

Moving All Montana's Children Across the Digital Divide

A Grant Proposal to the Oro y Plata Foundation

October 2005

Submitted by

**Montana Small School Alliance
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Contact Person:

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Describe your organization and the services it provides.

The Montana Small Schools Alliance (MSSA) was formed nine years ago by four groups: the Montana Association of County Superintendents of Schools; the College of Education, Health and Human Development, Montana State University – Bozeman, the Montana Rural Education Center, University of Montana – Western, and the Montana School Boards Association. The purpose of the Alliance is to provide research, resources, technical assistance and workshops to help the small schools in Montana meet state and federal mandates in educationally sound ways. For a more comprehensive list of our programs, please see the enclosed brochure.

Geographic area served by your organization:

While the Professional Development & Curriculum Consortium serve only 34 counties, the Alliance itself serves the 240 smallest school districts throughout the state of Montana.

Number of people served by your organization:

These districts represent close to 14,000 K-12 students with their attendant teachers and administrators.

Amount requested from Oro y Plata Foundation:

For the **Moving All Montana's Children Across the Digital Divide**, the Montana Small Schools Alliance requests \$3641.

Specifically, how would your organization use this grant? Do you need funding for general operating expenses or for a special project? If for a special project, please describe it. What do you hope to accomplish with this support?

MSSA is requesting funding for a special project. The project is called **Moving All Montana's Children Across the Digital Divide**. In the past two years the **Oro y Plata Foundation** has generously provided funds to buy copies of the CD-Rom version of Microsoft Encarta Reference Library for 109 of the multi-grade independent elementary school districts. We considered asking for money to provide copies to another 60 small school districts. We know that all of the districts in Montana do have computers for classroom use. However, there is another problem dealing with technology for some of our smallest rural school districts that we believe is even more pressing and no one has addressed. It is the connectivity to the Internet for these schools. We are not asking the Foundation to fund these charges, but we are asking for your help

in solving the problem of which specific schools are not connected and what options they have for gaining that connectivity.

We know from past research in this area that we still have places in Montana where students do not have reliable, high-speed access to the Internet. Some do not even have any kind of access either in their homes, but more importantly in their schools. Without this connectivity, these students will be left behind in crossing the digital divide. These are K-8 multi-grade independent elementary schools. When those children move on to their appropriate high schools they will be behind with their town peers, because every high school in Montana has high-speed Internet connectivity. In the past few years most schools have seen this as a priority. The Alliance has helped them work with their local telephone cooperatives and use E-Rate funding (discounted telecommunications services for schools and libraries especially in rural settings), but because of the remoteness of some K-8 school districts and the number of rural phone cooperatives in Montana it has been difficult to provide a coordinated effort.

In 2003, the Montana Small Schools Alliance was able to conduct a survey on Internet connectivity and reliability. There was a 46 percent return rate. The results showed that:

1. Eight percent had no Internet access in their school;
2. Thirty-eight percent said that the access they had was too slow to work with students;
3. Five percent said it was too slow for anyone to use; and
4. Twenty-seven percent said that the Internet access was not always reliable.

Last year with the urging of MSSA, the Office of Public Instruction asked these same or similar questions on their Annual Data Collection of all schools in Montana. However, when the results were examined, not all school districts had completed the technology section. Also, to exacerbate the situation, while the Alliance with some funding from the Northwest Regional Laboratory held a meeting for the phone cooperative providers in the state to discuss school access issues, not all of the companies came. Those that did were the ones who were supportive of providing good service to their schools.

At this time we are requesting *Oro y Plata* foundation to fund an action plan that will provide high-speed affordable connectivity to all schools in Montana. The plan would include the following:

1. Analyze the data provided from the Office of Public Instruction to determine which schools did not respond and which schools do not have high-speed reliable Internet service;
2. Call the schools that did not respond or that said they did not have reliable service and determine the issues and who their Internet providers could be;
3. Also find out if these schools know about the E-rate funding;
4. Research options for the specific schools for reliable connectivity;
5. Meet with the Internet providers, if necessary at their offices, to discuss how service may be provided;
6. Help schools with the paper work to get E-rate funding and find a viable method of providing Internet connectivity;
7. Continue to work on this issue until **All Montana's Children Cross the Digital Divide;**

8. Write and submit a report to *Oro y Plata Foundation* at the end of summer to let them know the progress.

Other funding sources:

The Montana Office of Public Instruction will again request the basic information in their Annual Data Collection Report from Montana School Districts and they will provide these data to the MSSA for analysis. MSSA will pay employer taxes and social security on the part of the budget for professional staff time.

How dependent is your organization on donations, and how much income does it receive from other sources (endowment or sales, for example)?

The Montana Small Schools Alliance is supported for the most part by contracts for services as is shown in the enclosed financial statements. Close to two-thirds of the Alliance's income is from its work with the Professional Development and Curriculum Consortium. Other services are contracts with the Montana University System and the Office of Public Instruction. It has already received sufficient contracts to cover the \$20,000 in Miscellaneous Income under the Alliance program item. The Alliance does provide some other resources to small schools at a nominal fee. The total from these sales amount to only \$500 of the annual income.

Why is the work of your organization important to your community and what local community support do you currently receive?

The Montana Small Schools Alliance is unique in the services it provides to the small schools of the state. Through close communication with the professionals throughout the state it becomes aware of issues and problems which need to be addressed. The four organizations that created it, continue to support the organization. For example, the University of Montana-Western has just taken over a list serve that the Alliance and Northwest Regional Education Laboratory created last year and Western will operate it as in-kind for the Alliance. The Office of Public Instruction continues to provide support to the Alliance through contracts for services because they feel the Alliance fills a critical need that they cannot meet. The Governor's office and the Legislative Council have also requested research MSSA has conducted as they work toward a funding solution to the Adequate Funding School Lawsuit.

Who else in your community is working on this issue? How will/do you coordinate with them?

The Montana Office of Public Instruction is working on collecting the data on school technology, but they do not have funds for any follow-up work. We coordinate at least monthly on school technology issues.

Future support: How will your organization be financed in the future?

MSSA has a stable funding base and the requested grant is not for general fund support of the organization. It is specifically to cover the expenses of this project.

Evaluation: How will the success of your organization's efforts (and ORO y Plata Foundation's involvement) be measured and communicated to your Oro y Plata contact?

The Alliance will keep accurate records of time and expenses incurred to meet the goals of the **Moving All Montana's Children Across the Digital Divide** project. A complete report of the strategies and results of the **Moving All Montana's Children Across the Digital Divide** project will be sent to the Foundation by September 1, 2006.

Additional information:

The director has been working in education for forty years. Her work in access to technology for Montana students began in the late seventies. That is also when her work in rural education began. She is able to leverage state and national resources and continues to work with professionals to improve the education for all students in small and rural schools in Montana.

Attached are the following:

- IRS 501 c (3) tax-exempt letter or evidence of government agency status under 170 c
- Operating budget for previous year
- Most recent financial statement
- Project budget (if applicable)
- List of current board members/officers

Signature

Organization: Montana Small Schools Alliance

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (printed): Claudette Morton Title: Executive Director

