

**House Education Committee
18 January 2013**

HB181: Library Media Services

Testimony

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee, my name is David Bedey. Today I am testifying, as a private citizen, in support of House Bill 181.

My experience in educational matters includes service as a professor of physics at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where I taught, supervised the implementation of pedagogic reforms, conducted scientific research, and participated in academy-wide governance in the areas of curriculum development, educational program assessment, and budgeting. Since late 2008, I have served on the Board of Trustees of the Hamilton School District and am currently its chairman. But I must remind you that I am appearing before your committee as a private citizen, not as a school board member.

The practical challenge facing local school districts is to provide the best education to students with the resources that are available. Taxpayers expect results with respect to student achievement, and they also expect their tax dollars to be spent wisely. I suspect that calls for alternatives to our present public education system (for example, school choice) are driven by a perception held by many citizens that we are not getting an adequate return on our investment in the public schools. Maintaining public confidence in our public schools demands that we demonstrate prudence in the expenditure of public funds.

Resources are always scarce while “good ideas” are virtually unlimited. Fiscal prudence is the art of allocating scarce resources to a district’s highest priorities. Almost every action taken forecloses other opportunities. Prioritization isn’t easy. It requires decision makers to make value judgments. I assert that those state accreditation standards that dictate how districts must resource programs have the effect of reducing budgetary flexibility, stifling innovation, and ultimately preventing districts from crafting education programs that best meet local needs. Passage of House Bill 181 is a step in the right direction toward rectifying this situation and thus enhancing the education of Montana’s students.

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I am not here to argue that library services are not important to achieving a district's educational goals. Library services in general and professional librarians in particular are indispensable to the education of our children. But there is no reason to think that the provision of adequate library services absolutely requires that a district staff its school libraries at the levels dictated in the current accreditation standards. Perhaps in some cases increasing librarian compensation to attract and retain fewer, but more effective, librarians might improve the library services provided to students in a given district. Or perhaps improving IT infrastructure, rather than adding librarians, might allow enhanced delivery of library services at lower cost, thus freeing funds for other district priorities. Or perhaps a district might determine that focusing on early childhood development by decreasing class size is a higher priority than staffing its libraries at the levels prescribed by the state, which might require eliminating a librarian position in order to free the funds needed to hire an additional first-grade teacher. These are tough decisions. Local school boards ought to be empowered to make them without the threat of loss of accreditation or having to petition the Office of Public Instruction for waivers or variances.

There is a fundamental philosophical question at the foundation of this issue: Who is in the best position to understand the needs of the students in our local schools? Some will claim that local school boards are not competent to determine the library (or other) resources needed to achieve district goals. How much better qualified is the Board of Public Education? Similarly, don't districts employ professional administrators to provide advice that ought to be at least as good as that coming from the Office of Public Instruction? (If not, the Board of Public Education has failed in its duty to establish credentialing requirements for administrators.)

Those who endorse the present top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to education betray a thinly concealed contempt for school trustees and for the voters who elect them. It is my position, based upon experience "in the trenches" that the best decisions are made by those closest to the problem. The state's constitution has it right: public schools are to be supervised and controlled by local boards of trustees while the Board of Public Education is only empowered to exercise general supervision over the public school system.

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For public education to thrive in Montana, we must create an environment that encourages innovation and fiscal prudence. The present relationship between the state and local school districts is counterproductive. True “local control,” which allows school boards to wisely expend resources to meet local needs, must be restored. In the context of “general supervision,” the role of the Board of Public Education and the Office of Public Instruction ought to be to support local boards of trustees by providing general standards for educational outcomes, a system of standardized tests, credentialing requirements for education professionals, support of research on cognitive science, and guidelines (but not requirements) for resource allocation.

Adjusting the power relationship between local school boards and the state would be a winner for students and for taxpayers. Both educational effectiveness and prudent stewardship of taxpayer dollars would be promoted. This could not help but to restore broad-based public confidence in public education.

I urge this committee to support House Bill 181.