

Angry, frustrated, begging your point of view

By Eric Feaver, MEA-MFT President



Eric Feaver, left, joins teachers at Target Range School this spring in their campaign for better salaries and benefits. See article on page 8. Photo courtesy of Michael Gallacher, Missoulian.

Flying home recently, I thumbed through the spring issue of *SkyWest Magazine*. Not once, but twice on the same page, page 46, *SkyWest* wanted me, the reader, to know...

“With some of the highest pay scales in the commuter airline business, SkyWest Airlines can attract the very best pilots to fly your aircraft. In addition to meeting

the standard FAA training requirements, SkyWest Airlines uses a rigorous one-year probationary period to train new pilots to their very best. Because we feature attractive salary packages and enhanced company benefits for pilots...SkyWest Airlines boasts one of the lowest employee turnover rates among regional airlines. That means superior safety for you, our passenger.”

Hmmm...think the day will ever come when a Montana school district advertises:

“With some of the highest salaries in the western United States, our district attracts the very best teachers to teach your children. Every last one of our new teachers meets or exceeds state standards of certification and endorsement, but in addition, during their three-year probationary period and beyond, we provide them ample professional development opportunities and peer mentorship to guarantee that their teaching is a positive growth experience for them and especially the students they teach.

“Because we feature an attractive, competitive salary package and professional development, health care, and other benefits, our district boasts one of the lowest employee turnover rates in Montana. That means superior classroom instruction for your children. That means our teachers will contribute to the economic, social, civic, and spiritual well-being of our community for years to come.”

Can you imagine? Think it will ever happen?
Fat chance.

The legislature, governor, and school districts are simply not dedicated to better teacher salaries. They're like ducks. Evidence of gross erosion in teacher supply, entry-level qualifications, and classroom performance rolls right off their backs. Tax freezes and cuts for supposed economic development, partisan political advantage, or local property tax relief dominate their agendas. They live in denial of the essence of classroom quality.

Consequently, the teaching profession in Montana is in BIG time trouble. The future of our children's instruction is in doubt.

We know this. We all know this. So what to do?

Too hot to handle?

After the whine, the whine we hear a lot, consider the following:

- Recruit, support, and elect school district, legislative, and statewide political candidates dedicated to better school funding and teacher salaries. Nah, not just dedicated but rabidly committed to better school funding and teacher salaries.

- Resist every legislative and gubernatorial attempt to cut taxes yet again, to take contrived surpluses and roll them back in nickels and dimes to individual taxpayers, and millions of dollars to national and international corporations headquartered someplace else.

- Oppose every proposed constitutional amendment to reduce or eliminate taxes or freeze or cap school spending.

- File a lawsuit against the state asserting that bad school funding condemns our children to less than quality education. Consequently bad school funding is unconstitutional. Then pray the courts agree and the legislature concurs.

- Support new taxes on tourists, tobacco products, and, yes, general sales.

- Promote a constitutional amendment to require the state increase the general fund capacity of every school district year after year at no less than inflation.

- Propose a legislative referendum or citizen initiative to create and maintain a statewide salary schedule that would pay all teachers in Montana, regardless of school district, a competitive salary an-

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Begging your point of view *(Continued from page 2)*

nually adjusted for inflation and would include career increments and stipends for National Board Certification, student teacher supervision, and pursuit of professional development. While at it, why not propose the same for all support personnel – classifieds and administrators?

Too hot to handle? Why do you say so? With the exception of proposed ballot issues to guarantee school funding and teacher salaries, over the last 15 years, we have worked on all of the above — with precious little to show for it.

The last legislature

You know the last legislature saw more bills introduced to enhance our miserable, indeed criminal, teacher salary shortage than in all previous legislatures combined. What did we get? A school funding bill that once adjusted for inflation and declining en-

rollments leaves us just about where we were in the last biennium and a small one-time-only stipend for National Board Certification.

The legislature rejected the education community's school funding bill. And among others it rejected bills to provide student loan repayment for teachers accepting high demand/low supply positions, stipends for student teacher supervisors, incentives for school districts to create peer mentorship programs, tax credits for teachers buying school supplies out of their own pockets, and a comprehensive statewide teacher salary.

Where do we go from here?

So, let us know. Where do we go from here?

Please have a good summer. Refresh your jets. Enjoy your family. And let us know what you want us to do. efeaver@mea-mft.org ■



YOUR MEA-MFT

MEA-MFT members to attend key national meetings

MEA-MFT members from around the state will represent Montana at two major national meetings this summer — the National Education Association Representative Assembly and American Federation of Teachers QuEST Conference.

NEA RA, Los Angeles

Forty-two MEA-MFT members will join nearly 10,000 other delegates in Los Angeles at NEA's 139th annual meeting July to debate and decide issues vital to public education in the United States.

The NEA's annual Representative Assembly (RA) is the world's largest deliberative body.

The 10,000 delegates, elected by other NEA members residing in every state, will discuss and vote on issues affecting their role in improving student performance and public education.

Their decisions on some 200 resolutions and new business items will help chart NEA's course for the coming year. NEA represents some 2.6 million teachers, retired educators, higher education faculty, administrators, and others in education-allied jobs.

This year's event is built around the theme "NEA 2001: Making Every Public School Great." Chief

items of business to be conducted at this year's RA will include a charter school policy, helping low-performing schools, and improving salaries and professional development for the nation's educators.

AFT QuEST, Washington, DC

AFT's biennial QuEST (Quality Educational Standards in Teaching) conference takes place in Washington, DC in July. Devoted to professional development, QuEST is a forum for learning, debate, and discussion among AFT members, leaders, and the entire education community.

At this year's conference, participants will learn about the latest research on school improvement, discuss hot education topics in the headlines, hear lively presentations at plenary sessions, and share ideas and practices with colleagues from across the country.

QuEST is a place for AFT leaders and educators to get practical guidance on meeting today's educational challenges, such as working with administrators to redesign low-performing schools, fostering labor-management cooperation, and becoming more involved in the debate over teacher quality. ■