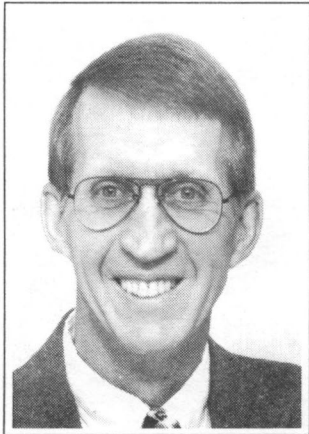


## New legislature – old priorities



BY ERIC FEAYER  
MEA-MFT PRESIDENT

**F**our months into our new union, the shoe fits. There will be no recount. We are one and number one. Our members have made us so.

As one union of 16,000 professional and classified public school, university, and government employees working in nearly every community in Montana, we are determined to do the best we can for our members. Right now, the impending legislative session dominates our attention and will continue to do so until adjournment deep in April. In order to deliver the best possible legislative outcome, we urge each and every member to promote and defend our priority legislative program outlined below.

### State pay plan

MEA-MFT and Montana Public Employees Association have negotiated a successor agreement with the state that will grow base salary 4 percent each year of the coming biennium, increase the state's health insurance contribution \$30 and \$41, and create a state labor relations training fund. We are grateful to Governor Marc Racicot for his advocacy of a better pay plan and the pre-budget negotiations that produced it. We are confident new governor Judy Martz and the 2001 Legislature will honor the contract we have bargained in good faith.

### K-12

But we are nowhere near agreement with Governor Racicot's woefully inadequate \$14.8 million or 3 percent proposed increase in basic and per pupil entitlements only in the second year of the biennium. We are at \$69.5 million distributed through a 4 percent increase in the first year and 7 percent in the second. Furthermore, along with other members of the education community, we will push for more dollars for special education, school improvement, professional development, pupil transportation, and an interim legislative study and development of a simple, rational school funding formula. Our current funding scheme is bereft of fairness and logic. Left as is, it will bankrupt quality public education in Montana.

Let's be frank, the legislature will not invest mil-

lions of dollars into teacher pay. It should, but it won't. It will, however, peck at the margin of our teacher shortage with bills to produce induction and peer mentorship grants, repayment of loans for teachers assuming high demand/low supply positions, and stipends for National Board Certified teachers. And for the first time, the legislature will debate a statewide teachers' salary schedule.

### Montana University System

It is difficult to decide which is more grossly underfunded, k-12 or the Montana University System. Whatever, we will focus our energy on a minimal \$37.2 million increase in state support of our university system. But even then, the board of regents must yet raise tuition substantially.

### Retirement

In 1997, the legislature granted a modest 1.5 percent inflationary increase (guaranteed annual benefit adjustment or GABA) in public employee retirement benefits. In 1999, the legislature provided the same for retired teachers. There is no reason why in 2001, the legislature should not grant the governing bodies of our retirement systems the authority to grow that annual hedge against inflation. Our bill will cost the state, employees, and taxpayers nothing. A GABA increase is our primary objective, but we have a number of other retirement bills to lobby that if adopted might possibly reverse the premature retirement and outmigration of experienced public employees and teachers to other states and the private sector.

### Defense

Bill draft requests to date prove that bad bills never die. They just get reintroduced session after session. So, once more into the breach we ride to defend quality public education and good government, professional standards and practice, union organizing and collective bargaining.

Folks, the 2001 Legislature will be a difficult, dangerous ride. But with your help, we will prevail.

MEA-MFT governance and staff wish all our members a joyous holiday season and a bountiful new year to come. ■