

Recession session

As predicted, the 2009 Legislature is a killing ground of good ideas. To date, no bill with a discernible fiscal impact, no matter how small, not already funded in the governor's budget, appears to have much chance.

Some legislators are not even willing to consider, much less debate, the public policy issues that frame bills with discernible fiscal impacts.

Our bills, the ones we have provoked to introduction, are NO exception. To see our priority legislation, please visit www.MEA-MFT.org or go directly to www.mea-mft.org/09prioritybills2.htm.

Of course, we knew this would be the case. Crawling along in the worst recession in memory, suffering huge job losses, and no one able to say financial markets have finally bottomed out, it is hard to argue that a new program should be adopted or an existing program should receive enhanced funding.

This is why affiliated state employee negotiators agreed to a base pay freeze. Not because it is a good idea...but because we could not see a positive revenue stream to fund a base pay increase over the biennium. We still don't.

What we believe: Nonetheless, we have not given up charging forward in support of good ideas that deserve policy discussions and funding. We believe it is a mistake to meekly surrender to negative recession politics. We have solid proposals that if not doable this session, maybe next. But among them, we have a small number of proposals that could, in fact should, be done right now.

For example:

We believe HB 87 (Dickenson) <http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/2009/billpdf/HB0087.pdf> is vital to the recruitment and retention of higher education faculty.

HB 87 would increase the state's contribution 1% to the grossly underfunded, noncompetitive defined contribution retirement plan in which 60 percent of all faculty members are trapped. We caused the last legislature to adopt a similar increase. This state can afford to do this again.

We believe SB 251 (Wanzenried) <http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/2009/billpdf/SB0251.pdf> corrects a great and chronic wrong in unemployment insurance. Why should a bus driver employed by a public school district not be eligible for unemployment when a public school bus driver employed by a private contractor is eligible? This wrong makes no sense. It is even more wrong that paraprofessionals are universally denied unemployment insurance. Why?

We believe Head Start is golden for the children and parents it serves. HB 369 (McClafferty) <http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/2009/billpdf/HB0369.pdf> is our first attempt to start up supplementary state funding of Head Start. Research proves Head Start's enormous economic and educational value.

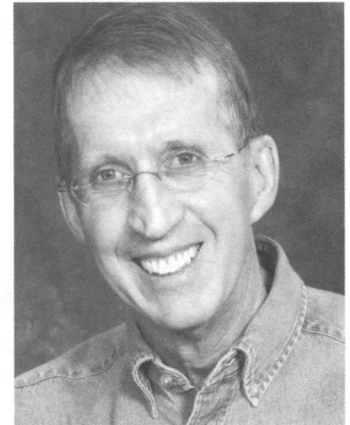
We believe we have no more time to lose constituting a state-funded virtual academy. It is foolish for school districts to buy distance learning curriculum and instruction from almost anywhere, usually out-of-state. Representative Wanda Grinde is sponsoring our bill. <http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/2009/billpdf/LC0788.pdf>

None of the above items is a BIG ticket item. Not one is the state pay plan. Not one funds k-12 or the university system. All together these bills cost little, but each promotes positive change and some correct ugly inequities.

Unfortunately, as we promote good, inexpensive ideas, we must yet defend ourselves from bills introduced by legislators who do not value state employees and the work they do, who disdain public education and the educators and support personnel who work therein, and who want to destroy organized labor and collective bargaining.

By the time you read this, our legislature will be 30 days into a 90 day session. The federal stimulus package will enhance funding of some vital programs and services, but the federal government will not fund a single one of our priority bills. This is a job for our state, as we will let legislators know.

You can help. Let them know, too. ■



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