



## MISSOURI SENATE

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# A Failing Formula

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### *Overhauling public school funding to guarantee adequate education*

JEFFERSON CITY – The Missouri Constitution declares that it is the state’s responsibility to fund public education, so it is expected that the education budget is a common topic on legislators’ agendas. But the importance of the issue has surged this past year due to more than half of Missouri’s public school districts bringing a lawsuit against the state that accuses them of having an unconstitutional school-funding system. Lawmakers have reached the consensus that our “foundation formula,” a complex equation used to calculate how much state aid goes to each public school district, is broken. And our hope is that if we fix it, the lawsuit will be dropped.

With the public school districts and Missouri legislators sharing the same goal—to fund public education in an adequate and equitable way—steps are being taken to revamp the formula. The Joint Committee on Education, a dual-chamber, bi-partisan panel of which I am a member, convened for the second time this week to further discuss a major overhaul of the state’s public education system, something that has not been done in more than a decade.

Missouri public schools get money from two sources—local tax revenue and directly from the state. The current formula bases the amount of state money that Missouri’s 524 school districts receive on each district’s property values and taxes. Because of the vast disparity between property values from district to district, wealthier districts get to spend more money per student than do poorer districts. The per-pupil funding ranges from \$5,000 to \$13,000.

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We members of the Joint Committee on Education want to devise a new plan to bring parity to the formula because students in poor districts deserve access to the same quality of education as those who attend schools in wealthier districts. Last week, we came up with a preliminary draft of a formula to distribute more than \$2 billion in state aid. Our plan, which is in its early stages, would reset the formula by determining a minimum amount of money that is required to offer an adequate education, then guaranteeing that every Missouri school district would spend that much money per student. This idea has gained support because it bases fund allocation on the financial needs of each district, in terms of educational resources, rather than on the financial assets of each district, in terms of property.

This week we also discussed other alternatives to consider in the crafting of a new formula. Some ideas include letting wealthy districts relinquish their state money in exchange for not having to follow state-mandated regulations, distributing tax revenue from legalized gambling on an equal per-pupil basis and basing funding off of local sales, income or earnings taxes instead of or in addition to property taxes.

School districts and lawmakers alike agree that our 12-year-old education formula is in desperate need of being rewritten. We now need to harmonize on the way in which to rewrite it. The committee has until March 1 to come up with a final recommendation to give to the Senate and House of Representatives so that formal legislation can be drafted and considered. I will do my best to ensure that the new formula establishes equality among districts and ensures quality education for each student. More than money is on the line with this important issue. We're talking about the value of our children's education.

To update you on some of my own legislation, Senate Bill 291 was considered before a public hearing on Wed., Feb. 17. Among several provisions, this measure would raise the threshold of the cost of contracts subject to prevailing wage law, which would allow smaller-scale projects to be completed sooner. **WHAT HAPPENED? JUST HEARD OR WAS IT PASSED** I will keep you posted on how that bill progresses, as well as the status of the education formula.

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*Senator Robert Mayer represents the people of Wayne, Ripley, Butler, Stoddard, New Madrid,  
Pemiscot and Dunklin counties in the Missouri Senate.*