



# WEEKLY REPORT

State Senator Gary Nodler  
District 32



Room 433 - State Capitol Bldg. - Jefferson City, MO 65101 - Contact: Barbara Mustoe Phone: (573) 751-2306

Week of June 5, 2006

## **QUALITY EDUCATION: A Cause for Persistence**

JEFFERSON CITY—Regular readers of this report may have noticed that much of my legislation over the past four years has focused on improving Missouri's system of education. There are several reasons for this. For starters, the Missouri Constitution declares that public education is the highest priority of state government. That priority is reflected by the large share of our state budget that goes toward funding education.

I am an advocate of strengthening Missouri's educational opportunities because a solid, sound and well-educated population affects us, economically, socially and individually. I was asked by the Senate leadership to assume the responsibility for helping to formulate the state's education policies when I was appointed chairman of the Senate Education Committee in 2005. With that responsibility, I have done my best to advance legislation that would enhance our children's opportunities for success in the academic world and beyond.

My first bill impacted our local community and the entire state. Senate Bill 55 passed the Senate overwhelmingly just one month after I was sworn in. This bill changed the name of Missouri Southern State College to Missouri Southern State University. The name change enabled the school to reflect its educational abilities and has since made recruiting quality faculty and students easier. That same measure also allowed the Coordinating Board of Higher Education to promote cooperative agreements between Missouri colleges and universities. Cooperative agreements allow institutions of higher education to offer programs, including graduate degrees, jointly with other colleges. Just last month, Missouri Southern State University and Northwest Missouri State graduated the first six joint Master's Degree graduates in the history of our state.

The following year I responded to the call to improve the Missouri Assessment Program, or MAP test, which was developed in 1997 to evaluate student performance. Because the MAP test has among the highest standards in the nation, it sets students up to fail to meet the federal requirement that all schools show substantial yearly progress. In 2004, I successfully sponsored a bill requiring that Missouri standards be aligned with those of the federal government. The new tests are being introduced this year and won't penalize Missouri schools for having a high definition of success. I am confident that the new test sets reasonable expectations for students in the Show-Me State.

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Last year we radically reformed the way we fund public schools. Rather than base the amount each school district gets on property taxes, the new foundation formula we crafted takes into account several factors. It starts with the school district's average daily attendance, and then adjusts the amount based on extra needs in the district, such as free-lunch programs and special education. The end figure is multiplied by the proposed state minimum-spending amount per student, which is \$6,117. The revised formula also takes into account the disparities in the spending value of a dollar from district to district. We are very satisfied with the new distribution method because providing a more equitable education to students regardless of where they live in Missouri is a sound investment in our children and in our future.

Having received final passage from the Legislature, a bill I sponsored this year includes several provisions affecting school districts at the local level. SB 894 includes language meant to complement the funding formula bill passed in 2005. Under SB 894, we have lessened the financial penalties imposed on schools that experience a slight drop in summer school enrollment. The decrease in summer school attendance would have to be rather significant before a school district would lose any state funding.

Another part of the bill deals with holding local school districts accountable for the quality of education they provide their students. School districts with levies set below the performance levy determined by the state's foundation formula must report whether they are providing an adequate education. If so, then the state *and* local communities are doing their jobs. Last year the state made the commitment to do its part, but this cannot succeed unless local effort is also sufficient. Now we must ensure that local districts' fulfill their responsibility.

Although the Legislature adjourned in May, my work as a state Senator goes on, and because of my responsibilities to education, I continue to look for answers to the challenges we face as a state. Missouri is not alone in the move to bring its system of education into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so it is helpful to see how other states are approaching these same problems. This week I just got back from attending a seminar in Denver, Col., put on by the National Conference of State Legislatures, where we explored various ideas about pre-kindergarten education. I will be heading to Cincinnati, Ohio, next week to attend a conference, hosted by Women in Government, and discuss higher education issues. The ideas I learn from other states' lawmakers and educational representatives is invaluable, because I can bring them back to Jefferson City and with other legislators, we can make the best choices for the future of the Show-Me State.

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