



Empowering Parents to Seek Out Adequate Education

By Dave Roland

As was widely expected, last week a circuit court judge denied several school districts' claims of constitutional entitlement to additional educational funding. The decision was not a difficult one, Judge Callahan wrote, because the state demonstrated "under every reasonable method of calculation" that it had satisfied its constitutional obligation to spend 25 percent of applicable state revenue on public education. In fact, attorneys for the state have demonstrated that the Legislature currently dedicates 36 percent of its revenues to education. Because more than one in every three of your tax dollars already goes to support the public education system, the court found no constitutional basis for the school districts' claims that they were owed up to \$1.3 billion more.

Missouri taxpayers should cross their fingers in hopes that the school districts will not appeal the decision. The plaintiff districts, which claimed inadequate funding as the reason roughly 60 percent of Missouri students scored less than proficient on their MAP exams, have already cost Missouri citizens *millions* of dollars in pursuit of a court ruling that would give them *hundreds of millions more* in taxpayer money. Now that the judge has exposed the districts' flimsy constitutional claims, Missouri taxpayers must hope that the plaintiffs have the good sense not to appeal it any further.

Unfortunately, good sense seems to be in short supply among many of the suing districts, who are apparently planning to argue before the Missouri Supreme Court that if only public schools had more funding, they would transform into powerhouses of educational virtuosity. But this myth was exposed at this summer's trial, where Dr. Michael Podgursky, an economist with the University of Missouri-Columbia, clearly demonstrated that test scores for districts spending more than \$13,000 per student were, on average, no better than those for districts spending less than \$5,000 per student.

If that statistical evidence isn't plain enough, we are only two decades removed from a court-ordered injection of hundreds of millions of dollars into the Kansas City School District — ultimately resulting in *lower* student achievement. In other words, the districts have steadfastly refused to accept what should be apparent from this state's experience — money is not the cure for what ails public education in Missouri.

Instead, our public education system needs structural reform that focuses on what is best for parents and children, not what preserves the status quo. For decades, government officials have dictated which schools children

Summary

A recent court decision denied school districts throughout Missouri from receiving \$1.3 billion in additional public funding. The data shows no correlation between increased public school spending levels and increased student performance, so taxpayers should hope the decision is not appealed. Instead, Missouri needs to encourage a new educational approach — the power of choice.

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would attend; if parents wanted to choose where their children would be educated, they had to be wealthy enough to send their kids to private schools or buy a home in a district with good public schools. Parents with smaller bank accounts either had to accept whatever education was offered by their government schools or work multiple jobs to afford private education.

With the advent of charter schools, low-income families have been given a glimmer of hope that they can choose schools more in tune with the needs of their children, whether that involves specialized academic offerings, heightened emphasis on security and discipline, or unique expertise working with developmentally challenged children. When schools are given the flexibility and incentive to adjust themselves to students' needs, they become more effective.

A new legislative session is just around the corner, so Missourians should encourage our elected officials to change the way public education is approached in this state. While it is a worthy goal to improve public schools' effectiveness, our highest priority should be empowering parents to choose the best available schools for their children. The power of choice can open up a new world of opportunity for children currently stuck in inadequate, ineffective schools — and when the kids win, we all win.

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