection, Demonstration/ Celebration process adapted from the Global Youth Service Day Toolkit, http://gysd.org/toolkit

1. Set Your Goal

☐ **Commit to 100% of your targeted student population signing the pledge**

What would happen if every high school student committed to graduating? Find out by setting a goal of 100% of your targeted student population – all high school students, a specific grade or grades – signing the *I Pledge to Graduate* PLEDGE. The PLEDGE encourages students to identify why it is important for them to graduate, and asks the students to obtain a witness' signature to support their commitment.

2. Gather Resources

☐ **Know your graduation data**

Obtain accurate local data about your school district in order to assess the dropout problem. Contact Andy Boehm, Dropout Data Coordinator, at the Office of Public Instruction at 444-0375, aboehm@mt.gov, to obtain this information. Consider all the instances that students begin to disengage, and eventually drop out from school. Survey your students and students who have dropped out for insight into when and why students in your community drop out, and what keeps them in school even in the face of duress. Knowing your school's data will help you strategically engage students in the initiative.

3. Prepare and Plan

☐ **Build an *I Pledge to Graduate* team at your school**

Bring together school and community leaders who can be engaged over a sustained period of time to integrate the initiative into your school. Your team's focus will be to obtain 100 percent pledge participation from students, and to implement the campaign each school year so that it is an ongoing effort and not a onetime activity. Your *I Pledge to Graduate* team might include parents, teachers, school counselors, coaches, business leaders, tribal elders, city government staff, school administrators, etc. Make sure students are included and are co-leaders.

☐ **Identify a student population the initiative will target**

When choosing a target population, it is important to take into consideration at what age most of the students in your district drop out. Seeing a large number of 9th graders drop out, the Mississippi Department of Education focused their efforts on 6th and 7th graders with their On the Bus – Destination Graduation campaign. Similarly, your *I Pledge to*

Questions* to ask about your graduation data:

- What percentages of students who start 9th grade in your community do not graduate from high school in four years?
- Each year, how many students drop out?
- During what grade(s) are students most likely to drop out?
- What school policies exist that push out students already on the verge or dropping out? (i.e., 10-day absence policy)
- Using indicators like attendance, behavior and credit deficiency, which students are most at-risk of not graduating?
- How early can you reliably identify a significant number of students who, absent effective intervention, have high odds of dropping out?

*Adapted from America's Promise *Grad Nation* Resources http://www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Dropout-Prevention/~/media/Files/Our%20Work/Dropout%20Prevention/Grad%20Nation%20April%206.ashx

Your *I Pledge to Graduate* team might consider identifying coordinators for the following components:

- kick-off event
- end-of-year celebration
- media/public relations
- social networking
- pledge tracking
- student incentives

Graduate campaign can be targeted to middle-schoolers, freshmen or toward every student in your school every year they are in high school.

Options to consider:

- Freshmen class pledge
- All high school students pledge together every year
- Each high school class (freshman/sophomore/junior/senior) pledges every year
- Seventh and/or eighth graders pledge at the end of the school year
- Elementary, middle and high school students take the pledge to graduate

☐ Suggest ways people can stay or become involved in the initiative

Lowering the dropout rate is not only the responsibility of the school district, it's everybody's business. From students, to teachers, to local business owners or the town mayor, everyone can make a difference in raising the graduation rate. Included in the "Starting a Graduation Matters Initiative in Your Town" toolkit are one-page Action Sheets for Students, Educators, Families and Businesses/Communities/Local Government which include simple suggestions to gain these groups involvement. Linked to state and national websites and resources, each Action Sheet includes best practices, effective strategies and concrete steps each stakeholder can take to raise the graduation rate on the local level.

Some local "celebrities" you might consider inviting to join your campaign include:

- Superintendent of Public Instruction Denise Juneau
- A statewide-elected official (Governor, state or national Senators or Representatives, State Auditor, Secretary of State or Attorney General)
- Mayor
- Justice of the Peace or District Judge
- County Commissioners
- Tribal Elders
- City Commissioners
- People who Overcame Odds to Graduate
- Local Musicians, Artists or Athletes
- University Students
- High School Alumni

☐ **Get local "celebrity" involvement**

Look to include local dignitaries, "celebrities" and recognized leaders in your community to bring momentum to your efforts. In all the steps taken to involve local "celebrities," be sure to keep the media up to date and invite them to attend events.

Graduation Matters Missoula invited their mayor to get on board with their efforts to raise the graduation rate. He sent a letter to every incoming freshman (reproduced in the Appendix) asking each student to commit to graduating from high school. Consider asking a local "celebrity" to get involved with your *I Pledge to Graduate* campaign by reaching out to your target students and asking them to take the pledge to graduate.

4. Take Action

☐ **Have kick-off, ongoing and end-of-year celebrations**

The opportunity to acknowledge a student's commitment to graduate should not be passed up. Holding a kick-off assembly will set the tone for your school's *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative, and is an opportunity to raise the profile of your school's efforts to lower the dropout rate in your community. Involving media and public

officials in the kick-off ensures that a larger cross-section of your community will learn about your school's commitment to lowering the dropout rate and become engaged in the effort. An end-of-the-year event is a great way for your school to affirm its commitment to supporting its students and celebrate its success with the initiative.

Celebration Event Ideas

Kick-off / End-of-Year

- Pledge walking ceremony similar to the walk at graduation.
- I Pledge to Graduate pep-rally or assembly.
- Class of 20XX group picture.
- Students put their handprints on an I Pledge to Graduate banner.
- Students sign a pledge on a poster or wall.
- Class picnic or pizza party.
- Student graduation summit where students gain skills, voice their concerns and pledge to graduate.
- Conclude your Freshman Academy or Freshman Orientation with an I Pledge to Graduate ceremony.
- Invite a couple of students to speak at the I Pledge to Graduate assembly. Include students who have struggled to make it to their Senior year or whose voices are seldom heard.

On-going *I Pledge to Graduate* event ideas

- Have a competition with another school for the highest number of pledgers, or within your school with boys vs. girls or freshmen vs. sophomores.
- Publish the names of students who have pledged to graduate in the local newspaper after each quarter or semester.
- Hold a community forum, rally or roundtable with a presentation for families about what is required to graduate and how families can best support their student in that effort.
- Incorporate the I Pledge to Graduate campaign into your school's Spirit Week.

Elements of a kick-off celebration*

- Ask public officials, local celebrities, tribal elders or community leaders to address pledgers
- Invite upperclassmen to talk about the importance of staying in school and graduating
- Acknowledge all sponsors, partners, volunteers and pledgers
- Invite the media so everyone in the community learns of your efforts
- Provide music. Music (provided by a school band, radio DJ, etc.) always gets people excited and ready to act
- Include a formal moment for students to take the PLEDGE to graduate
- Have fun!

Elements of an end-of-year celebration*

- Acknowledge pledgers' hard work
- Recognize sponsors and donors
- Highlight accomplishments and stories of the year
- Give opportunity for students, teachers, partners, volunteers, parents, sponsors, etc. to share experiences
  Invite the media so everyone in the community stays apprised of your efforts
- Have fun!

*Adapted from Youth Serve America's *Global Youth Service Day Toolkit: http://gysd.org/toolkit*

- Set up a table during lunch or at a school event with pledge cards or a laptop so students can pledge online at www.graduationmatters.mt.gov.
- Invite incoming senior class students to attend the middle school I Pledge to Graduate pledge ceremony and become graduation mentors for incoming freshmen students (Research has shown that engaging at-risk older students as mentors with younger students has a powerful impact on both the investment of the older student, as well as for the younger student).
- Hold occasional random drawings for incentives that are open to students who have pledged to graduate.

Examples of Pledge Campaigns around the Country

To inspire your school's planning and organization for your *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative, here are a few examples of celebration events used in schools around the nation.

- **Graduation Matters Missoula – Missoula, Montana**
  http://www.graduationmattersmissoula.org

  Incoming freshman receive a letter of encouragement from the city mayor asking them to commit to graduate from high school. Students respond to the mayor's office via postcard, which includes a question about what barriers they might see in the way of their graduation. The mayor's office works with the school district to develop accommodations and new policies to assist the self-identified at-risk students. At the end of the school year, the mayor hosts a follow-up pizza lunch for the freshman at each local high school.

- **Graduation Matters Billings – Billings, Montana**
  http://www.kulr8.com/news/local/Native-American-Students-Pledge-to-Graduate-126871073.html?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter

  American Indian students participate in a two-week summer program called "Native American High School 101" for incoming 9th graders. The High School 101 course focuses on communication skills, time management, choices and consequences as well as American Indian culture. The students earn half an elective credit for their participation in the program. The students individually state "*I Pledge to Graduate*" before receiving a certificate and t-shirt. Families and school board members are present to celebrate the occasion with them.

- **The Freshmen Academy— Pepperell High School, Rome, Georgia**
  http://www.pepperellhigh.com/FreshmanAcademy.html

  The Freshman Academy's purpose is to prepare all students for academic success with structure, goal-orientation, a rigorous curriculum, and a sound code of discipline. Components of the academy include freshman-year team teaching, looping home room teachers that act as advisors, a High School 101 course, graduation coaches, academic support programs and student-made orientation resources on the school website. During the High School 101 course, students plan for graduation and beyond, develop time management skills and examine choices and consequences. Upperclassmen are expected to welcome freshman and serve as peer support for the transition into high school. Students pledge to graduate during a Dedication to Graduation ceremony in October and have a celebration day in May for students who passed all their classes. After the first year of implementing the Freshman Academy, the high school saw a significant drop in discipline referrals of freshman from 460 to 60 (see the Consult Other Resources section for a link to Pepperell High School's High School 101 curriculum).

- **Destination Graduation—Simpson County Schools, Mississippi**
  http://www.onthebus.ms/community_spotlights/magee_2009/spotlight_0908_magee.html

  A large event is held at a football stadium where students run onto the field and are introduced by class – from the Kindergarten Class of 2023 to the Senior Class of 2012. All students, parents and community members are invited and encouraged to participate and show the students their support. State Farm provides treat bags and t-shirts for the students. Each class has an opportunity to decorate a school bus to express their goal of staying "On the Bus" to graduation.

- **I P.L.E.D.G.E. Ceremony—Hancock, Mississippi**
  http://www.wlox.com/Global/story.asp?S=14456322;

  To emphasize the importance of graduation, the school holds a ceremony to encourage students to make a commitment to graduate with witnesses who help students visualize their future graduation. The middle schools host an official 8th grade pledge ceremony inviting their families to join the students. Students share information about the importance of staying in school. A caring adult escorts each student to the ceremony table to sign the pledge with the acronym I Pledge to Learn Each Day and Graduate Empowered (I P.L.E.D.G.E.). Students receive a necklace inscribed with their graduation year.

- **On the Bus— Mississippi Schools**
  http://www.onthebus.ms/

  On the Bus is a public awareness campaign to support the Mississippi Department of Education's dropout prevention program and to inform the public of the magnitude of the dropout problem across the state. The goal of On the Bus is simply to encourage Mississippians to get "on the bus" and attend school. The campaign uses student-made public service announcements and digital media sources to get its message out.

☐ **Invite students to speak in school and in the community about their pledge to graduate**

Engage students by having them remain consistently active throughout the initiative. Invite them to participate and speak at events related to the *I Pledge to Graduate* campaign, such as at the kick-off and end-of-year celebrations, at meetings, such as teacher in-service days and school board meetings, and at community forums.

☐ **Offer incentives to students who pledge to graduate**

The Office of Public Instruction is working to recruit sponsors to provide commemorative awards for every student who pledges to graduate. When a student pledges online on the Graduation Matters Montana webpage on the OPI website, a link will open with a printable award certificate and Pledge Card stating that the student has pledged to graduate. Additionally, the Office of Public Instruction will send the student a silicone wristband saying *I Pledge to Graduate*.

Your local business sponsors may consider offering student pledgers a discount upon presentation of the certificate or Pledge Card.

In terms of incentives for your *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative, consider the following:

- Tap into your local business community for discounts and incentives such as gas cards, free coffee drinks, iTunes cards, t-shirts, food discounts and more. Many stores and businesses in Montana's towns offer local scholarships, sponsor local softball teams, or underwrite festivals or events. Consider asking a local store

or business to sponsor your *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative. Take a look at "Obtaining Incentive Donations from Larger Corporations" in the Appendix for help in this effort.

- Ideally, data will be a major component of your campaign and therefore, you might consider offering incentives to students who make the most improvement in attendance, most improvement in behavior and most improvement in in-class effort in addition to the regular awards for perfect attendance or high grades.
- If you are able to procure a valuable incentive award like a laptop or scholarship from a local business, be sure to periodically build excitement for the award drawing so students stay engaged in pursuing it.
- Consider collaborating with the parent committee that organizes the Senior All-Night Party in your town (if there is one) and asking them to reserve one of their prize drawings specifically for the students who pledged to graduate and did so.

☐ **Publicize your efforts**

- With posters/flyers/social media/ billboards/logos posted in participating businesses
- Issue press releases, invite media to your *I Pledge to Graduate* kick-off event and continue to update them about your programs and progress
- Invite State Superintendent Denise Juneau to your community to help kick off your *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative
- Make sure OPI includes your community on the Graduation Matters Montana website as part of the statewide initiative

From the kick-off to the end-of-the-year celebration, make sure someone is ready to answer questions posed by volunteers, the community, public officials, special guests or local media. Document your efforts by keeping a scrapbook or records of any articles published about your events and by taking photos and videos during the events.

5. Develop Strategies to Sustain Student Engagement

☐ **Provide sustained support to students who have taken the pledge and might be at-risk of dropping out**

- Start an On-Track to Graduate committee of teachers
    - Using the ABCs identified by Grad Nation and America's Promise (Attendance, Behavior and Course Performance), teachers identify five students each to track. By narrowing and focusing on individual at-risk student progress more closely, teachers are able to develop a personal relationship with an at-risk student while also ensuring that the student is moving toward high school completion.
- Enlist local volunteers to offer tutoring to students who are struggling with academics
- Collaborate with Big Brothers Big Sisters, Junior Achievement, Jobs for Montana's Graduates, the Student Assistance Foundation, etc.

- Assign adult advocates to meet regularly with students at-risk of dropping out
- Start a Student Advisory Board to keep continuously informed on what obstacles students face in order to graduate
- Ask the local newspaper to publish a monthly or weekly column of student activities beyond just sports to encourage parent and student engagement in school life

6. Evaluate Progress

☐ **Reflect before, during and after each school year**

By reflecting and evaluating your progress, you understand better why you are participating in the initiative, what impact you are making and what you learn along the way. It also gives you a chance to review the outcomes from participating in the *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative, and to assess what worked to engage students, what could be done differently next year to increase student participation, and determine potential next steps. Be sure to seek feedback from the students! [12]

7. Celebrate and Recognize

Celebrate and recognize the commitment students made through *I Pledge to Graduate* and volunteers who helped plan and implement the initiative in your school. Not only will your community become aware of how much they are appreciated and valued, but they will also realize the impact made on students.

☐ **Celebrate successes**

Decide how you will acknowledge the students' commitments to graduate and encourage them to stay committed throughout the school year.

Some possible ways to celebrate your successes:

- Include the names of students who have pledged in the school newsletter
- Announce over the intercom throughout the year the positive efforts of individual students and student groups
- Give frequent updates on the number of students who have pledged
- If you made an *I Pledge to Graduate* banner, poster or wall hanging with student pictures or handprints, hang it as the background at the graduation ceremony
- Have an end-of-year event to celebrate each student's commitment

Refer to the Celebration Event Ideas section for more end-of-year celebrations ideas.

☐ **Communicate your successes**

Communicate with the media on events and success stories related to the pledge initiative by writing press releases (see the Sample Media Advisory in the Graduation Matters Toolkit). Your school and community participation in the *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative will heighten public awareness of the dropout rate in your community and can serve as a catalyst for discussion and action about this important issue. Engaging the media and public officials helps the initiative reach a wide, diverse audience, brings positive attention to the students' pledge commitments, highlights the importance of graduation and pledging, and educates the community about needs and solutions to those needs.

[16] *Source: the Global Youth Service Day Toolkit: http://gysd.org/toolkit*

☐ **Keep the school and community informed of any outcomes and stories**

Publicize how students are being impacted by the *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative. Also provide information of how to get involved in *I Pledge to Graduate* for future school years.

8. Consult Other Resources

The Office of Public Instruction staff would not have been able to put together the *I Pledge to Graduate* toolkit without the best practices, effective strategies, and inspiration that was provided by the following resources. We encourage you to look into these resources further as you plan and implement your *I Pledge to Graduate* initiative.

- **Global Youth Service Day (GYSD) toolkit** is a free resource for GYSD, which is organized by YSA (Youth Service America) and its Global Youth Service Network. Sponsors include State Farm, United HealthCare, Disney, Sodexo, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and Learn and Serve America. http://www.gysd.org
- **Grad Nation: A Guidebook to Help Communities Tackle the Dropout Crisis** – Developed by America's Promise, the Grad Nation guidebook is an invaluable resource filled with best practices and effective strategies to help local communities lower their dropout rate. http://www.americaspromise.org/gradnation
- **The Community Tool Box** - The Community Tool Box is developed and managed by the Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas, and partners nationally and internationally. http://ctb.ku.edu/en/default.aspx
- **Graduation Matters Missoula** website: http://graduationmattersmissoula.com/
- **Pepperell High School Freshman Academy and High School 101 Curriculum**, Rome, Georgia: Freshman Academy Info Sheet: http://www.pepperellhigh.com/FreshmanAcademy.html High School 101 Curriculum: http://opi.mt.gov/PDF/GradMatters/HS101Curriculum.pdf
- **"On the Bus: Destination Graduation"** campaign, Mississippi Department of Education: http://www.onthebus.ms/
- **Do Something**, "Using the power of online to get teens to do good stuff offline:" www.dosomething.org
- **"Save Me a Spot in College"** campaign, California Colleges: http://www.californiacolleges.edu/tools/pledge.asp

9. Appendix

Item A--The PLEDGE

On average in the state of Montana, **5 students drop out of school every day.** This is not OK with me. Something needs to change. I can be a part of the change.

I *CAN* MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

I Pledge to Graduate!
opi.mt.gov

MY PLEDGE:

I, _____, will graduate from high school.

No matter what it takes, how long it takes, or how hard it gets, I can do this and I will not give up. One reason I think it is important for me to graduate is

_____

_____

_____.

I make this pledge to myself, my family, my friends, my school and my community.

My Signature _____ Date _____

As a witness, I hereby commit to supporting _____ to graduate.

My Witness_____ Date _____

Item B. Missoula Mayor John Engen's Letter – Sample

August 12, 2009

[FIRST NAME] [LAST NAME]

[ADDRESS]

[CITY], [STATE] [ZIP]

Dear [FIRST NAME],

I'm sending this letter to you and all of your classmates in Big Sky's freshman class.

I'm John Engen, mayor of the City of Missoula. Thirty-one years ago, I was a freshman at Hellgate High School. At first, I was intimidated, confused and overwhelmed. I felt like I didn't fit in, didn't believe I ever would and had no idea how I was going to make it through four years of this stuff. But I had support at home, I made new friends, I learned from great teachers and I discovered abilities I never imagined I possessed. I graduated from Hellgate and The University of Montana and moved on to a rewarding, varied and fascinating career that continues to unfold.

I want you to finish high school, continue your education and lead a rewarding, fulfilling life, too. That's why I'm writing you. Around the United States, about one-third of young folks drop out of high school. Those dropouts are less likely to find good jobs, own homes, live comfortably and contribute to their communities. I'd like you to stick with it. And if you need help, we're here.

This year, I'm asking the Big Sky Class of 2014 to commit to graduating from high school. And if, for any reason, you don't think you'll make it, I'm asking you to tell us why and give us a chance to help you. We'll encourage you and help you find the resources you need to continue your high school education.

I'm enclosing a response card for you to fill out. It's voluntary, of course, but I'd really like to know if you can commit to completing high school. And if you can't, I'd like to know why so the school and I can help. I look forward to getting to know you and thank you for considering this request.

If you or your parents have questions, please don't hesitate to contact the dropout prevention program coordinator, [CONTACT] at [PHONE NUMBER], or [EMAIL], your principal, or me at [PHONE NUMBER], or [EMAIL].

Let us help you finish what you start.

Sincerely,

John Engen

Mayor

Item C. Obtaining Donations from Larger Corporations

Examples from the Global Youth Service Day Toolkit include food companies, restaurants and grocery chains that have policies for charitable donations and might be interested in donating food or money to your project.

- Costco http://shop.costco.com/About/Charitable-Giving
  Donations (in-kind and monetary) and grants offered.
  Who's eligible: 501(c)(3)'s focused on children, education or health and human services.
  Timing: Year-round. Allow three months for grants, less for in-kind assistance.

- Papa John's http://company.papajohns.com/comun/index.shtm
  Donations (in-kind and monetary) offered.
  Who's eligible: Ask at your local store.

- Pizza Hut http://www.pizzahut.com/corporatecontributionguidelines.html
  Donations (in-kind and monetary) offered, variable by location.
  Who's eligible: Ask at your local store.

- Quizno's http://www.quiznos.com/subsandwiches/About/charity.html
  Donations (in-kind and monetary) offered.
  Who's eligible: Ask at your local store.

- Safeway http://safewayfoundation.org/FundingGuidelines.html
  Donations (in-kind) of under $50 offered by local stores and grants offered by the Safeway Foundation.
  Who's eligible: 501(c)(3)'s focused on hunger relief, education, health and human services, and people with special needs.

- Subway http://www.subway.com/subwayroot/AboutSubway/helpingSociety/index.aspx
  Donations (in-kind and monetary) and sponsorships offered.
  Who's eligible: 501(c)(3)'s and educational organizations.

Also work with your local businesses and community-based organizations.

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Roberts High School

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