

Tom's Tales November 2009



As I compose this article for November's "Recorder," the revised 2009-10 State Budget with obvious implications for public education, and several accompanying pieces of legislation crafted during the recently concluded special legislative session are awaiting action by the Governor. Hopefully much of what I have to report to you now will still be accurate both when you read this and after the Governor acts.

First, though, some background: Prior to the start of the special session there were a series of meetings with legislative leadership groups and also the Governor at which NMCSA was represented- typically by designated superintendents, but also by principals and school business officials. At none of these sessions did our representatives "agree" to absorb any specific % reductions to school budget despite some reports to the contrary. In fact, the Superintendents' Association adopted and sent a formal position statement urging the preservation of the unit value and the development of an immediate plan to replace the federal stimulus money which was used this year to supplant state general fund support to education, while also suggesting savings from categorical programs first—those so called "below-the-line" accounts vs. those within the State Equalization Guarantee.

However, in response to various, hypothetical reduction scenarios presented to them by legislators, our folks did respond with ideas as to how Districts might be able to cope, and what relief and flexibility from some statutes and regulations would be necessary to allow all Districts to deal with their unique local circumstances. And when the Governor initially stated that he would support a no cuts to education position- as did many of our legislative friends- that became our public strategy. We were not going to give our "permission" to make deep cuts but rather react accordingly to whatever ultimately might occur.

Even after the Governor ceded ground to a modest 1.5 % cut to public education, many supportive legislators continued to press for zero, even while we were fearing a much more drastic 3-3.5 % eventuality. When a compromise Bill-HB 17/33- emerged in the House Appropriations and Finance Committee that included a 2% reduction to the SEG, but was coupled with a creative way to return property liability insurance money to the Districts- in essence buying down the net effect of the reduction to less than even 1%, we were more than pleasantly surprised. After receiving some reassurance from those most supportive legislators that they would not feel betrayed, we only then spoke in favor of this compromise with the belief that there would be no chance to see any better proposals.

And we have continued to urge our members to contact the Governor's office –as we have already done on behalf of the Coalition- supporting the signing of this legislation. Although we have some concerns about some specific reductions to certain areas of our school budgets- our REC's, ed. tech. funds, instructional materials, transportation etc.- the alternatives which had been under consideration would have been dramatically worse for everyone.

As the saying goes: "That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

Tom Sullivan