

Where we stand

As I write, your guess is as good as mine as to the conclusions the 2007 Legislature and Governor Brian Schweitzer will reach sometime late in April.

But I can guess that if the Constitutionalist/Republican legislative leaders in the House of Representatives and the governor do not come to agreement by the end of April, this legislature will meet in special session until they do.

Meanwhile, despite the obvious political elephants—and some lesser-sized critters with weirdly inflated egos—stomping around the capitol, we will press our agenda forward with all the vigor we can muster.

Bottom line, we must pass the state and university employee pay plan that we bargained with Governor Brian Schweitzer and our members ratified.

And we support Superintendent Linda McCulloch's k-12 school funding proposals generally speaking and, specifically, full-time kindergarten and doubling the \$2,000 quality educator payment to \$4,000.

Insofar as Governor Schweitzer's school funding proposals do this, we are with him. Like Superintendent McCulloch, the governor is an unrelenting advocate of state-funded full-time kindergarten. So are we.

Frankly, I am deeply disappointed that a single Montana public school educator would argue against full-time kindergarten for any real or imagined reason.

Public education is not a static system. Those of us who believe the state has in the past notoriously underfunded schools have not pursued our grievances in court and walked miles and miles through the halls of the state capitol in pursuit of adequate funding of only what we do.

We believe the state must help school districts fund what we *ought* to be doing. Right now, there is no ought that we ought to be doing of greater priority than full-time kindergarten.

I do not see Governor Schweitzer walking away from this session without full-time kindergarten. Those who think otherwise had better get a grip.

But unlike Superintendent McCulloch, to date

the governor has NOT embraced our primary school funding proposal—doubling the quality educator payment. Hence we have plenty of hard lobbying to do.

And then there is retirement. You know, a bunch of years ago, during a string of legislative sessions straight from hell, MEA-MFT pushed through the 1993 Legislature a proposed constitutional amendment that went to a vote of the people in November 1994. Voters overwhelmingly adopted our proposal that became Article 8, Section 15 that reads in part, "*Public retirement systems shall be funded on an actuarially sound basis.*"

Consequently, the legislature has a constitutional duty to address the actuarially unfunded liabilities of our public retirement systems.

As it does, we are pushing to fix a gross error in judgment committed in the dying hours of the 2003 Legislature that compels school districts to pay the retirement costs of federally funded employees—special education and Title I employees.

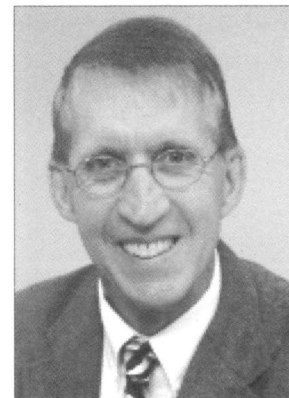
In order to cut county property taxes dedicated to retirement a smidgen, the 2003 Legislature caused districts to cut personnel, programs, and services invested in the education of our most vulnerable and impoverished students. Outrageous.

And once again we seek to remedy the chronic inequity that exists in employer contributions to Montana University System faculty who are compelled to participate in the so-called Optional Retirement Plan (ORP).

Briefly stated, all faculty members hired since 1993 must participate in the ORP—so much for the notion it is optional. And in order to pay off the unfunded liabilities created when these same faculty were carved out of the Teachers Retirement System (TRS), the university system must divert dollars from ORP participants to TRS.

In short, the university system contributes less to faculty in the OPR than it contributes to faculty and all other education folks in TRS.

Please read through our priority, proactive legislation as presented herein. And stay in touch. If you wish to stay in touch on a regular basis, e-mail me at efeaver@mea-mft.org. ■



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