



Education Reforms

May 18, 2007

Former U.S. Congressman William L. Clay Sr. once noted that he had "no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, just permanent interests." I found the same to be true during the final week of my first session in the Senate. Let me explain.

After many hours of discussions with legislators of both parties since January, I was convinced that while the state's struggling school districts would benefit from an infusion of money, the will to provide it was lacking without strong accountability measures in place to help ensure that extra aid could produce achievement gains. So I crafted a balanced set of proposals that provided millions of dollars to attract and retain top-notch city teachers, while increasing accountability in the district.

Last Wednesday, the Senate took up House Bill 265, a special education bill handled by Sen. Scott Rupp (R-St. Charles). The bill morphed into a much larger education package including several of my proposals. By the time Sen. Rupp's omnibus bill came to the floor, it was an unwieldy document that most assumed would collapse under its own weight.

Indeed, most lobbyists in the corridor (employed by Missouri's three major education special interests (NEA, AFT, MST) believed the bill was essentially dead on arrival. This belief, however, did not keep them from laying in wait outside the chamber with their laptops - cranking out amendments - to distribute in hopes of prolonging debate and killing the bill.

The bill, however, did not collapse. Rather, it sparked one of the most interesting debates on the Senate floor all year. For nearly ten hours the Senate discussed

many of my proposed reforms for struggling districts, including:

- aid for early childhood education
- school uniforms
- bonuses for teachers in hard-to-staff subject areas
- voluntary performance pay
- teacher assessments
- other reforms designed to increase accountability and performance

A few Senators offered amendments that would have gutted the bill, attempting to remove several items, including a provision mandating that teachers in failing districts pass a test demonstrating knowledge in their subject area. The provision required teachers to score 60% in order to continue teaching in their area, providing remediation programs and a chance to retest for teachers who failed the first time. The amendment to remove this failed, as did most others, and the bill eventually passed by a wide margin with bipartisan support.

Days later, the situation was reversed, as the majority brought up two measures with which I strongly disagreed.

First, Sen. Delbert Scott (R-Lowry City) offered a bill to severely restrict women's access to reproductive health services and to allow school districts to teach abstinence-only sex education, which even the Bush administration admitted [has failed to reduce unintended pregnancies](#). As a defender of women's reproductive freedom and comprehensive sex education, I had joined four colleagues to filibuster this bill. Unfortunately, issues of reproductive rights, sex ed, and stem-cell research arise all [too frequently](#).

The second problematic proposal placed a constitutional amendment on the ballot next fall declaring English the state's official language. While I understand that most Missourians would support such an amendment, I strongly disagree with the message Missouri sends by passing constitutional amendments implying that new citizens are not welcome here. We are a nation of immigrants. Many times before, during earlier immigration waves, fear-mongers have claimed that immigrants would destroy the nation's cultural fabric. They were wrong each time. Moreover, immigrants from Bosnia, Somalia, Vietnam, Thailand, Mexico, Guatemala, Ethiopia, and Eritrea have helped revitalize the city of St. Louis, and the city has witnessed exactly what economists have always suggested:

immigrants add several dollars to the economy for every dollar of services they use. And so I stood up to let the bill sponsor, Sen. Kevin Engler (R-Farmington), know how I felt.in French. I like to think my high school French teacher would've been proud of the attempt, though she'd surely cringe at the accent.

Unfortunately, both measures easily passed over my objection.

What is notable is that some of the very same Senators who had fought my education proposals stood with me against the political pandering on abortion and English-only.

It all goes back to former Congressman Clay's aphorism. I've got a clear set of permanent interests, some mentioned above: improving our city's schools, protecting our personal freedoms, and encouraging tolerance of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. But in my fight to achieve these goals, I have no permanent allies and no permanent adversaries - just permanent interests.

It's tough to sum up my first session cogently or concisely. This much I can say for sure: before I teach "The Legislative Process" next fall, I'll have to rip up my old syllabus, and start anew.

Thanks, as always, for your support.

Jeff

Contact Information

Capitol Office
State Capitol Building
Room 425
Jefferson City, MO 65101

Phone Number:
573.751.3599

Fax:
573.751.0266

Website:
<http://www.senate.mo.gov/smith>

District Office:
4515 Olive Blvd
Suite 210
St. Louis, MO 63108

Phone Number:
314.361.4333

