

September 16, 2011

To: Education and Local Government Interim Committee  
From: Tonia Bloom, Corvallis School Trustee

I'd like to thank the members of the committee for making time for this panel of representatives of different types of school districts from around the state. My name is Tonia Bloom. I have been a trustee of the Corvallis School District for 24 years.

Although Corvallis was a Class B district when I began on the board in 1987, after a period of rapid enrollment growth in the 1990's, it was moved to Class A. There are 21 districts currently designated as Class A. They educate approximately 29,000 Montana students. Some Class A districts have independent elementary districts that feed into their high schools. Others, such as Corvallis, are unified K-12 districts. By a number of measures, Class A districts are a good size. They are of a size that is fairly efficient to operate. Educationally, they are large enough to provide good educational programs in all areas, but not so large that students and families feel lost.

By now you have some idea of the variety of school districts that exist in the State of Montana. This variety is reflective of the great differences in size of the communities in our state, as well as the long distances between many towns, geographical barriers, and the history of settlement. There is an equal variation in the local tax and other resources available to individual school districts. This is the case not only between districts of different sizes, but also among districts of similar size. The disparities in the local tax resources of school districts is one of the main reasons state funding plays such an essential role in ensuring that school-age children throughout the state all have access to a quality education. Geographical realities and disparities in local wealth will always make it impossible to create a one-size-fits-all formula for funding schools in Montana.

The diversity of economic and demographic circumstances also makes it difficult to generalize about the challenges facing Class A districts. For every Sidney, wondering where to put and how to pay for a sudden increase in students, there is another district trying to deal with a drop in enrollment, which reduces funding more than it reduces fixed costs. In my several decades as a Corvallis trustee, I have experienced both scenarios.

There are a number of areas, however, where I think it is safe to say that all districts are in the same boat. Each of them is a major area of concern for the Corvallis School District.

- One major issue is the long-standing deficit in both state and federal support for special education services, which are mandated by law. This is a major unfunded mandate which saps the resources available for other needs.
- In the past decade, schools have made huge strides in using technology to both improve the efficiency of operations and to better educate students.

The Montana Legislature has more than once earmarked funding streams to help and encourage schools to acquire technology. However, this has not been accompanied by a funding stream to pay for maintaining, servicing, and upgrading these expensive pieces of infrastructure.

- Schools have also made huge strides toward improving curriculum and employing better assessments and measures of student progress. Most schools have responded to the deeply flawed federal NCLB mandates by doing their best to use assessments to give them good information about improving student learning. Lack of funding, however, makes it very difficult to do or keep on doing, the things in the area of curriculum development, teacher in-service training, and direct support for student learning that we all know works.

These issues are deserving of your attention as legislators. In the past few years an influx of federal funds has helped compensate for stagnant levels of state funding. The federal funding is not going to be there at the same levels in the future, making adequate state support for schools even more vital.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.