

Unkindest cut of them all?

The unvarnished, indisputable, grubby truth is, over the last 20 years the Montana state legislature has been unkind to k-12 public education.

So unkind it is hard to choose which legislature has inflicted the unkindest cut of them all.

To wit: Which of the following hurt public schools most?

Was it the June 1986 special legislative session that, for the first time in Montana history, slashed an anticipated 4 percent increase in state funding of public schools to 1 percent and spent half of the then-\$90 million “education trust” to cover a deficit in the state’s budget?

Or was it the 1987 regular legislative session that, for the first time in Montana history, failed to increase state funding of the school foundation program and completely gutted what remained of the “education trust?”

These two sessions precipitated the first school funding lawsuit, *Helena Elementary v. State of Montana*, in which MEA-MFT was a plaintiff.

1993 – the beginning of a decade of neglect

Or perhaps it was the 1993 regular legislative session that designed the most painfully regressive enrollment-driven school funding formula imaginable? In so doing, the legislature reduced the state appropriation to public schools by \$30 million.

But wait. Maybe it was the 1993 special legislative session that ripped another \$20 million out of state appropriation to public schools? Public schools have never recovered from the 1993 regular and special legislative sessions.

Whoa, hold on there. What about the 1995 legislative session that failed to appropriate a single fraction of a percent increase in elementary and secondary basic and per pupil entitlements?

Yet before we hand the trophy over to any previous session, why not nominate the 1997 Legislature that opened up state coffers to increase school funding all of 1 percent in each

year of the biennium? But not wanting to look too horribly tight fisted, the 1997 Legislature appropriated \$12 million more in one-time-only money that it then specifically ordered could NOT be used for teacher salaries!

Or finally, how can we ignore the 2003 Legislature that, in the last minute, adopted a school funding bill that denied every school district historic access to a permissive county property tax levy to cover the costs of retirement for federally funded employees? Does anyone really wonder why, after this deplorable session, the entire education community came together to file *Columbia Falls v. State of Montana*, in which MEA-MFT is once again a plaintiff?

So which session inflicted the unkindest cut of them all?

Frankly, the book is not yet out . . . As I write, the 2005 legislative session is still in session destined to reconvene in special session.

So, which way did they go?

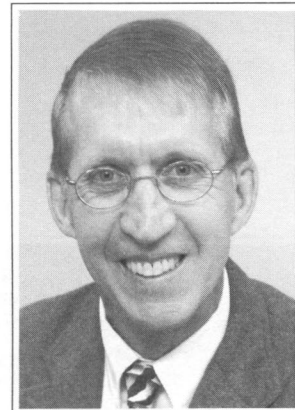
Out our front window, directly across the street, in front of the capitol, down slope from the gallant, equestrian pose of Thomas Meagher, and now set in concrete on the right hand edge of the capitol flower garden, is a newly installed iron silhouette of Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, Sacagawea, and her baby, Pomp.

Nice concept piece. Very appropriate to help commemorate the 200th anniversary of one of the most remarkable journeys in history—except for one annoying flaw. Our intrepid explorers guided by the indomitable Sacagawea are looking and pointing the wrong direction. They are all facing east!

Oh, for sure, once the capitol flower garden—designed to look like the state of Montana—is prepared for summer flowers, the silhouette will look to be appropriately placed. But for the moment, like this legislature, four of Montana’s most famous historic figures look to be lost.

Keep the faith. This legislature may yet find itself—perhaps as late as December—a real champion of public school funding.

We shall see. ■



BY ERIC FEAVER
MEA-MFT PRESIDENT