



WEEKLY REPORT

State Senator Gary Nodler
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Equal Versus Equitable

JEFFERSON CITY – The bi-partisan, dual-chamber Joint Committee on Education of which I am a member met earlier this week to expand on ideas for finding a new way to provide adequate and equitable public education funding across the state. It was the third of four meetings, and although we are still ironing out the details, the progress we have made has given me a renewed sense of optimism for the future of our public schools.

No lawmaker contests that our “foundation formula,” the complex equation used to calculate how much state aid goes to each public school district, is flawed.

Many complaints about the current formula are being driven by the misperception that the buying power of a dollar is the same across the state. But in reality, the cost of education is similar to the cost of living in that it varies dramatically from district to district. The value of infrastructure, such as the school buildings themselves, as well as the administrative cost of staff wages and the expenses of teaching materials differ by district.

At this stage in the panel’s meetings, we are no longer focusing on the symptoms of the problem; we are concentrating on the problem itself. The current formula bases the amount of state money that Missouri’s 524 school districts receive on each district’s property values and taxes. Our new plan, though not finalized, revises the formula by determining a minimum per-student amount required to provide an adequate education, then guaranteeing that every Missouri school district would have at least that amount to spend on each student.

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This idea 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.

The target amount we're starting with for an adequate education is approximately \$6,300 per pupil, which we arrived at by assessing top performing districts throughout the state. Then, to address the disparity of how much a dollar can buy, one idea that we are considering incorporating into the formula is a value index. A value index would take the target amount of \$6,300 and adjust it for each district, according to that district's cost of providing an adequate education. Although the amounts won't be numerically *equal*, the buying power of the amounts will be *equitable*. Important to note is that under the new formula, many of Missouri's school districts would receive funding increases, and no school district will lose any state aid that it already receives.

By value indexing the dollar's buying power, our plan, once finished, will cost the state less and be worth more, because it will be fair and legally defensible. As the panel moves toward giving final recommendations to the legislature, I am confident that we can correct flaws in the school funding formula because we are now intent on fixing the core problem of calculating adequacy and determining equity. We are creatively and fairly crafting legislation that will provide adequate and equitable education in Missouri's public school system.

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*Senator Gary Nodler represents the people of Newton, Jasper
and Dade counties in the Missouri Senate.*