

2007 Legislature: worth a cheer or two

April 27—crushed by the weight of the anarchist Constitutionalist-Republican majority ruling the House of Representatives—the 2007 regularly scheduled legislative session crashed and burned. As House Majority Leader Mike Lange so inelegantly stated in perhaps the most infamous political meltdown in recent Montana history, “We are at impasse.”

At impasse, the legislature went home. Going home was the only right option left.

Fortunately, not long thereafter, Governor Brian Schweitzer and a variable number of more moderate Republican representatives worked out a set of compromises, and the 2007 Legislature finished its work in special session.

But believe it or not, in this tense and frequently dysfunctional political arena, MEA-MFT was able to score points worthy of proper notice, if not celebration.

Pay plan: Along with the Montana Public Employees Association, we lobbied through the legislature the prebudget state employee pay plan we negotiated with Governor Schweitzer. When the governor signed our bill, we achieved for the first time in memory a 3 percent or better annual increase in state employee base compensation for four consecutive years!

Retirement: We helped push forward bills to eliminate unfunded liabilities in the Teachers and Public Employee Retirement Systems.

TRS in particular will receive another infusion of one-time-only money. This time \$50 million. And the state will fund a \$27 million dollar increase in employer contributions necessary to bring TRS into actuarial compliance—as our constitution directs.

In the last two sessions, at the behest of the governor, the legislature has invested \$150 million in one-time-only and \$27 million in ongoing and growing contributions to TRS. This is real money, real investment in public education and the folks who work therein. All this without a penny increase in property taxes! Oddly, there are folks in the education community who fail to see property tax-free investment in our retirement systems as school funding.

And by our work alone, for the first time ever the state will increase the employer contribution to the university faculty defined contribution retirement plan. This 1 percent increase in payroll is a meaningful step toward more equitable faculty compensation across the university system.

Full-time kindergarten: K-12 school funding generated nasty political debate inside and out of the 2007 Legislature. The Montana education community is not nearly united enough on some basic core values. So be it.

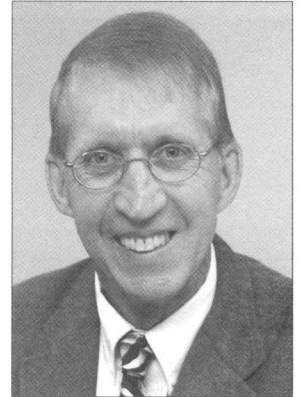
For example, the Montana education community did not everywhere support state funding of voluntary full-time kindergarten. Well, we did. And we prevailed. All Montana children will soon enjoy the opportunity to begin their educational careers in full-time kindergarten.

There is no way, however, that we would have achieved this happy outcome were it not for the unequivocal support of Governor Schweitzer and Superintendent of Public Instruction Linda McCulloch.

Bad bills walking: A sizeable number of bills meant to harm government and public education died. We helped provoke their demise. For example we helped kill bills to:

- Permit virtually anyone to teach—sometimes for free.
- Authorize individual school districts to license teachers.
- Provide tuition tax credits for private and religious schools.
- Eliminate compulsory school attendance laws.
- Mandate “intellectual diversity” in Montana higher education courses of instruction.
- Combine new state employee sick leave and vacation leave into reduced flex leave.
- Freeze the wages of full-service restaurant servers at \$6.15 per hour forever.
- Adopt so-called “right-to-work.” And
- Cap state spending similar to CI-97, the TABOR ballot issue we killed last fall in the courts.

Special thanks to all who helped us throughout the 2007 Legislature, a legislature as successful as it was volatile. ■



BY ERIC FEAVER
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