



# Salary shortage reform

We cannot remember when bad teacher salaries enjoyed more news media and political attention. Here at MEA-MFT we have been reporting the dramatic erosion in salaries for years. Usually our efforts earned maybe one day's worth of media and generated no political steam.

But this year, our annual report and opinion pieces linking serious teacher shortages to dismal salaries grew legs. News reporters are writing well-researched stories. Editors opine something must be done. Politicians are making promises they will address the problem.

It is as though everyone outside the inner circle suddenly discovered what we have long lamented: As excellent, career teachers retire, we are too frequently unable to replace them with quality new hires. If we are to maintain our outstanding public schools – staffing them with competent, caring, committed, career educators – we must pay more. Our children demand we reform salaries across the board everywhere in Montana.

MEA-MFT is working right now with willing partners such as the Montana School Boards Association, School Administrators of Montana, Montana Rural Education Association, Office of Public Instruction, and the governor's office, to develop a political consensus supporting the best way to address this issue.

Throughout this process, we are debating a number of reforms to present to the governor and next legislature.

**Statewide salary schedule:** There is deep disparity in teacher pay from one school district to another. There is no educational justification for existing inequities. Teachers, especially in our smaller communities, are tired of hard, adversarial, prolonged bargaining for crumbs with friends, neighbors, and sometimes relatives. But MEA-MFT will not sell out on this issue. We will support a statewide salary schedule that competes with California, Nevada, and Washington. We will not support a statewide salary schedule that equalizes us downward to an arbitrary common denominator less than what many teachers earn now.

**State-funded minimum starting salary.** Starting salaries are worse than bad. Even our best paying school districts struggle to offer \$22,000. Less than \$20,000 is common. \$25,000 makes sense – more sense when adjusted for inflation on an annual basis. But any mandated starting salary requires state funding and negoti-

ated adjustments in local collective bargaining agreements.

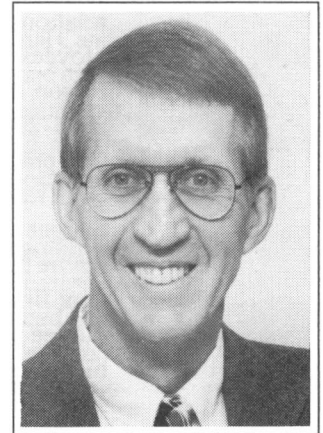
**State-funded new teacher incentives:** If we cannot agree on a minimum starting salary, maybe we can design state-funded programs to recruit, prepare, employ, and retain teachers in high-demand, low-supply areas of need. Tuition payments, loan assumption, signing and re-signing bonuses – on a quid pro quo basis – bear further scrutiny.

**State-funded professional development days:** Our professional development expectations are enormous. In order to establish and maintain peer mentorship programs, implement performance based standards, and integrate new technologies in classroom instruction, we must create more professional development time and opportunity than ever before. Fortunately, we can provide professional development and reform teacher salaries simultaneously. We believe the state should pay teachers, through local school districts, their daily rate of compensation for additional professional development days. Maybe five days, maybe more. More pay for important work – very compelling idea.

**State-funded National Board Certification:** We have talked a lot about National Board Certification. But NBC will grow slowly in Montana unless we provide teachers an equal opportunity to sit for the process and realize an increase in pay when they succeed. We support state-funded incentives to sit for NBC and an annual stipend of \$3,000 for the life of the certificate. More pay for meeting difficult to obtain, high standards – another compelling idea.

**Eliminate cap on retired teachers' earnings:** Perhaps the least expensive reform we could make would be to invite teachers with more than 25 years of creditable service to retire yet continue to teach part or full time with no cap on earnings and no compromise of retirement benefits. For sure, retired teachers could not continue to contribute to the Teachers Retirement System, and we should cap the number of years a retired teacher could continue to teach. But we know no better way that we might immediately retain necessary quality instruction.

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