

SAM Bulletin Exec Director Article – May 2017

Title: 65th Montana Legislature – That’s A Wrap!

The 2017 Legislative Session adjourned Sine Die at about 10:45 AM on Friday, April 28. The race to the end included the effort to pass a statewide infrastructure bill that included up to 50 Quality Schools Grant Program school projects ended 2 votes shy of passing, and the resulting hollow feeling of things left undone. The legislature used 88 of the 90 days allowed for the session. The day-to-day activity during the session is demanding of your SAM team, trying to connect the issues with our members who would have most influence in helping the legislators understand the needs of our schools and the students we serve. The weekend allowed some time for reflection on the session, and I share those reflections with you in this article. Please know that in the coming days, SAM will be sharing the details of the 65th Legislative Session and the facts and impacts on our schools. You can expect to see that information on the SAM Advocacy webpage by following the link -- <http://www.sammt.org/advocacy>.

For those interested in the day-to-day activity, all of the reports are on the SAM Legislative Network 2017 webpage by following the link -- <http://www.sammt.org/sam-legislative-network-2017>. A great big thank you to the 85 SAM members who represented all regions of all six SAM affiliate associations in their advocacy service through the SAMLN17 throughout the session. It is this group of SAM advocates that truly made a difference to help legislators understand the SAM advocacy priorities and to assist them when they needed help to cast a vote in the best interest of Montana school children. Along with seventeen SAMLN17 Updates, you will see a half dozen or so Calls to Action were activated session. We were effective in communication with legislators.

SAM Advocacy Priorities were developed by the Delegate Assembly and gained membership approval on October 20, 2016 at MCEL. Those priorities are/were:

- ✚ Support Recruitment and Retention of Quality Educators
 - Public School Health Insurance Costs
- ✚ Oppose Privatization with Public Funds
- ✚ Support Special Education Funding
- ✚ Support Facility and Technology Infrastructure

Additionally, as the legislative session began, the revenue shortfall at the state level and the budget issues this causes for the state, required an added advocacy priority to support school funding and the current school funding formula’s seven components and the required inflationary increases as established in law (over about 20 years of work to get it to this point). So, these items were the main focus of SAM’s work throughout the session. This resulted in following and advocating for (or against) about 110 bills to the end of the session. These bills and their status can be reviewed on the SAM Bills 2017 webpage following the link -- <http://www.sammt.org/sam-bills-2017>.

School Funding

A complicated blend of bills including HB 191 (Inflation on the components of the school funding formula), HB 2 (General appropriations act) and the coordinating language in HB 647 (Generally revise education funding, implement general appropriations bill) resulted in the fact that school district budget authority was not compromised, all components of the funding formula remain in effect, and inflation was applied to those components. The success of this is the fact that the state is experiencing a shortfall of between \$125-\$200 million, and with PK-12 education being about 33% of the state general fund, would in previous years resulted in cuts to PK-12 education of \$40-\$70 million! The challenge with this is that the legislature left the capitol with a balanced state budget, did not increase revenues substantially through fees or tax increases, but did transfer the burden of paying for increases to state services to other taxing

jurisdictions, like property tax payers in local school districts. The details of the impact on your school district will be forthcoming.

Recruitment and Retention of Quality Educators

Five bills during the session were intended to address recruitment and retention. HB 119 (Revise quality educator loan assistance program) and SB 115 (Revising stipends for national board certified teachers) both passed. Unfortunately, all of the funding for HB 119 was stripped from the bill so the policy is good but provides no additional funds to make a difference in the coming biennium.

Oppose Privatization with Public Funds

Two privatization with public funding bills were considered during this session, HB 423 (Create special ed savings accounts) and HB 376 (Establish public charter schools). HB 423 did not make transmittal deadline and HB 376 was killed in the Senate Education Committee only to be blasted to the floor of the Senate on the last 8 days of the session to be used as a bargaining tool for the statewide infrastructure bill. HB 376 did not survive that strategy and was defeated on the House floor for lack of the required 2/3 votes to suspend the rules to hear a bill like this so late in the session.

Support Special Education Funding

Seven bills to address special education funding were a part of the 65th legislative session. All of those bills except for HJ 1 (Request study of funding for education programs for special needs students) failed during the session. The study will take place in the interim and SAM will be working to get our members to the table for that discussion. In the end, HB 2 (General appropriations act) was amended to include approximately \$1.2 million for special ed allowable cost distribution for the biennium. A bit short of inflation, and no adjustment for special ed cooperatives as outlined and promoted by the Special Ed Coop Funding Task Force. More work needs to be done in this area.

Support Facility and Technology Infrastructure

Twelve bills were followed during the session that would have had an impact on school facilities and technology infrastructure. SB 307 (Revise K-12 school funding laws to address facilities) passed the legislative session. The bill establishes a school major maintenance fund allowing districts to permissively levy (\$15,000 per district plus \$100 per student) to establish the fund and the state contribution will be added to the fund depending on the relative wealth of the district (between 18% and 80% match). This fund requires a resolution by school districts to outline the non-votes levy increases approved by the trustees and list the projects under consideration for the major maintenance fund. More details will be coming on this new law that provides districts with the ability to establish this major maintenance fund with local contribution and state match, with local control of how and when to use the funds to complete the necessary work in the district. SB 5 (Revise intercap loan program) to allow districts with tax protests or need for temporary facilities to borrow low interest money has passed. HB 390 (Generally revise school funding laws) allows \$2 million in state technology funding to be used as a match for federal E-rate funding (up to \$20 million) for broadband build expanding internet access in Montana schools.

I did not go into details on many other bills that passed that will impact delivery systems in our schools and services we provide for students. Those details will be coming as well. This brief description of the actions around SAM advocacy priorities should reveal why I would characterize the 2017 legislative session as a success for our schools. Certainly, during a time of significant statewide shortfall in revenue, and our schools accounting for 33% of the general fund expenditure, the descriptions above should help all of us understand that we held our ground by not denigrating the school funding formula or school district budget authority while gaining policies that allow more local control for school districts.

Again, a big thank you to the SAM members serving on the SAM Legislative Network 2017! The collective effort to enhance advocacy made a difference for the schools and students you serve! Thanks for your great contributions to SAM and to the students in your community!

Kirk