

To the Citizens of Montana:

As educational leaders across this glorious state of Montana, we are experiencing a very alarming trend. The Office of Public Instruction is unable to keep the employees that assist us in taking care of the schools in our charge. The turn-over rate at OPI has been nearly 90% in the last 5 years, and that aligns with and is the direct result of the “leadership” of Ms. Elsie Arntzen. Since her election in 2016 and taking office in January of 2017, there has been confusion, dramatic changes in personnel, loss of institutional and operational knowledge and poor communication or complete lack of response to questions that arise from teachers and administrators statewide. In our positions, we serve the smallest, most rural schools in our state and due to the lack of support from the elected head of education in the state of Montana, our rural schools are suffering.

It is time we voice our dissent. Ms. Arntzen’s leadership is not in the best interests of the 10,686 educational personnel in our state, nor the approximately 147,000 public-school students. It is unacceptable for the top public education official in Montana to participate in forums which tear down the very system she was elected to uphold. Montana communities pride themselves on having wonderful, locally-controlled educational systems for our fine young citizens in the making. We are appalled that she, as a purported educational leader, would take part in a church sponsored anti-public education rally where threats made on the lives of well-respected school administrators garner a chuckle. This is shocking, unbelievable, and unacceptable. And a comment of “shoot em” might be in jest – until it is personally aimed at an innocent educator in our own backyards. Inciting school violence in a country with a horrific history of school shootings should be a criminal offense.

We suggest that Ms. Arntzen must change her course and begin to support public education and the Constitutions to which she pledged an oath to uphold. If she does this, OPI can re-build. If not, it will continue to flounder ineffectively and inefficiently, which makes our jobs and the jobs of everyone involved in public education much more difficult.

This condemnation of Elsie Arntzen and of the lack of direction at OPI does not apply to the hard working, committed, longstanding or newly hired employees of OPI that are doing their best under horrible circumstances. It has been a real challenge for our schools and administrators to deal with an understaffed, fragmented state agency—no replies to phone calls, no responses to

emails, and the inexperienced, rushed work on Chapters 57 and 58 of the Administrative Rules of Montana. Of equal significance is OPI's failure to process licenses in a timely fashion, impacting a school's ability to hire teachers in these challenging times. We are deeply concerned about what will happen when Chapter 55, which governs school accreditation, is opened later this year for review and revision.

As distressing as all that may sound, the very idea that Ms. Arntzen would promote legislative changes allowing parents to opt out of school district policies is dangerous and absurd. Public education works because it is governed by federal law, state statute, administrative rule, and board policy - created by parents of students and community volunteers. These mechanisms ensure all students receive a safe, appropriate, rigorous public education. Children are non-partisan; our leadership should be too.

Ms. Arntzen's rhetoric perpetrates a false narrative and is divisive and offensive to the very people she took an oath to serve. The welfare of Montana's students and public education could and should become a priority in our great state again. How much is too much? When will the citizens of Montana see that we need to support the selfless public servants in education, those who chose education as a vocation and serve their students and communities tirelessly? We all deserve better state leadership.

Sincerely,

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