

Report card time

Our 2009 legislator report card dominates this issue of *MEA-MFT Today*.

We begin measuring legislator performance from day one and don't stop until the legislature adjourns. Then after long and careful consideration of the priority bills and amendments we chased around all session long, we build our report card.

Legislators need to know how we measured their performance, just because. Our members need to know how legislators voted on our issues to commend or chastise as they see fit and to remember their performance if and when they seek reelection or election to another decision making office.

We want legislators and members, and all those who consider facts more relevant than fiction, to know our priority issues—what we fought hard for or against in the last session and what we will likely support or oppose in the next.

I have long marveled at the ignorance or deceit of those who would define our issues for us or assert we supported or opposed legislation at variance with what our members have directed us to do through our representative governance bodies.

In this regard, we began the 2009 Legislature with a short, progressive list of wants to enhance our members' lives and the work they do—wants in addition to the state employee pay plan and state funding of k-graduate school public education. To wit:

• **First time ever partial state funding of Head Start.** We labored for years to compel the state to fund full-time kindergarten. We may labor years more to help fund pre-k instruction for those who need it the most. Consider this a legislative priority until done.

• **Unemployment compensation for public school support personnel** when unemployed such as when schools are closed. I doubt we could find a more outrageous inequity than how this state and federal government treat education support professionals during the weeks and months they are unemployed. This, too, will remain a priority until done.

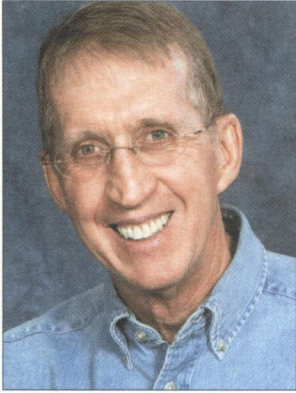
• **An incentive to help retain quality educators** for at least 30 years through an increase in the multiplier of final average salary. We have already begun discussions with the Teachers Retirement System and a legislative interim committee to blend this proposal into their ideas for how we can best address huge unfunded liabilities in TRS and retain quality classroom instruction at the same time.

• **A 1% increase in state funding** of the defined contribution retirement program Montana university system faculty suffer. No one dares to retire on this deceptively named Optional Retirement Plan. The ORP is Exhibit A in our argument against supplanting public employee and teacher defined benefit retirement plans with individually risky, grossly underfunded 401(k)s.

• **Creation of a first-time ever state funded virtual academy** to provide a wider range of educational opportunities to Montana public school students. This is the only priority bill we caused to be introduced that passed. Smart ideas we have successfully pushed through recent past legislatures—like full-time kindergarten, quality educator payment, and loan repayment for teachers taking high demand/low supply teaching positions—take time. But after a bit of bump and shove, our virtual academy (MTVA) sold itself. Even though the legislature chose to fund MTVA with one-time-only dollars, we believe MTVA will keep on selling itself to governors and legislatures to come.

Finally, worth repeating, our report card will show that among other defensive victories, we helped defeat three public school privatization bills, three "right-to-work" bills, two anti-minimum wage bills, two assaults on the board of public education, and one atrocious attempt to decertify us whenever we might exercise our constitutional right to engage the political process. For more, visit www.mea-mft.org/povaprmay09.html.

So, read and reread this report. And let your legislators know how happy or not you are with their performance. ■



BY ERIC FEAVER
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