



WEEKLY REPORT

State Senator Gary Nodler
District 32



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Aiming High for Higher Education

JEFFERSON CITY—The 2006 session promises to be a turning point for Missouri’s system of higher education. The Legislature is considering a 2-percent increase in state funding for public colleges and universities, as well as advancing legislation that will strengthen the higher education system and secure its long-term vitality in the Show-Me State.

This week, the Senate Education Committee combined several higher education initiatives into an omnibus bill that I am sponsoring. One of the main intentions of Senate Bill 590 is to give more power to the Missouri Coordinating Board of Higher Education, which was created in the 1970s to limit duplication of programs among state colleges. Unfortunately, when the nine-member board was given this huge responsibility, it was not given the necessary authority to carry out its mission. But with these provisions that I crafted, the board would gain a binding-arbitration authority, enabling it to enforce its policies and discipline uncooperative state-funded colleges and universities.

The board’s new power would include the ability to withhold from or fine disagreeable institutions up to 1 percent of what they were allocated by the state. This new regulatory ability will help prevent and mediate disputes between schools when conflicts regarding duplication of programs surface. With a coordinating board that can actually coordinate, institutions can maintain their independence while remaining in tune with the statewide focus and purpose.

Another of my provisions in SB 590 establishes the “Associate Degree Transfer Incentive Scholarship Program,” which would distribute funds to qualified Missouri colleges and universities so that they can offer scholarships to students as incentives to transfer from a state community college. The measure would help close the cost gap between two-year and four-year institutions and would encourage those with associate’s degrees to continue their higher education at participating universities and colleges.

SB 590 also requires officials in elementary, secondary and higher education to collaborate efforts with the Department of Economic Development and report to the General Assembly how the state can better prepare Missouri students for the workforce. In order to keep Missouri in pace with the 21st century and increase the efficacy of the Missouri educational system, collaboration between representatives from the technology, workforce and education sectors is necessary.

The measure also provides tuition grants to eligible Missouri veterans who have served in the Iraq war. Supporting the educational goals of these brave men and women who have served our country is the least we can do to show our appreciation for their efforts. Also included in the legislation is an extension of the expiration date for a capital improvement grant program through the University of Missouri system and specifications pertaining to the eligibility criteria for the governing board of Missouri State University.

I applaud Governor Blunt's successful efforts to advance his Lewis and Clark Discovery Initiative with a plan to ensure that the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority (MOHELA) remains a viable resource for Missouri students seeking financial aid. Under the initiative, MOHELA will sell nearly half of its assets to a private buyer.

Money from the sale will generate more than \$425 million for higher education institutions across the state. This proposal would earmark \$300 million for capital projects, and the remaining money would fund scholarships, research, and attract and retain "life sciences" companies in Missouri. Missouri Southern State University stands to gain \$19.2 million from the sale. The additional good news is that the loans of Missouri college students will not be put up for sale, but will continue to be served in Missouri by the financial aid program that MOHELA provides.

I am pleased that the governor has come up with a way to allow Missouri students to continue receiving low-interest loans, loan forgiveness and other incentives. As chairman of the Senate Education committee and vice-chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I look forward to working with the governor and my fellow lawmakers to further ensure that students and higher education institutions in Missouri come out ahead.

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