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## **Education Committee Debates St. Louis School District Reforms**

JEFFERSON CITY — St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS) have been in the spotlight in recent months due to state efforts to improve performance at city schools. The State Board of Education has voted 5-1 to remove the district's accreditation, and a three-member transitional board will oversee the district beginning June 15. Although these moves have elicited strong debate, there is no question that change is needed. With Missouri taxpayers pouring in millions of dollars to K-12 education, we should all expect to see results. My colleagues and I on the Senate Education Committee recently examined additional steps we can take to make positive change for St. Louis students.

One plan with bipartisan support would institute a legislative task force on improving urban education. Under the proposal, outlined in Senate Bills 652 and 688, the 10-member panel would study and analyze the challenges facing "provisionally accredited" and "unaccredited" school districts. Members would then report their findings to the Legislature by Dec. 31, 2008.

Another plan that has come before the Education Committee implements the Metropolitan School District Improvement Act, which is designed to improve city teachers, demand greater achievement, and provide a better overall environment for area students. Senate Bill 690 provides state-funded bonuses to teachers specializing in underserved subjects, such as math, science and special education, and to educators at schools showing the greatest improvement rates. However, teachers must also prove they are giving our children the education they deserve. Under the plan, educators are required to test every five years in their content area.

The plan also lengthens the school day by 90 minutes and increases the year by 30 days. It also requires students to take benchmark tests and increases funding for after-school enrichment programs and early childhood learning. Finally, SB 690 provides new funding to provide the most disruptive students access to alternative schools, which will be staffed by teachers and social workers trained in specialized instruction. SB 690 also funds a Department of Social Services program to locate truant students and return them to school.

With approximately three in four African American males dropping out of St. Louis schools before graduation, SLPS is unquestionably in crisis. All Missourians have a vested interest in the success of St. Louis schools because we spend millions on public education. We must demand better stewardship of our tax dollars and remain open to any opportunity to upgrade performance and better serve district students.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by phone at (866) 271-2844.

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