



Commentary

The Honorable Yvonne Wilson
Missouri State Senator

I am Senator Yvonne Wilson, representing the Ninth District in the Missouri State Senate, which encompasses part of Jackson County. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the challenges facing education funding in Missouri and in the Kansas City area in particular.

The Kansas City School District remains in a state of transition—from its status under court oversight stemming from the desegregation lawsuit to a unitary status (i.e., free of court oversight). The Kansas City School District has petitioned the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to approve a re-review of the district for full accreditation.

Outgoing Kansas City school superintendent Bernard Taylor was recently asked about the most difficult part of his job. His response: “school finances.” Dr. Taylor says the difficulty is *balancing what you have to do to remain fiscally solvent with what you have to do to meet the needs of students*. Adding to the district’s financial woes are reductions in state support and the attempted diversion of limited resources to charter schools.

An effort to provide millions of dollars to fund a state school voucher program was defeated in the Missouri legislature this year, but supporters are sure to attempt this diversion of public school dollars to private and religious schools in the next session. The proposed “tuition tax credits” would do nothing to improve the education of the majority of children in the Kansas City School District who attend public schools.

Nevertheless, the Board of Fund Commissioners is forcing the Kansas City School District to pay up to \$6 million per year to charter schools. The money

is used by the district to pay bonds, which cover expenses for the improvement of facilities mandated by the desegregation case.

The District’s enrollment for the current year has declined, resulting in a projected net loss in revenue of more than \$4 million compared with fiscal year (FY) 2005. Each year balancing the budget becomes a little more difficult.

The District is pleased that a new state foundation formula was adopted in the previous legislative session. The new formula, Senate Bill 287, is a “student needs” driven formula, whereas the current formula relies heavily on property taxes generated at the local level.

The new formula creates a per-pupil allocation based on what it takes to adequately fund education needs of a “regular education” student. Senate Bill 287 also provides funding for “special needs” students.

Although the funding for a special needs student is a step in the right direction, there are some parts of the new formula that require some tweaking. For example, the new formula does not take into consideration districts with high percentages of special needs students. Just as consideration was given in the new formula for small districts, the formula also needs to be modified to add additional revenue to districts with high concentrations of students eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Overall, the formula provides about \$24 million in additional revenue for the Kansas City School District to be phased in over seven years beginning July 1, 2006.

Looking ahead to the 2006 Missouri legislative session, the Kansas City School Board will pursue

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a number of items related to school funding, including

- supporting the elimination of the summer school penalty;
- supporting a 1.25 percent allowance for summer school attendance;
- supporting the new formula's current consolidation of Proposition C into the basic formula;
- opposing the elimination of the dollar value modifier;
- supporting the creation of a regional or county dollar value modifier;
- opposing tax credit scholarships or vouchers;
- supporting funding for after-school programs;
- opposing the "adopt-a-school" business tax credit; and
- opposing an increase in the number of charter schools in the district.

Although the new school funding formula will provide an estimated annual increase in school funding of \$838 million, phased in over seven years, a number of lawmakers, including myself, have questioned how the state will come up with this additional revenue.

Republicans constantly reject any talk of tax increases to help *fully* fund the educational needs of our children, yet they continue to propose tax breaks for large corporations and special interest groups.

Governor Blunt and his allies in the legislature claim their top priority is education, but their deeds thus far have shown their rhetoric to be empty. The children of Missouri deserve better. After all, our future is in their hands.