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Wednesday, Sept. 12, 2012.

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SAF Grants \$50,000 to Support Local Graduation Matters Initiatives

Billings, MT — Superintendent Denise Juneau and Kelly Cresswell, vice president of Foundation Activities at Student Assistance Foundation (SAF), announced today that nonprofit SAF granted \$50,000 to support Graduation Matters Montana.

Graduation Matters Montana is a network of locally designed, community-driven efforts to increase the number of Montana students who graduate from high school ready for college and careers in the Montana workforce.

Said Superintendent Juneau, "Student Assistance Foundation understands the importance of making sure high school students graduate and that they have the access and opportunity to pursue higher education. This investment in Graduation Matters Montana will promote greater collaboration between K-12 schools, colleges and universities and seeks to break down barriers students and families face when considering life after high school graduation."

Support from SAF will allow the Office of Public Instruction to launch the Graduation Matters Montana - Student Assistance Foundation College Readiness Fund. The funds will be distributed through a competitive process to up to 10 participating schools that agree to at least one of the following:

- Identify a target number of seniors they will have complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and provide support and interventions designed to achieve that target.
- Host student and family focus groups to discuss college-going attitudes and perceptions, and develop plans to address issues raised.
- Propose an activity/activities that will affect graduation attainment and college preparedness in their community.

"Student Assistance Foundation's community outreach offices, located throughout the state, are eager to work with local schools to help students prepare for college," Cresswell said. "This partnership with Graduation Matters Montana provides us with the means to spread the message that graduation is important, and postsecondary education is not only possible, but crucial, to future success."

Juneau launched Graduation Matters Montana in 2010 and aims to cut Montana's dropout rate in half to 2.55 percent by 2014. Currently, 24 communities have signed on as Graduation Matters communities, including all of Montana's largest school districts.

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Stated Billings Superintendent Terry Bouck, "Graduation Matters Billings finds its motivation in the students we serve and its strength in the community partnerships we are building. Our partnership with the higher education community has never been more important, and we're grateful to OPI for supporting our local efforts."

The announcement of the new Graduation Matters Montana Student Assistance Foundation College Readiness Fund was held at City College in Billings. By 2018, it is expected that more than 60 percent of jobs in Montana are going to require training and education beyond high school.

"City College and MSU-Billings are active members of Graduation Matters Billings and are committed to partnering with the school district and the community to ensure that access to an affordable, high-quality college education is a reality for every Montanan," says Marsha Riley, Dean of City College. "We are pleased to be part of this important collaboration and support Superintendent Juneau as she works to establish effective partnerships like this one with the Student Assistance Foundation."

Montana school districts that have launched a local Graduation Matters Montana initiative or districts that commit to launching an initiative as part of this grant are eligible to apply for funding. Applications are available on the Graduation Matters Montana website (<http://graduationmatters.mt.gov>.) and are due October 26, 2012. Awardees will be announced November 26, 2012.

Current communities involved in a Graduation Matters Montana initiative: Anaconda, Belgrade, Billings, Bozeman, Browning, Butte, Corvallis, Great Falls, Hamilton, Hardin, Havre, Helena, Kalispell, Lame Deer, Lewistown, Libby, Livingston, Miles City, Missoula, Polson, St. Ignatius, Stevensville, Thompson Falls and Townsend

More information about Graduation Matters Montana can be found at <http://graduationmatters.mt.gov>.

About Student Assistance Foundation

Student Assistance Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit Montana corporation that provides students with knowledge and tools to pursue and fund their postsecondary education. Funds generated by SAF are returned to Montanans in the form of education grants and public benefit programs - to date more than \$25 million. For more information, visit www.safmt.org or www.SmartAboutCollege.org.