

Testimony to Legislature Regarding Special Education Funding  
January 19, 2004

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Ron Laferriere, past president of the Montana Council of Administrators for Special Education, and I thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the special education administrators and personnel serving schools across Montana. I hope that my testimony assists you in your deliberations on behalf of Montanas' schools. I am currently the special education director for a rural cooperative in Gallatin and Madison Counties. In the past, I also served as the Director of Special Education for Bozeman Public Schools. Hence, through my testimony, I hope to represent the perspectives of both large and small rural school districts.

Long term data compiled by the Office of Public Instruction has revealed alarming trends in special education funding. For close to a decade, the state of Montana provided little or no increase in state funding for special education. Consequently, due to the shortfall in federal funding and the pressures on local school districts to meet the federal mandates associated with special education, local expenditures for special education increased dramatically, specifically, over a thousand percent, during the same ten year period. While state funding did not increase during that time, school districts continued to strive to meet their obligation to provide appropriate services to children with special needs. However, in this process, general fund dollars were diverted away from general education programs intended to meet the needs of all of Montana's children.

Recently, I completed a one year term on the Governors's School Renewal Commission, a bipartisan commission comprised of several key legislators, business officials, and key stake holders from the education community. Over the course of the year, through long hours of hard work and deliberation, the Renewal Commission thoroughly examined the complexities of school funding and more specifically, special education funding. After thoughtful consideration and extensive discussion, the Renewal Commission achieved unanimous consensus on the position that the state of Montana should consider legislation which would increase state support for special education funding in a more balanced manner and in a manner which would reduce local expenditures for special education.

Recent data compiled by the Office of Public Instruction indicated that there were moderate increases within the past few years in both state and federal support for special education funding in Montana. Consequently, and for the first time in over a decade, local expenditures for special education were in fact reduced. This data clearly substantiated the purposeful intent of the Renewal Commissions' position, that is, that increases in state funding for special education would result in a reduction in local expenditure for special education thereby freeing up much needed dollars for general education programs for all children.

As a special education professional, I would like you to know that we do not seek growth or expansion of special education programs at the expense of general education services for all students. As a Cooperative Director on the front line serving both small rural and large schools, I can attest to the fact that schools are struggling significantly to meet the costs of educating all children including general education students and those students with diverse needs. I speak to you on behalf of Montana Schools to strongly urge you to consider legislation which would promote increased state support for special education in a balanced manner and and in a manner which would allow schools to fund services for all children. Thank you for all your efforts on behalf of Montana's children.

Sincerely,  
Ron Laferriere, Special Education Director  
Past President, Montana Council of Administrators  
of Special Education