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The Demonstration of Support, Unity, Courage, and Focus During Polarized Times



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In the middle of summer, just when we thought things had a reasonable chance of getting back to normal for our public schools, things started spinning out of control again. The arrival of the Delta Variant of COVID-19 arrived with unnerving similarity to the uptick in cases that we experienced in late October 2020, scuttling our plans for, if not a return to normalcy, a path toward some semblance of it. This time, the clock has sped up and the stakes have risen, with nearly a ten-fold year to year increase in daily average cases, a 300% increase in total cases, a nearly 200% increase in hospitalizations despite several hundred thousand Montanans who have either been vaccinated or caught and recovered from COVID. The timing of these developments, occurring just in time for the beginning of school, could not be worse.

See MREA's [year-to-year analysis](#) of COVID-related statistics.

Local trustees in each community in this state have worked hard to ensure that all students reach their full potential. Some of you have decided to require masks as recommended by CDC guidance while others have decided to make masks optional. Given the significant diversity of Montana, ranging from one-room schoolhouses in counties with only 2-3 people per square mile and no current COVID cases to schools located in communities with more than 3,000 people per square mile with several hundred active cases, differences in approaches to ensuring a safe and effective learning environment are to be expected and respected. Trustees are making those decisions with a commitment to developing the full educational potential of each person and they are making the decisions as intended under the "supervision and control" clause of the Montana Constitution (Article X, Section 8).

So, despite your best efforts, here we are again, with a chorus of critics to tell you what they perceive to be your mistakes. Federal agencies, state and local officials, parents deeply divided on opposite sides of one another, and others fanning the flames of controversy have all applied pressure, often with mutually exclusive solutions, and each certain their way is not only better than anyone else's but is the only way.

Only one thing is certain; no matter what your board has decided on masks, part of your community disagrees and among those who disagree, some are angry. Even more, certainly is another truism that is equally valid – you continue to get better at what you do every day as you work through and overcome your current difficulties. You have learned and stood tall, becoming better trustees, better boards, better administrators, better business managers. Most importantly, you have improved as leaders by enduring these circumstances. Once we have weathered these struggles, the lasting strength of your increased abilities will serve your communities and the children of Montana well into the future.

In the meantime, what piece of advice can I lend to you? Perhaps that things will soon calm down? No one can make such a promise. What's next? Who knows? Perhaps it will be Lambda, MU, or one of the other "variants of concern" which we have not yet met face to face. I wish all it would take is a simple article, but that is not the way it works. And yet, as many have said over the years, this too shall pass. I also like the words of Franklin Roosevelt, who gave some particularly good advice for elected school boards right about now: "When you come to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on."

As individuals, trustees have viewpoints spanning the continuum of politics from far left to far-right and everything between for decades, but I have always admired how elected trustees refrain from applying a partisan lens in crafting solutions. I have come to firmly believe nonpartisan, community-connected school boards, administrators and business managers will get it right more often than anyone else for the schools in each of your communities. Each time a polarized issue has temporarily arisen and worked its way into the spotlight, you have delivered. You live, work, serve and dedicate yourself to others in the community most impacted by the decisions you make, uncompensated, standing firm with equal respect for those pleased and displeased with the results of your deliberations.

MTSBA's Commitment to You:

1. MTSBA believes in each community's right to make decisions regarding their public schools.
2. We are grateful for leaders willing to run for office and serve without compensation of any kind.
3. We empathize with the difficulty of making decisions on polarizing issues.
4. We embrace the process of community engagement, compliance with open meeting laws, and accountability to the voters rooted in Article X, Section 8 of the Montana Constitution and engrained in decisions made at the school board level in Montana.

Our Advice:

1. Don't bite the hook. You have an obligation to ensure an opportunity for public comment *before* you make a significant decision. You are not, however, obligated to provide an unending opportunity to obstruct the work of the district forever thereafter. This solemn responsibility to uphold the public's right to participate in government has limits. Engaging in a back and forth with those vehemently or irrationally opposed to a decision you already made, whether at the board meeting, on social media, or at the front door of the school, won't help. You have listened to people carefully, tried to discern the collective will of your community, and have incorporated the views of

those you serve the best you can without sacrificing your ideals. No one has a right to ask more. Trust in the difficult decisions you have made. If the input at meetings becomes repetitive and divisive, there is nothing wrong with politely acknowledging the comment and moving on.

2. Mutually support one another (trustee to trustee, board to staff, staff to board) and take pride and ownership in bearing the weight of decisions on the board's collective shoulders together, to ensure that individuals are not unfairly targeted and so that your board does not become vulnerable through division from within.
3. Stand tall for what you believe in but recognize not everyone agrees. Leave room for the possibility of being persuaded, just as you hope others will remain open to your persuasion. Find a way to disagree agreeably when possible and when not possible, walk away. You do not owe anyone the right to abuse you. You deserve individual dignity and respect for your service, just as you owe, demand, and protect the same for others.
4. When things get complicated, call MTSBA. I won't say we have seen it all - yet - but there is very little that we have not seen through this pandemic. There are mutual benefits for each member when MTSBA helps. We become increasingly well acquainted with the various iterations of opinion, strategy, and attempts to manipulate your process, which makes us better prepared upon completion of our service for the next call from a member. Know that MTSBA is proud to stand for every one of you and we are committed to help you be your best as a school board member, as a school board, and as a board/staff leadership team.

Regardless of where your board comes down on a particular issue, you can always rely on MTSBA to advocate for and defend you as part of our organizational commitment to the "supervision and control" of each school district by people elected within that community as intended under Article X, Section 8 of the Montana Constitution.

Thank you each for all that you do for each child in every public school. We each notice, value, and take pride in your amazing contributions during these difficult times.

Lance Melton
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