

SENATE EDUCATION

EXHIBIT NO. 2DATE 3-28-11BILL NO. SB428

March 28, 2011

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

For the record, my name is Molly Severtson, and I'm here today representing The Policy Institute, a nonprofit organization promoting public policy based on economic justice, fair taxation, corporate accountability and environmental responsibility. I rise today in support of Senate Bill 428.

As you all know, many challenges have been made to the constitutionality of Montana's school funding system as far back as 1985, when I was – by the way – a sixth-grader at Creston Elementary School in Creston, Montana.

Time and again, the courts have ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, concluding that indeed, the funding system in place was structurally flawed and that the State of Montana was not adequately funding its share of the cost of educating the state's students.

But year after year, decade after decade now, the state of Montana has held onto a system that is unfair, unequal and unconstitutional, applying legislative band-aids here and there that ultimately have not solved the problem.

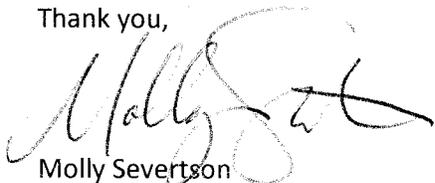
Senate Bill 428 creates a system that is fair and sustainable. It's better for schools, for students and for a large majority of taxpayers. Under the current system, a small minority of our students – those who live in oil and gas counties – are benefitting disproportionately, while a large majority are suffering under a system that fails to provide them equal protection under the law and equal educational opportunity.

One of the good things about this bill is that it gives a property tax reduction to 82% of Montana's residential property taxpayers. Of course the downside of setting the system right is that it will undoubtedly cause some hardship to some of our neighbors in Eastern Montana, and I wish that weren't so. But right now, we are breaking a constitutional promise to the majority of our students and that just isn't right.

I think the final report of the Quality Schools Interim Committee of 2006, which came out of this very body, said it well, "No one in Montana will argue the need for a high-quality public educational system. Public education is the cornerstone of our society. It is where our children learn the values that we all cherish as Americans. It is where our future is nurtured."

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, doing the right thing isn't always easy, but it still must be done. Senate Bill 428 is right for Montana and I urge you to support it.

Thank you,

Molly Severtson
Executive Director