

July 28, 2020

Governor Continues to Block Office of Public Instruction from the Table

I am optimistic for the coming school year. I would rather be talking about the positive vision for Montana education than the Governor's vacant leadership lacking transparency. On March 3rd, the Governor created Montana's Coronavirus Task Force, leaving out a significant sector impacted by COVID-19; the education community. Under pressure, the Governor's staff allowed the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) to participate.

After a few in-person and virtual meetings attended by the OPI's school health and safety experts, the OPI received an email on May 4th from a Department of Public Health & Human Services (DPHHS) staffer stating: "We are going to be canceling these meetings for the foreseeable future...". The Governor has indicated the Task Force continues to meet, yet that was the last I heard from the Task Force. This example showcases the Governor's lack of communication and coordination resulting in misinformation being sent to school leaders.

The Governor has been silent on my requests for:

- Clarification on his school closure directive
- Verifying funding flow to schools for in-class time
- District enrollment requirements related to offsite learning
- School transportation support
- Local school district taxpayer support utilizing the Coronavirus Relief Funds
- For inclusion on the Montana Coronavirus Task Force
- Duplicative reopening schools guidance rationale
- Clarity regarding his ill-timed and inaccurately calculated school safety supply
- Repeated requests for calls to remedy the lack of communication

The Governor continues his negligent disservice to Montana's students, families, and educators. My agency has in good faith and in the spirit of cooperation offered language, data, and support to aid good decision-making. In fact, a great deal of OPI employee time has been spent remedying the education-related errors in the Governor's directives. These mistakes needlessly occurred and wasted resources that could have been used for serving students.

I urge the Governor to join me at the table working for our students, families, educators, and the great employees of the OPI.

Elsie Arntzen is Montana's Superintendent of Public Instruction