

9/9/21

Open Letter to Montanans

Consider the value of your public school in your community!

I pen this letter upon return from a 1700-mile journey to communities across the state and numerous hours of phone and online communications these past two weeks with administrators in Montana's public schools. The purpose of that travel and communications was to get a sense from our school leaders about the opening of the 2021-22 school year in our schools and communities all across the state. What I learned is that each community's education team has joyously opened school with students returning with the energy and enthusiasm a new school year always brings.

I also learned that it is the goal of every school community that I talked with to open school and work tirelessly to keep the school open to serve our children's educational, social emotional, and brain health needs during this pandemic. I learned that COVID-19, and its long, drawn out damage, has all community members feeling tired, fed up, and angry because of the impact the virus has had on our lives and the lives of our loved ones, friends and neighbors.

The aftereffect of this anger has, in the past two weeks,, frequently been directed toward the community's schools and the leadership of those schools (superintendents, principals, school board trustees, special education directors, county superintendents, technology directors) and even in some instances the teachers, para educators (aides), school cooks, secretaries, bus drivers, custodians, and anyone who is serving to meet the needs of children.. In many communities, this anger and vitriol in public venues are creating unnerving situations that our children are observing, that rise to the level of safety concerns for those who have committed their life and career to being educators. This is not the Montana way.

I learned that the politics surrounding the anger in our country, mostly focused on COVID-19 and its harsh impact on our lives, has been staged in Montana and with propaganda driven by entities outside of Montana and social media. The evidence of this politicizing of the anger of Montanans in the past two weeks showed itself in the actions of State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Elsie Arntzen, attending community rallies suggesting that the people rise up against the local control of their community and schools and implying that community input had not been considered in creating the safest environment for our schools to gather our children. And, one day later, a temporary emergency rule announced by the Governor as promulgated by the Department of Health and Human Services. The "shall consider" language in this rule about health and safety of our children in schools pointed out the obvious work that has already been done in all schools and their community – collecting input on the will of the community on the health issues impacting the school environment and safety of our children. These political actions served no purpose other than to provoke already tired and angry community members to vent that anger on their community school. I learned that these events and actions have contributed to the unsafe feeling in our schools. This is a poor example for our children and furthers the anxiety that our school kids feel about the pandemic and the harm that it has done to their young lives. This is not the Montana way.

The political atmosphere and angry approach that seems to be the rule of politics these days needs to cease so that we do not further harm our children and their ability to receive the education that they deserve as a Montanan. I learned that in the anger, some of our community members have lost sight of the value of the school in their community ...

- as the safe place for education opportunities to happen for our children,

- as the public school being the largest employer in many, many communities across the state and surely an economic driver in every community in Montana by ignoring a big goal for the economic health of our communities to keep our schools open.

By keeping our sights on the value of our community school we may have to sacrifice some of our personal freedoms to protect the workers (and children) in our schools so they can continue to do their 'Job 1' in our schools and not be at home dealing with illness, quarantine, and remote learning.

If this has not garnered your attention, or perhaps only caused your anger to escalate, I ask you to contemplate what your community looks like without your public school to serve as a safe place for the education of our children, the community center for social and community gatherings, and the pride of supporting our kids as they participate in their academics, co-curricular, extra-curricular, arts and athletic activities. These are values of all Montanans. During my 40 years as an educator I have observed many community members rise up against any faction that would take their school from their community, and rightfully so—we have a sound, though imperfect, system of public schools in our state that is the envy of those outside our Montana borders.

My appeal to our community members is the fact that never before (in the middle of the pandemic) has it been more important to stand up for your community school by making your voice of support heard on your expectations going forward, and to do that with the civility Montanans are known for. Reflect on the value of your school in your community, not just for you, but also for the common good. The health, economic viability, and sense of pride we have when rallying around our kids and their accomplishments. That is the Montana way.

Montana cannot afford to lose educational leaders, educators, and all of the community members who serve to meet our children's needs because they can no longer endure working in a toxic political environment. Your next-door neighbor who is committed to the career of educating our children is not an evil co-conspirator intending to harm children and our Montana way of life. If this unsubstantiated surge against those serving your community's children continues, I have learned that our educational leaders, educators, and support team will not continue to work in this environment under these conditions. We already face a severe shortage of quality educators in Montana, particularly rural Montana. If community schools cannot put together the education team to serve your children, the locally controlled community school will no longer exist. Consider how that will impact your community.

There is no expectation that for-profit private schools charging large tuition have any intention of opening up in Montana (even in our large communities) because it is hard work and expensive to invest in the education of children. So, if your community school no longer exists, most of Montana will have the opportunities available through online charter schools that turn a profit on the efficiencies created by remote learning. All of our communities learned the value of in-person learning when the pandemic required many schools to move to remote learning last school year, and the difficulties that created for parents/workers/community members in implementing education for their children. Online-only opportunities for educating children in our communities through the mantra of private charters are a lacking substitute for the system of schools that you have in your community.

I appeal to you, to please rise up now and support your local public school and their efforts and energy to keep in person learning opportunities in place for our children! That is the Montana way!

Kirk J. Miller, EdD

Montanan - grandfather and father of Montana public school children having served 40 years as an educator in six Montana communities – teacher in Livingston, teacher in Havre and adjunct faculty at

Northern Montana College (back then), principal at Shepherd High School, superintendent of Cascade Public Schools, Havre Public Schools, and Bozeman Public Schools, adjunct faculty at Montana State University, currently in Helena serving as the Executive Director of School Administrators of Montana – the professional association for administrators all across the state – those folks I said I have been talking with leading our schools. Educated in Laurel elementary public schools; graduated from Havre High School; Associate of Science degree in Engineering Technology from Northern Montana College; Bachelor of Science degree in Education, major Mathematics, minor Chemistry from Northern Montana College; Master of Science in Educational Leadership emphasis in Curriculum from Montana State University; Doctorate in Educational Leadership with dissertation investigating the key elements of implementing school technology plans from Montana State University. Married for 41 years to a life-long early childhood educator serving both public and private pre-school opportunities for Montana's children. Along the way, appointed to the Montana Board of Public Education by Governor Racicot and re-appointed by Governor Martz with unanimous approval of the Senate confirmation, serving 14 years on the Board with 6 years as chair. Served on statewide education committees and studies and have participated in representing education issues in the legislative process since the 1991 legislative session. 40 years of listening to and valuing the input of community members all across Montana for serving our public school system and the value our community schools bring to every community in Montana.