



'05 Legislature: hopes and expectations

One month into the 2005 Legislature, we remain hopeful that "a new day really has come to Montana."

MEA-MFT members helped elect our new governor and new legislature. We helped end a much-too-long reign of one-party rule that ignored public education and public service.

So we should be hopeful, and we should expect to see the fruits of our political action labor.

State employee pay plan

In one specific way, we already have. Governor Brian Schweitzer has clearly signaled his intent to do better by state employees. Four days after his inauguration, four days and nine months after we began prebudget pay plan negotiations with former Governor Judy Martz, we reached a tentative state pay plan agreement with Governor Schweitzer that we expect to become law.

During the ratification process, a longtime state employee who received no pay increase whatsoever from the 2003 Legislature e-mailed me in skeptical disbelief that he would actually see a pay increase. I asked if Governor Schweitzer would give him a call.

The governor did. The governor's call provoked the same member to e-mail me that "it is good times when the governor of Montana takes time out of his very busy schedule to talk with an employee of Montana State Hospital."

Indeed it is.

The pay plan we negotiated with the governor does not repair the damage done by the last legislature, but Governor Schweitzer's attitude toward state employees bodes well for the future. Come the 2007 prebudget pay plan negotiations, we hope to bargain another reasonable, responsible pay increase for every state employee who does the work that matters.

Fairness for higher education

And maybe with our new governor's help we can at last engage the commissioner of higher education and board of regents in prebudget pay plan negotiations for university faculty. Absent prebudget university pay plan negotiations, we struggle through the legislature to fund the state's

share of university pay, a share that has been slipping inexorably away, adding to the tuition burden Montana university students must bear.

K-12 funding in flux

Then there is the briar patch of k-12 school funding. Here, even with a favorable Montana Supreme Court hammer in hand, we are not certain good times are to be had anytime soon.

We can hope, but our expectations may go smash across the rocks of an uncertain surplus, extremist political bashing of a judiciary that knows how to read our state's constitution, and raw partisan politics.

The Montana education community is, on the surface at least, united in its endeavor to move the legislature toward reasonable, responsible compliance with its constitutional obligation to adequately fund "a basic system of free quality public elementary and secondary schools."

There are, however, fractures within. Fractures that could widen into school funding killing crevasses unless our new governor and legislature commit themselves to more revenue than, say, the \$50 million so far more or less on the table.

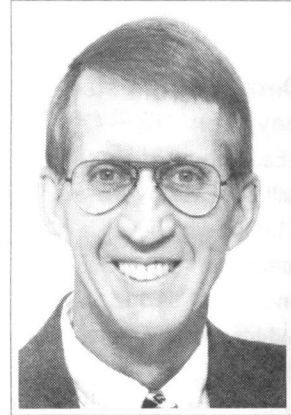
Ironically, \$50 million is just about the same amount the 1993 regular and special legislative sessions cut out of k-12 school funding—a loss from which schools have never recovered.

\$50 million won't pay for some very basic needs. \$50 million only will grow education community crevasses that could swallow up even our dynamic new governor and a legislature that teeter-totters on a partisan divide so narrow there is no predictable margin of victory.

Here at MEA-MFT, we think we have a pretty good idea how Governor Schweitzer and the 2005 Legislature can make a k-12 school funding deal. We hope and expect the governor and legislature will listen.

We worked hard to get where we are right now. We will not surrender to the boo birds who don't like public schools and the nervous nellys who fear appropriating more than \$50 million might mean a tax increase or two.

Stay in touch. Together we can help make it a really new day in Montana. ■



BY ERIC FEAVER
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"The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you **hope** for. And the most you can do is live inside that **hope**. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof." *Barbara Kingsolver, Author*