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# *On the Front Lines: How No Child Left Behind Is Affecting Schools*

## *A Profile of Belt Public Schools Belt, Montana*



### BELT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- Superintendent Calvin L. Johnson
- Student Population: 318
- District Grades: K–6; 7–8; 9–12
- Minority Population: Less than 1%
- Students With Disabilities: 8%
- Free and Reduced-Price Lunch: 32%
- Community: Rural

### **District Snapshot**

Belt, Montana, is a small rural community of about 2,000 residents located just 20 miles from Great Falls, a city of 80,000 that provides jobs for many of Belt’s residents. Farming and government employment at a nearby U.S. Air Force base are also large sources of jobs.

The school system in Belt, led by Superintendent Calvin Johnson, serves over 300 students in kindergarten through grade 12. Johnson, who has served as superintendent for seven years, has also worked as an educator in three other states—offering him a unique perspective.

A longtime a supporter of standards-based accountability, Johnson is a strong proponent of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) with some degree of flexibility, especially in the area of teacher quality. Johnson says that NCLB has helped the district move forward with reform efforts. After an uphill battle to change policies and practices in the school system, Johnson found that having the support of the federal government and the state enabled him to institute changes. “It made my job much easier,” says Johnson, adding that without NCLB, student achievement in the Belt system would not be where it is today.

### **Teacher Quality**

As with many school systems across the country—especially small rural systems—teachers and administrators in Belt wear many different hats. Superintendent Johnson also serves as principal of the middle school. Teachers, too, serve in many different capacities, especially in the classroom where content expertise in multiple subjects is a necessity. Of the 27 teachers on staff, 11 have a master’s degree, and all meet the Montana definition of a “highly qualified teacher,” says Johnson—a definition that takes into account the unique challenges of the largely rural state. “Our middle school has 25 kids in each grade, so to have a certified, degreed teacher in all of the subject areas is next to impossible,” says Johnson. As a result, middle school teachers generally hold the state’s elementary K–8 license and teach more than one subject.

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Recruiting can also be a challenge in Belt—for all grades and subjects. “There is a high demand, but a very low supply,” says Johnson. For the most recent opening in the school system, Johnson received only two resumes.

The 300-person student body puts Belt in the top 50 of the districts in the state in terms of size—highlighting the challenges faced by schools across Montana.

Johnson notes the neighboring school system finally closed its doors last year when enrollment for the system reached a low of only two students.

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*—Calvin Johnson, Superintendent, Belt Public Schools*

Despite these obstacles, Johnson is a firm believer in the impact a teacher can have on student achievement and continues to work with the staff to make improvements. “Teacher quality is one of the most important, if not the most important, aspects of student achievement,” says Johnson. “It’s the number one thing—be effective in the classroom.” A common attribute of high-quality teachers, Johnson notes, is their ability to adjust to the students and situations at hand. He is also quick to note that being licensed and being qualified to teach are not one-and-the-same.

Johnson has used professional development as a key instrument of change in the district. Educators in Belt are spending more time on professional development activities through statewide programs, online classes and extensive training during the summer. A great deal of training occurs on site—not surprising given the remote location of the school system. “We’ve pushed professional development a lot in the last few years and seen changes,” says Johnson.

## **Assessments**

Students in Belt follow the state assessment system—MontCAS—which tests students in grades 3–8 and grade 10 in reading and math using the state’s criterion-referenced tests. The district also uses the Iowa Tests to assess students in grades 4, 8 and 11 in reading, language arts, mathematics, social studies and science.

With only a few years of assessing using the criterion-referenced tests, educators in Belt rely more on the results from the Iowa Tests than the state test put in place to comply with NCLB. “We value it much more because it’s been around, and we have data to make good decisions,” says Johnson. The achievement data from the Iowa Tests enables the school system to make changes to improve curriculum and student achievement, he says.

Johnson has also noticed the impact NCLB-focused assessment has had on parents and students, noting that parents value the information about school performance on the state tests. Students, Johnson adds, take the tests more seriously since NCLB was signed into law in 2002. Johnson believes the annual testing required under NCLB should continue; however, he feels students should take only one type of assessment. One test can do the job, says Johnson, and he believes it should be the Iowa Tests, the norm-referenced assessment that has long been in place in the Belt School System.

## **Data Systems**

The Belt district embraces the use of data in decision-making. Johnson says the district has benchmarks each year, and data analysis helps them get there. “We use that analysis a lot in terms of how we’re going to make changes: we reassign teachers ... adjust the curriculum ... or do some type of analysis to figure out why students are not

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doing well in a particular area,” says Johnson. While the district generates much of its own data, the state is just now beginning to offer some assistance, says Johnson.

## **Accountability**

NCLB is helping improve learning in Belt, says Johnson. “NCLB has focused everybody’s attention, and so instantly you have ... broad support from everybody,” he explains. When a teacher is reassigned, or a subject is added to the curriculum in order to meet achievement goals, there is common support, which is a change for Johnson. “Having that goal has made it that much easier; people accept that and work toward the goal,” says Johnson.

Yet it is a challenge to keep on top of all of the changes from the federal requirements, the state plan and the district’s own accountability measures. “Montana is trying to get some adjustments approved, and so it is a learning process,” says Johnson of the years since NCLB was set in motion. “Each year, in the past couple of years, it has had to adjust because the state keeps changing their plan,” he says of the school system’s accountability measures.

Johnson also has concerns about how adequate yearly progress (AYP) is defined across the states. “What Montana uses for AYP may be twice as hard as neighboring states,” says Johnson. “There should be information sharing among the 50 states, to learn from each other, and to make adjustments.”

A Montana school or district is in improvement status if it fails to make AYP for two consecutive years. AYP is measured using Montana’s 4th, 8th and 10th grade criterion-referenced reading and math test scores, participation, attendance and graduation rates. Because the district is small, only two subgroups—white and economically disadvantaged—can be counted for Belt Elementary. In the middle grades the district falls under the “small schools process” for AYP because the total number of students tested is so small. Belt test scores have been rising in recent years. Scores in the elementary grades for the 2004–2005 school year show 38 percent of students meeting proficiency standards in both reading and math—up from 31 percent in the previous year in both subjects. Johnson says that more research is needed on adjustments for subgroups, as evidenced by the challenges faced by small rural districts, such as Belt. “NCLB is good, but one-size-fits-all does not work. There are unique situations,” says Johnson.

*“I believe the support of NCLB has provided the framework for serious school improvement and achievement gains. Although upon my arrival in this district seven years ago we had identified achievement and educational deficiencies which we were addressing, the support of NCLB made the change transition much more productive. Having the clout of the national leadership behind you made the implementation of change more effective and staff, board, parents and students more willing to support educational change than they would have been just with local administrative direction. And although we were implementing educational change in our district, the support of NCLB made our school improvement efforts more successful and allowed us to progress towards achievement gains at a much faster pace than if we had been on our own.”*

*—Calvin Johnson, Superintendent, Belt Public Schools*

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## School Improvement

“When I arrived, academics were not a major push,” says Johnson, adding that test scores were low, textbooks were 10 to 20 years old and there were problems with teacher quality. But NCLB is helping to implement much-needed changes, says Johnson. Today, the Belt system has full-day kindergarten—a change since NCLB. In addition, professional development and special programming focused on reading and math are helping to steer the system toward achievement for all.

The push for full-day kindergarten was a gradual process, says Johnson, but something that he has long been committed to putting in place. When introduced, the program was not mandatory and not full-week. Gradually, Johnson increased the days from three days a week to four and, finally, five. “Our state only funds half-day kindergarten ... so I worked it into our budget,” says Johnson. Using federal money, the system is working toward making a similar commitment to prekindergarten, says Johnson.

The district’s communication with parents and the community is strong, says Johnson. School officials share information online and during board meetings. “Typically we have good parent and community support,” says Johnson. Even without an active parent-teacher association, Johnson says that when the school needs help, parents willingly assist, although the school has to be the catalyst. The district also gets help in some unique ways—one program regularly brings grandparents into the schools to read in the elementary grades.

Despite progress, Johnson says that to better support continuous school improvement, Belt schools need additional personnel. “There are a lot of requirements, but not enough time, energy or money,” says Johnson. “We know what we need to do in most cases, we just lack the finances.”

## Other Components of an Effective Education System

Being in such an isolated region of the country, Belt has focused a great deal of attention on technology in recent years. “We’re very progressive with technology,” says Johnson. “We have computers in every classroom and Internet access.” Parents are included in the technology focus—they can now check grades online. The system is also providing SMART Boards this year, interactive whiteboards that are used with a computer.

Isolation is perhaps the most unique challenge faced by Belt, says Johnson. The highly qualified teacher requirements, coupled with supply and demand in the region, make it nearly impossible to comply with NCLB, says Johnson. “We’re not big enough to have a full-time certified chemistry teachers,” he adds. Although these problems have long been an issue in the system, NCLB has exacerbated them, says Johnson. The federal government needs to adjust to local needs, he says, taking into account the special circumstances of each school.

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## About the Commission

The bipartisan, independent Commission on No Child Left Behind is examining the strengths and weaknesses of the No Child Left Behind Act and will make concrete and realistic recommendations to Congress, the Administration, state and local stakeholders, parents and the general public to ensure the law is an effective tool in spurring academic achievement and closing the achievement gap.

In seeking to accomplish its mission, the Commission is guided by these principles:

1. All children can learn and should be expected to reach high standards.
2. Accountability for public education systems in the United States must improve to enable students to excel.
3. The achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their non-disadvantaged peers must be eliminated to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed.
4. Education results for all students must improve in order for the United States to remain competitive in the global marketplace.
5. Parents have a right to expect their children to be taught by a highly qualified teacher. Teachers have the right to be treated like professionals, including access to sound working conditions and high quality preparation and ongoing professional development opportunities.
6. Education reform must be coupled with additional resources, but federal, state, and local resources must be used more efficiently and effectively to ensure results in return for the increased investment.

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