

Missoula County School
Board Chair Toni Rehbein
and Superintendent
Alex Apostle.



Agents of Change

A Montana school board sets a goal of having 100 percent of its students finish high school, and the district answers the challenge with Graduation Matters Missoula

When officials in Missoula, Mont., realized that nearly one in five students failed to graduate from high school on time, they didn't simply attribute the problem to the ills of poverty, lazy students, or a troubled home life.

Instead of assigning blame, they tackled the problem by creating Graduation Matters Missoula, a communitywide initiative that seeks to ensure that 100 percent of students graduate from the Missoula County Public Schools.

"We developed five very specific goals, which included, No. 1, that all students would achieve academically and all students would graduate from high school regardless of their circumstances and abilities," says Superintendent Alex Apostle.

This emphasis on graduation began in 2008, when the school board hired Apostle as superintendent of the 8,600-student district. "I wanted to evaluate all our assessments and data," he says. "That included reviewing the graduation rate and dropout rate. It was pretty significant that we were losing lots of kids. We lost almost 300 students between 2005 and 2007."

Educators, especially those in larger urban districts, might view that number with envy. But school officials admit they were disquieted by their data. As a small city of 67,000,

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Missoula doesn't have the daunting challenges of larger urban centers, and as a regional economic center and home to the University of Montana, the community took pride in the educational attainment of its citizenry.

An 81 percent graduation rate, even if other students eventually earned a degree or GED, just didn't match community expectations.

But facts were facts. As school leaders now readily admit, the district's leadership had become complacent—lulled by the fact that so many students did succeed—and no one had looked hard enough at the issue.

Reassessing priorities

When a new superintendent is hired, it's a logical step for the school board to reassess its priorities. With community input, the board and Apostle did just that, developing a new set of strategic goals and objectives for the coming years, says school board Chair Toni Rehbein. It was a timely opportunity for the district leadership to address the now-understood dropout and graduation problem.

It's easy, of course, to set a goal that all students will graduate. It's quite another to translate this vision into reality. To make certain it happened, Apostle, with help from the board and senior administrators, started making changes. One early

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step was to rework the district’s disciplinary policy, which staff considered too punitive on truancy matters. Students who missed 10 or more days of school automatically failed their courses, a practice that put struggling students impossibly behind academically.

“We rewrote our attendance policies to be more proactive . . . to intervene with students earlier, get with families that evidenced at-risk behavior with attendance, and to build contacts with students,” says Mark Thane, a regional director responsible for supervising a number of the district’s schools.

Thane says the district also “took a hard look” at its credit recovery programs for students receiving Ds and Fs. “We want to keep college-readiness and rigor in our courses,” he says. “But we also removed obstacles to recovering credits for students who go through difficult times or other issues in life that caused them to fail.”

Another step: Collecting data every week on every student who appears to have dropped out. The information is sent to the principals, who know their regional directors soon will ask what they’re doing to contact students and parents and begin intervention efforts.

“We’ve many varied approaches,” Thane says. “We decided to have an on-time graduation committee in each high school, so that staff can meet to look at students at risk behaviorally, socially, and academically. We also want to be proactive, and in each middle and elementary school, we’ve developed student intervention teams to look at students at risk. Early intervention is the key.”

Intertwined initiatives

The initiatives of Graduation Matters Missoula and the district’s overall efforts to improve student achievement are closely intertwined. For example, the district has created two new academies—a health science academy at one high school, and an International Baccalaureate program at another—that officials say they hope will inspire and engage students, including those who perhaps are not challenged in the classroom.

“If you want a student to stay in school, you have to offer a reason for them to stay,” Apostle says. “Graduation Matters has been effective, and we’re very proud of the direction that it’s taking us, but the district is responsible for developing instructional programs that are really going to make a difference in keeping kids in school, keeping them motivated and excited.”

Work also has been done to change attitudes within the district, Apostle says. Teachers work on Graduation Matters committees, and professional development has focused more on helping to identify and aid struggling students.

“Teachers are paying closer attention to how they involve students in the classroom, how they engage them, how they support them, regardless of where they are on the education continuum,” Apostle says. “It’s a combination of increased aware-

ness, high expectations, and a focus on making sure kids are doing well.”

Students are encouraged to tutor classmates, get involved in extracurricular activities, and celebrate their successes. In 2010, for example, high school freshmen attended a rally highlighting the 100-percent graduation goal at the University of Montana football stadium.

Although a great deal of the work in keeping students in school rightly falls on educators’ shoulders, Graduation Matters also taps community resources and talents, school officials say. Susan Hay Patrick, CEO of United Way of Missoula County and a member of Graduation Matters’ steering committee, says the district has formed various committees to look at how the community can support the initiative through more volunteerism, student internships at local businesses, or donations of cash or in-kind services.

It’s working. Business and community groups have raised more than \$40,000 for the initiative, as well as more than half a million dollars for other academic initiatives. Community leaders also are working with area programs to make preschoolers ready for their first day of school.

“This is not just a teacher’s problem; it’s a community problem,” Hay Patrick says. “There’s a role for all of us to play in helping kids stay and succeed in school.”

Roles and responsibilities

For Hay Patrick, one important project was marketing the initiative to maximize everyone’s commitment to the goal of a 100 percent graduation rate. A big effort was made to see the story and logo of Graduation Matters on every message board in every school and distributed widely through the community.

“I’m very big on branding,” she says. “It might seem a small thing, a slogany, gimmicky thing, but it caught fire in the community. I’d say we have a 90 percent recognition rate for Graduation Matters in the community.”

All of these efforts are paying off. In the first full year of the program, the dropout rate fell by 47 percent, Apostle says. Officials are hopeful the graduation rate will top 90 percent this year, and the state education department has been inspired to launch its own program, Graduation Matters Montana.

The board’s most important role has been to hire a strong leader, set the goals, and support the administration as it works toward that 100 percent graduation rate, Rehbein says.

“It’s about focus, focus, focus,” the board chair says. “Our goals have driven every decision and guided the direction of this school system. Ninety percent of our community is familiar with Graduation Matters Missoula. Graduation is now really cool among students—it’s often on the tip of their tongues. That comes from the focus that we’ve had.” ■

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