

Okay, let's talk

As the year ends, despite our best efforts, not all remains well in MEA-MFT land.

Relatively speaking, this year, state employees did better than not in the last round of prebudget negotiations with former Governor Marc Racicot and hard lobbying of the state pay plan through the 2001 Legislature. We remain grateful new Governor Judy Martz never wavered in her support of House Bill 13.

But are state employees at market? No. Do workload issues continue to frustrate and in some circumstances endanger some of our members in direct patient care facilities? Yes. Can we "fix" these situations in the round of prebudget negotiations that we have just begun, the first ever with our new governor? Dubious.

For sure, we will insist on better than what we have now in salary and benefits and labor/management training and union leave. Along with the Montana Public Employees Association, we will hang in there until the end, but it will be a rough ride. The governor and her representatives have made it abundantly clear that from their point of view there is little money to be had to satisfy state employees and the vital programs we serve.

From our point of view, the governor seems determined to spend what little money the state may have available in the next legislature – not on state employees, not on education – but on an income tax cut!

Shameful. *Déjà vu* all over again. For example, take higher education. What can be said about a governor and state legislature determined to pass even more of the costs of higher education onto the students? Costs that students pay now and with heavier debt loads, pay later.

Consequently, graduates of our excellent teacher preparation programs flee to other states where pay is a lot better, and maybe they will be able to retire their loans, get married, raise a family, buy stuff, and help grow another state's economy!

They are leaving in unprecedented numbers. As tuitions rise, and debt rises, they will leave even more certainly. And our salary driven teacher shortage will grow inexorably worse.

Who will teach our children in 2012?

Taking bets?

Whatever, MEA-MFT and other leading k-higher education advocates have joined with positive minded business folks who have formed the Economic Development Action Group (EDAG) to wage a public relations campaign that will help focus the next legislature's attention on doing better by our educational enterprise.

As for k-12 specifically, our needs are so great, and they have been so consistently unmet – one legislature and one governor after another – that we do wonder: where can we go next to make a difference?

A slightly different direction

So, in addition to EDAG, our own media campaign, traditional political action efforts, and legislative lobbying, we will push the agenda in a slightly different direction.

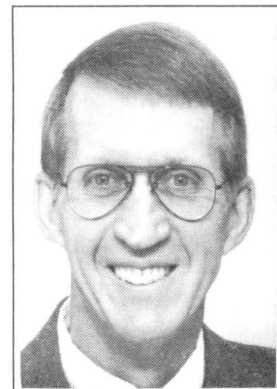
Back in November, the MEA-MFT Board of Directors unanimously authorized us to join with other parties to pursue a school-funding lawsuit.

Our suit will argue that the current k-12 DEFunding system fails to comply with Article X, Section 1, Montana State Constitution, that states: "(1) It is the goal of the people to establish a system of education which will develop the full educational potential of each person. Equality of education opportunity is guaranteed to each person of the state." And further states: "(3) The legislature shall provide a basic system of free quality public elementary and secondary schools."

In pursuit of legal and ultimately legislative redress of our school-funding grievance, we will help design a remedy that will provide school funding adequate enough to grow competitive salaries for the school personnel who daily deliver public education. To seek less is to condemn Montana's public schools and the children we serve to a future of at best deadening mediocrity.

Let's talk and then get on with it.

May the New Year bring you peace and joy. ■



BY ERIC FEAVER
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