Missoula education summit offers education road map

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OPINION:

MISSOULA EDUCATION SUMMIT OFFERS EDUCATION ROAD MAP

By Alex Apostle, Missoula County Public Schools superintendent; George M. Dennison, UM president; and Dick King, Missoula Area Economic Development Corp. president.

MISSOULA —

About a year ago, representatives of Missoula County Public Schools, local private schools, the Missoula Area Economic Development Corp. and The University of Montana found consensus in the need for action. To that end, we agreed on some pilot efforts while awaiting a Missoula Area Education Summit to outline a full agenda.

The pilot projects focused on actions that can make a difference immediately without requiring long-term commitments. We have created an academy for high school and University math teachers that provides professional development assistance. We also participate in the ongoing Montana Math and Science Teacher Initiative to assure an adequate supply and retention of qualified math and science teachers. We have several more such projects in the works.

The Nov. 12 summit sought to explore the current situation and to develop an action agenda for implementation. Three separate workgroups discussed issues and submitted recommendations that fit well with all we have initiated to date.
• The PreK-12 Group urged developing policies to maintain rigor and high expectations; raising the bar by redefining standards for promotion from grade to grade and using integrated and calibrated assessments to assure competency levels; creating professional development academies to foster performance improvement for educators; using information technology and appropriate teaching methods more extensively to enhance learning and engage students; pursuing dual enrollment for high school and college credit; launching a campaign to retain students until graduation; and establishing partnerships with business and industry for student and teacher internships.

• The Two-Year Group called for more robust partnerships between high schools and UM’s College of Technology to provide for more dual enrollment; more appropriate and focused preparation of students for technical and vocational programs; more technical training and career pathways for high school students; and an Early College High School that allows students to receive a diploma and an associate degree after four years of high school. The group also urged more partnerships with business and industry, custom training programs to meet industry needs and more internship experiences for students and teachers.

• The Four-Year and Graduate Education group emphasized the promise of professional development academies to improve teaching and learning; the imperative of high expectations for students, faculty and administrators and the alignment of curricula and outcomes to assure seamless transition from K-12 to college; the need to improve teacher preparation by emphasizing an appropriate balance of content and teaching methods; the value of teacher and student summer internships to expose them to relevant work force experience; and initiatives to promote technology transfer and business development involving the University and private sector.
The Missoula school district and UM have begun some related initiatives to broaden awareness of the issues. We have urged active participation in a communitywide campaign to encourage young people to remain in school until graduation to prepare for the future they want. Three years ago, UM President George Dennison inaugurated a letter-writing effort to congratulate entering high school freshman and urge them to do well academically to protect their options for the future, whether in college or the work force. He also writes them in their sophomore, junior and senior years, offering assistance as they think about future plans. These initiatives recognize we must engage young people to achieve success.

It seems clear that we have much that we can do to bring about needed change. However, the critical steps missing as yet from the process involve stakeholder acceptance of the strategic direction. In fact, we have yet to articulate a vision for education in the Missoula area. We also must find a way to empower a steering group, on behalf of the Missoula community, to develop recommendations for consideration by the community through its established governance processes.

Until we have the vision articulated and accepted, the steering group in place and charged, and the process defined for consideration and approval of recommendations, we cannot with any assurance claim we have made progress toward the achievement of our goals. We commit, however, to persevere and to succeed.

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