

Public Comment
Public Charter School Applications

Columbia Falls Trades Academy

1. Deana Payne

In response to the application for Columbia Falls Trades Academy for a public charter school, I whole heartedly support this agenda.

This program will support those students who choose not to go to college and endure the heavy burden of student loans but instead use their hands and minds to accomplish work tasks and add to the community. The ability to add internships and workdays, will be such a win for students to learn.

Our world is ever changing to the technology boom, and we need to continue being focused on trades that help build our communities and toning the skills needed to continue growth and for our future.

The academy will open a vast variety of opportunity for so many students. It will keep them involved in school because it will be something they really want to do, not just told to do.

The Flathead Valley is growing every day, which adds needs for housing, businesses, infrastructure, and so many other things trades will help with. If we as a community are adding to the workforce with our own, we will be more self sufficient and keep it local.

I encourage you to support this initiative and help the valley give more opportunity to our students and community.

Columbia Falls School District #6

Home of the Wildcats/kats



Date: January 7, 2026

Subject: Public Comment and Clarification

Dear Board of Public Education,

This memorandum provides detailed responses to the follow-up questions raised regarding the Columbia Falls Trades Academy (CFTA) public charter school application. The District aims to clarify facility readiness, community and educational partnerships, and instructional design to support the Board's upcoming vote in January.

1. Facilities and Site Readiness (Canyon Elementary School)

The CFTA will transition to a permanent home at the Canyon Elementary campus in 2027, after an initial year at the Columbia Falls High School. The District wishes to clarify the following regarding the site:

- Infrastructure Upgrades: During the fall of 2024, the campus was prepared with updated sewer systems, electrical capacity, and modern IT infrastructure, including CAT6 cabling, new switches, and wireless access points to support a high-tech learning environment.
- Building Status and Size: While the school closed to K-5 students in 2009 for budget reasons, the building has not been dormant; it has been consistently leased to the county and various community organizations. The main building is 23,052 square feet and sits on 12.50 acres, providing significant room for growth.
- Construction Lab Space: There will need to be a larger building constructed at the Canyon Elementary site in Hungry Horse, MT to allow for a high quality construction lab space. With the program beginning with the existing space at Columbia Falls High School and the Glacier Park Cabin Project will allow for the necessary time for construction and partnerships. The students will also be able to be involved in the construction of their learning space, a true hands on project!
- Expansion and Specialized Labs: The District plans to utilize two out-buildings to serve as additional classrooms and dedicated work spaces, specifically designed for HVAC and Plumbing Learning Labs. These modules are approximately 900 square feet each in learning space already set up for educational use.
- Existing Community Clinic: Since 2016, 3,500 square feet of the facility has been remodeled into a fully operational outpatient medical clinic (currently Greater Valley Community Health), demonstrating the building's versatility and ongoing community integration.



Columbia Falls School District #6

Home of the Wildcats



2. Strategic Partnerships and Workforce Alignment

The CFTA relies on deep-rooted connections with local industry and higher education to ensure student success.

- Flathead Valley Community College (FVCC): The District has a proven history of success with FVCC through dual-credit courses, particularly in welding. We hope this partnership will continue through the design process and future program expansion to offer students a direct pathway to post-secondary technical education.
- Industry Support: Organizations such as the Flathead Building Association serve as vital resources for the academy. Regional contractors and trade associations have been contacted about providing mentorship, materials, and potential donations of tools and buildings to support hands-on learning. No established commitments have been made at this time as we feel they are waiting for definitive direction. There is definitely a buzz in the air about this possibility.

3. Instructional Design and Staffing Clarifications

- Clarification on "Year-Round Facility": During previous discussions, the term "year-round facility" was used to indicate that the building is equipped for all four seasons of Montana's climate; the CFTA will not be a year-round school. It will follow a four-day school week (Monday–Thursday), with Fridays reserved for extended projects and internships.
- Staffing and Licensure: To ensure high-quality technical instruction, the District will utilize Class 4 Licensure for hiring trades instructors, allowing industry experts to transition into the classroom. Instruction will occur in small cohorts of 12–15 students to maintain safety and provide individualized support.
- Proficiency-Based Model: Students will progress through the curriculum by demonstrating mastery of skills rather than traditional seat time, culminating in certifications such as OSHA-10 and NCCER.

Conclusion

The Columbia Falls Trades Academy is a community-driven initiative that leverages existing District assets and strong regional partnerships to meet the Flathead Valley's growing demand for skilled labor. By providing a professional, jobsite-like environment at the Canyon Elementary campus, CFTA will empower students to graduate with marketable skills and a clear path to both the workforce and advanced technical degrees.

Sincerely,



Cory J. Dziowgo

Superintendent of Columbia Falls School District #6

Montana Board of Public Education
Attention: McCall Flynn, Executive Director
Via e-mail: mflynn@mt.gov

RE: Columbia Falls Trade Academy

Dear Ms. Flynn,

The purpose of this letter is to voice our support for the formation of a new Columbia Falls Trades Academy utilizing the funds appropriated for formation of charter schools in Montana. As an established general contractor in the Flathead Valley we experience firsthand the difficulties in securing employees with requisite skills for work in the trades. The Columbia Falls Trades Academy will help alleviate some of these difficulties, without a doubt.

Construction, as an industry, has been broadly hampered by the exit of skilled workers in the boomer generation without sufficient replacement due to overemphasis on the value of college education. This has led to a scarcity of qualified tradespeople over the past 2 decades and driven consumer costs to all-time highs. Efforts, such as the Columbia Falls Trades Academy are part of the solution to providing a balanced and prepared workforce.

As our economy and society shifts to more utilization of artificial intelligence, robotics and supercomputing it seems very prudent for the educational institutions in our state to promote craft and trade skill development as skilled construction jobs are extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to entirely replicate through computing, whereas functions such as accounting, finance and engineering are being quickly replaced by automation and AI.

The Columbia Falls School District's request for grant funds in the amount of \$347,000 seems to be a very modest and reasonable request. Furthermore, their established track record indicates a high likelihood for a return on the investment of these taxpayer dollars. To that end, we urge full funding of their request.

Thank you,

John P. Lobbestael
Managing Member
Finmark Construction, LLC



To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Nicolas Ream. I graduated from Columbia Falls High School with an Honors Diploma and High Honors in 2016. I earned an Associate of Arts, Summa Cum Laude; a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration – Management and Entrepreneurship, Summa Cum Laude, University Scholar; and a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration – Marketing, Summa Cum Laude, University Scholar, from the University of Montana in 2020. In 2022, I earned a Master of Science in Real Estate and the Built Environment from the University of Denver as a Daniels Scholar. I am the Chief Experience Officer, Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing, and Project Manager at Montana Heritage Home Builders, Inc., a high-end luxury, high-performance, full-service, design/build custom home building, remodeling, light-commercial construction, and real estate development company. Montana Heritage Home Builders was founded in Columbia Falls in 1997. I am a proud member of the Board of Directors of the Columbia Falls Area Chamber of Commerce, where I serve as Chair of the Economic Development Committee. I also serve on the Leadership Council of the National Association of Home Builders and the Board of Directors of the Montana Building Industry Association, and I previously served on the Board of Directors of the Flathead Building Association. I currently serve as the Second Vice Chair of the National Association of Home Builders Education Committee and the Chair of the Montana Building Industry Association Membership, Education, and Research Committee.

In August 2025, there were 188,000 open construction positions, with that number expected to increase significantly in the near future. I have had several conversations with the Superintendent of Columbia Falls #6, Cory Dziowgo, about the potential for the Columbia Falls Trades Academy (CFTA). The addition of the Columbia Falls Trades Academy would be a massive benefit to the community and the industry, helping achieve housing affordability. One impact on housing affordability is the shortage of the skilled workforce. I would be honored to work with the Columbia Falls Trades Academy to help it succeed and connect it with the resources provided by the Home Builders Institute.

The construction industry offers excellent opportunities for career development, and the Columbia Falls Trades Academy will expand students' opportunities to succeed.

I am honored to support the establishment of the Columbia Falls Trades Academy. The future is bright! I appreciate your consideration of my letter of support for the Columbia Falls Trades Academy.

Sincerely,

Nicolas R. Ream

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