



The opening bell has rung, and the 2009 legislative session is officially underway. While the results of the November election didn't change the overall makeup of the legislature, there are 22 new members in the House and two new members in the Senate. The Senate was not up for a general election in November, but there were two open seats due to retirements. The Senate DFL picked up both of those seats and increased their majority to 46-21, which is more than enough (45) to override a veto. The House DFL majority remains intact and they had a net gain of two seats to increase their majority to 87-47. They need 90 votes to override a veto.

By now, everyone is familiar with the dismal state of the American economy and the impact it is having on the state's budget. The current budget forecast shows expected state expenditures for fiscal years 2010-11 at \$37 billion, while anticipated state revenue will be short of that at \$32 billion. The revenue projection is rumored to get worse by the time the next budget forecast is released at the end of February. Closing the \$5 billion (could grow to \$6 billion) budget gap is the primary challenge for the Legislature and Governor. In recent comments, the Governor has reiterated his staunch opposition to state tax increases to be a part of the budget solution. By contrast, many around the legislature don't see a way out of the budget mess without some new state tax revenue.

On January 27, the Governor will release his budget proposal to the legislature and public. In the meantime, legislative committees will hold overview hearings for new members to gain a basic understanding of the budget process and how various programs are funded. The key dates and events that guide the legislative session are these:

- Late February another budget forecast is released giving legislators current information on the budget situation
- Late March and early April the legislature will go through a series of bill deadlines whereby legislation needs to be out of relevant policy and finance committees in order to "stay alive" for the rest of session. This is also the period where the omnibus finance bills (E-12, Health & Human Services, Transportation, etc) are rolled out
- Passover/Easter break
- The final push toward the May 18th constitutional end date of session

Given the difficulty of the budget situation, the Governor's reluctance to raise revenue and the DFL's reluctance to cut deeply into Health & Human Services and Education, many predict a special session that will drag on through the summer. Extra innings may be needed to close up this budget session, but the core issues will be on the table all along the way. It will be interesting to see the Governor's budget proposal on January 27th without new revenue on the table. It will also be interesting to see what revenue options the DFL legislature and tax committees put on the table. What the public and education professionals should be aware of is even with some tax increases there will still be massive budget cuts and education may not be spared as the "sacred cow" this year. As the state economist Tom Stinson stated, "This is the worst budget crisis Minnesota has seen since World War II." MREA and all of the education

organizations will be fighting hard this session to make sure education is spared as much budget pain as possible. However, we need to be realistic about what the legislature and Governor can do for public education in a very depressing economic environment.

With that said, we still have a lot of work to do this session. Legislators are already talking about relieving local units of government from unfunded mandates. They are also talking about how schools can best utilize “shared services” in order to preserve core educational programming by streamlining administrative functions. We also have a handful of education policy issues we need to work on including:

- Fixing the mess over Type III bus driver requirements
- Eliminating the Labor Day start date
- Fixing the reverse referendum threshold so operating referendums aren’t jeopardized by a small minority of voters
- Charter school reform including a moratorium on charter expansion in areas where districts have recently consolidated
- On-going support for technology improvements and expanded access to quality on-line learning opportunities

This is by no means a comprehensive list of issues that education will face this session. New issues always spring up, and MREA is at the Capitol, on your behalf, ready to represent the interests of students in greater Minnesota. As always, we are here to assist you in navigating your way around the Capitol, giving advice on how to approach your legislators and providing weekly updates on legislative activity. Now, more than ever, your legislators need to hear from you about how to best preserve educational opportunities while we manage our way out of this economic mess.