

Healthcare education pipeline

responses provided by **Christine Simonsen**

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Suggested talking points/prompts:

- What healthcare pathways currently exist for Montana students at the high-school level, community college level, and university or professional-school level?

Currently, Billings Public Schools does not have a fully articulated health science pathway at the high school level. However, students have access to a variety of health science courses that provide foundational knowledge, career exploration, dual-credit opportunities, and industry-recognized certifications.

The existing sequence begins with Project Lead the Way (PLTW) **Principles of Biomedical Sciences (PBS)**, a year-long course open to students in grades 9–12 with no prerequisites. Students may then progress to PLTW **Human Body Systems (HBS)**, a year-long course for grades 10–12 that requires completion of or concurrent enrollment in biology and prior completion of PBS. A third PLTW course, **Medical Interventions (MI)**, is not currently offered but is planned for reinstatement in 2027. This course is intended for grades 11–12 and requires completion of PBS, HBS, and biology. Students earn 1 CTE credit for each of these completed courses.

Additional health science course offerings include:

- **Medical Terminology** (0.5 CTE credit; dual credit available: **AHMS 144 – 3 credits @ City College MSUB**): One-semester course for grades 10–12 requiring completion of or concurrent enrollment in biology.
- **Basic College Human Biology**: (1 CTE credit; dual credit available for **4 credits BIO 104/105**) Year-long dual-credit course for grades 10–12 requiring completion of or concurrent enrollment in biology.
- **Introduction to the Operating Room** (0.5 CTE credit): One-semester course for grades 10–12 requiring completion of or concurrent enrollment in biology.
- **Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)** (0.5 CTE credit): One-semester course for grades 11–12 requiring completion of biology.
- **Medical Careers** (0.5 CTE credit, 0.5 biology credit, and **3 dual-credit college credits HTH 101: Opportunities in the Health Professions**): Available to grade 12 students who have completed 3 science credits.
- **Emergency Medical Technician (EMT)** (1 CTE credit; dual credit available: **6 credits – ECP 291**; City College at Montana State University Billings): Available to grade 12 students. Students can earn Basic Life Support (BLS) certification and the opportunity to earn EMT certification. Students must have completed biology to enroll.

While these courses provide valuable preparation for healthcare careers, they currently function as individual offerings rather than as part of a comprehensive, intentionally designed health science pathway. Billings Public Schools will be submitting a proposal to the Montana Office of Public Instruction in October 2026 for a **Health Science Charter School** that will open in **August 2027** to include a fully articulated pathway that aligns secondary, postsecondary, and workforce experiences, resulting in stackable credentials, dual-credit attainment, industry certifications, and seamless transitions into Montana's healthcare workforce and higher education programs.

Furthermore, Community Education, housed in the Lincoln Center and overseen by Billings Public Schools offers the following Health Science adult education course and possibility to earn certifications:

- **Medical Assistant** (all required courses to earn certification are provided)
- **CNA (Certified Nurse Assistant)**
- **Medical Coding & Billing**
- **Phlebotomy**

- Are the strongest models concentrated in certain communities, and if so, how can they be replicated statewide?

Strong healthcare pathway models often emerge in communities that benefit from robust partnerships among K–12 schools, postsecondary institutions, healthcare providers, and workforce development organizations. Replicating these models statewide will require intentional collaboration, shared resources, and the dissemination of proven practices that can be adapted to meet local workforce and community needs.

Following approval of the Health Science Charter School proposal by the Montana Office of Public Instruction, Christine Simonsen intends to actively support statewide replication efforts by freely sharing program documents, curriculum frameworks, partnership agreements, marketing materials, implementation strategies, and lessons learned. She also plans to present at local, state, and national conferences and collaborate with interested school districts and community partners to help expand high-quality healthcare pathway opportunities across Montana.

- Which programs are producing licensure-ready workers most effectively?

Programs that most effectively produce licensure-ready healthcare workers are those that combine rigorous classroom instruction, hands-on clinical experiences, industry-recognized certifications, strong employer partnerships, and clear connections to postsecondary education. Successful programs align curriculum with workforce needs, provide opportunities for students to earn credentials while in school, and offer meaningful work-based learning experiences that build both technical skills and professional competencies.

In Montana, continued collaboration among K–12 schools, colleges, healthcare employers, and licensing bodies will be essential to identifying and scaling programs that demonstrate strong credential attainment, licensure pass rates, employment outcomes, and workforce retention.

- Where are there disconnects between education programs, credentialing structures, and workforce demand?

Disconnects often occur when education programs, credentialing requirements, and workforce needs are developed independently rather than collaboratively. Common gaps include limited alignment between K–12 pathways and postsecondary programs, insufficient opportunities for students to earn industry-recognized credentials while in school, and barriers that prevent students from accessing clinical experiences or work-based learning opportunities required by employers.

Additionally, workforce demand can shift more quickly than educational programs and credentialing structures are able to adapt. Strengthening communication and collaboration among educators, healthcare employers, licensing bodies, and workforce development organizations will help ensure that training programs remain responsive to current and future workforce needs.

- How should the state think about stackable credentials, career laddering, and “grow your own” models?

The state should prioritize stackable credentials, career laddering, and “grow your own” workforce models as key strategies for addressing Montana's healthcare workforce shortages. Students should have opportunities to earn industry-recognized certifications, dual-credit coursework, and college credits **while in high school**, allowing them to enter the workforce quickly while maintaining clear pathways for continued education and career advancement.

A **well-designed healthcare pathway** should enable students to progress from entry-level credentials to increasingly advanced roles through seamless transitions between secondary education, postsecondary institutions, apprenticeships, and employer-supported training. “Grow your own” models are particularly important in rural and underserved communities, as students who receive education, training, and work-based learning experiences locally are more likely to remain in Montana and contribute to the state's long-term healthcare workforce needs.

- Is there room to build stronger connections from EMT, CNA, home health aide, or other entry credentials into longer-term healthcare careers?

Yes. Entry-level credentials such as EMT, CNA, and home health aide can serve as valuable on-ramps into healthcare careers, but stronger connections are needed to ensure students and workers can clearly see and access the next steps in their professional development. Creating intentional career ladders that connect these credentials to advanced certifications, associate and bachelor's degree programs, apprenticeships, and employer-supported education pathways can improve workforce retention and advancement.

By aligning education, credentialing, and workforce needs, Montana can help individuals enter the healthcare workforce more quickly while providing clear opportunities for continued education, increased earning potential, and long-term career growth.

- What information or support would help the task force make useful recommendations without duplicating work already being done through other initiatives?

To avoid duplicating existing efforts, the task force would benefit from a comprehensive inventory of current healthcare workforce, education, apprenticeship, and pathway initiatives occurring across Montana. Understanding what programs already exist, their outcomes, identified gaps, and opportunities for collaboration would allow the task force to focus on strengthening and scaling effective models rather than creating parallel systems.

Additionally, regular communication among K-12 education, postsecondary institutions, healthcare employers, workforce development organizations, and state agencies will help ensure recommendations are coordinated, data-informed, and aligned with Montana's long-term healthcare workforce needs.