

Capitol Report

Senator Luann Ridgeway

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Summary for the busy reader: The Governor's "66% Solution" for education reviewed.

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Some weeks ago, Governor Blunt announced a mandate that all schools in Missouri spend 65% of all their money in the classroom. This was to include money for teachers, books and in-classroom supplies.

This proposal was greeted with resounding silence at best and resounding opposition at worst. The silence generally came from the House and Senate. The opposition generally came from school boards and superintendents.

When I talked to people in Clay County about this proposal, the general response was this: "Why would we spend only 65% in the classroom? Why not 80% or 90%?" Most people don't know that many Missouri schools fail to spend over 65% of their total budget on true classroom expenditures.

The Governor's staff apparently hatched the 65% idea from a plan being pushed by the founder of Overstock.com. A brief look into the background and views of Overstock's founder will tell you that, while he may be a good businessman, his other views on the world are a little wacky. (The CEO's name is Patrick Byrne. Google his name for some interesting reading.)

Just because a rather wacky person is pushing an idea does not necessarily mean the idea itself is wacky. But it does make you pause to delve deeper into the whys and wherefores of the idea.

As the 65% mandate evolved, it changed from a "mandate" (read "do it or else") to "target" (read "strong suggestion with no or else"). Originally, library materials and counselors were not allowed to count toward the 65%. Now they do count.

Then the 65% suggestion (sorry, "target") was raised to the "66% Solution". Nobody seems to know why. With the state of math scores in some Missouri schools, maybe we would be better off mandating an increase in the math classroom time so students could understand what 66% is.

Then there is the pesky problem of philosophy. I've always said I believe in local control of our schools. This is why people in a school district elect a school board. Isn't

it better left to the parents and locally elected school board members to determine how schools should spend their money? The 66% Solution is scheduled to go to a state-wide vote of the people. While this leaves control in the hands of the people, I question why voters in St. Louis should decide what is good for schools in Smithville, and vice versa.

Personally, I think most schools spend too much time and money on sports, lawsuits, construction costs and administrator salaries. The average school superintendent in Clay County makes well over \$100,000 – check it out by calling your local district and asking for a copy of the superintendent's employment contract. Administrator's employment contracts tend to be well-guarded by most schools, but they are legally available due to the Sunshine Law. But my guess is that if you (like TV reporter Linda Wager) try to get a copy of any contract that spells out not just salary, but the total compensation package, of a school administrator, you will have a hard time. I've tried to pass legislation to require each school district to publish administrators total compensation packages on the school web site, but you would think I had ask them to divulge national secrets. I had this requirement attached to last year's school funding bill, but due to opposition from the school administrator lobby, it was removed.

The state could take action to lower construction costs for most schools in the state by repealing prevailing wage laws so they would have more classroom money available. The state could tie administrator salaries to a multiple of the average teacher salary – which means that administrators would have a great incentive to pay teachers well. One of the biggest reasons our best and brightest students fail to go into the teaching profession is low pay. If you are a good student, why not become a doctor, lawyer, nurse, engineer, CPA or other professional where you can make more money? Teachers tend to be underpaid and overregulated compared to other professions. The state could work to reduce school and teacher lawsuit liability (which drains money from the classroom) when they try to discipline unruly students.

As you can tell, I'm not sold on the 66% Solution but I know the Governor's heart is in the right place. The Governor has shown his willingness to listen to suggestions for change and I expect he will continue to do so. The Governor is trying to lead the way, but the House and Senate must play their Constitutional role to object, support, amend or discard various proposals.

Make no mistake: I very much support the general direction the House and Senate has taken since 2004. We would not have had lawsuit reform, worker's compensation reform and school funding reform without Governor Blunt's support. We are spending more money on education than ever due to the House, Senate and Governor Blunt. And we are doing all this without a tax increase. That's pretty remarkable. However, even when I agree with the general direction, I remain willing to question (and perhaps improve) specific proposals.

Public schools do need change to allow more academic excellence. But the answer does not necessarily lie in more top-down oversight from the state. If you have thoughts on how we could best improve education in Missouri, I'm certainly willing to listen. If

you are a classroom teacher, I would particularly enjoy hearing from you about what you consider to be the greatest problems you deal with in trying to educate children.

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