

Capitol Report

Apples aren't Oranges and Scholarships aren't Vouchers

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Summary: KC School Superintendent abandons defense of failed KC School District and goes on the attack against Scholarships. Differences between scholarships and vouchers explained.

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You know your opponents are out of bullets when they start throwing rocks. This week on KC Public Television, the Superintendent of the KC School Public School District resorted to just that in his rant against legislation to provide scholarships to poor children in the district.

I sponsored legislation this year to provide scholarships to children in lower income households trapped inside three persistently failing public school districts in Missouri, namely the Kansas City Public School District, the St. Louis Public School District and the Wellstone Public School District (near St. Louis). The measure recently received a very successful, two hour long hearing, held by the Senate Education Committee. It has drawn support from a wide range of people: Urban African-American parents, Catholic Bishops, Suburban parents tired of the persistent failure of urban schools, Legislative Black Caucus members, Republican and Democrat Legislators, the St. Louis Regional Commerce and Growth Association. It has drawn opposition from those who continue to focus on preserving the "system" in these districts, rather than preserving opportunities for children.

The latest smear attempted by the opponents of ANY change in these districts is the ploy to refer to the scholarship plan as a voucher program. The facts just don't support these charges. Whether you support vouchers or not, there are fundamental differences between these two school choice options that must be clarified.

Here are the basic differences between vouchers and the scholarship proposal. Vouchers allocate education dollars to the student, not to the school system. With a voucher, a child who leaves a public school takes the public education money with him. The voucher for education would then provide money to the public, private or religious school the child chooses to attend, up to the amount the public school would have received had the child stayed enrolled in the public system. In other words, there is a net decrease in education funding for public schools for every child that leaves the public system to attend a private school on a voucher.

The scholarship program I proposed does NOT take money away from public schools. (There are some who believe that poorly performing schools should lose money like any other business in the free market. This is a competition theory that may have

merit worthy of discussion, but is not included in my scholarship proposal.) If a student receives a scholarship and leaves public school, the school that is left keeps receiving public education money as if the student still attended public school.

Unlike vouchers, the receiving public or private school can only receive up to \$5,000 to educate the child under the scholarship plan. There is nothing in the scholarship proposal that ties scholarship awards to the amount of public money flowing per pupil to the public schools. (Please note that the Kansas City Public School District has received up to \$9,000 per student to educate a child.)

Another difference is that vouchers take money out of the state public school foundation formula, which is the primary source of the state portion of funding for schools. The scholarship uses tax credit money that is apart from and in addition to money in the school formula.

Last year, the legislature gave more money to all school districts by dramatically overhauling our state school foundation formula. As a matter of fact, there are now more dollars being spent on public education than ever before in the history of the state. This is under a Republican Administration. The school lobbyists are still asking for more. In 1993, Democrat Governor Mel Carnahan passed the largest tax increase in Missouri history and targeted the increases for education. He was praised for about a year until the school lobbyists were back in the halls of the Capitol asking for more. The scholarship proposal would put more money toward education but the public school lobbyists don't like it. One school lobbyist at the hearing pointed out three specific problems she had with the legislation. The chair of the committee asked her if those three concerns were adequately addressed, would she then support the scholarships. Her answer: "Probably not." It appears that what they really want is no change and more money for a system rather than more money for educating children.

Scholarships actually provide MORE money for education in two ways:

- 1) The \$40 million in scholarships are in addition to (not part of) the money Missouri already spends on education; and
- 2) The school that loses a scholarship student still gets money from the state formula as if the student was still there. The only thing the school loses is the burden to educate the child. Therefore, the public schools have fewer students, but receive the same money. How is this bad for them?

Good public schools are actually being harmed by the persistent failures in Kansas City, St. Louis and Wellstone. Some people confuse the North Kansas City School District with the Kansas City School District, causing loss of confidence in one of Clay County's most successful public school districts. According to a former Kansas City Councilman, all of Kansas City suffers due to the poor reputation of the KC School District. It is more difficult to attract businesses, jobs and new housing to our area in part because of our poor KC Public Schools. Area districts like Independence, Blue Springs and Lee's

Summit suffer as well because it is thought that all of Jackson County is in the KC Public School District.

Much of education funding is from commercial development. When we lose new business to Kansas or elsewhere, we lose not only jobs but tax dollars for education. This hurts us all. The Regional Commerce and Growth Association, speaking for the St. Louis business community, has grasped this. They question why Missouri regularly spends millions in tax credits for historic preservation, to save bricks and mortar, when we fail to use those same tax credits to preserve our intellectual capital. Well said.

Sometimes I think the Kansas City School District is too close to Kansas because defenders of this persistently failing system seem to rely on the OZ mantra of "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain". Behind the curtain are decades of children with lost opportunities due to a failed education system. The scholarships will provide those opportunities to at least some students without costing public schools a dime. It's time we were more child-minded than system-minded and embrace the scholarship proposal.

Contact Information: Senator Luann Ridgeway: State Capitol- Room 419, Phone: (573) 751-2547, Toll Free- 866-875-8348, Fax: (573) 751-9771, E-mail: luann.ridgeway@senate.mo.gov