



MISSOURI SENATE

JEFFERSON CITY

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School Lawsuit a Waste of Money

JEFFERSON CITY – The unfortunate lawsuit filed by about half of Missouri’s public school districts claiming the state does not spend enough money on public education should have ended last week. That’s when a Cole County Judge ruled that the state *does* meet its constitutional obligation to spend at least 25 percent of the state’s annual revenue to fund public education. That same judge had ruled earlier this year that the state distributes money to public school districts across the state in a fair and equitable manner.

The school funding lawsuit, filed in 2004, has cost Missouri taxpayers more than \$4.6 million so far, and will cost taxpayers even more if the school districts remaining a party to the lawsuit appeal the judge’s decision. The attorney representing the school districts is urging them to continue in their quixotic quest.

Public school officials throughout the state knew or should have known that lawmakers were going to revise the school funding formula during the 2005 legislative session, but many decided to press ahead with the lawsuit challenging Missouri’s school funding method anyway. Lawmakers did pass the Outstanding Schools Act in 2005, which changed the way that state appropriations are divided among school districts by basing funding on student need, rather than property tax receipts. This phased-in formula has been fully funded every year since it was adopted. The phase-in for FY 2008 includes a \$132.6 million increase in funding for public schools in Missouri.

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Overall, Missouri lawmakers have increased funding for public education by more than \$367 million over the last three fiscal years without a tax increase.

In the 28th Senatorial District, at least seven school districts participated in the school funding lawsuit: Bolivar R-1, Dallas County R-1, Fair Play R-2, Skyline R-2, Stockton R-1, Pleasant Hope, and Weaubleau R-3. Of these, the Bolivar R-1 School District and the Fair Play R-2 School District have dropped out of the lawsuit, but only after spending several thousand dollars of taxpayers' money on the effort. The Dallas County R-1 School District has spent about \$10,000 on the lawsuit so far, Weaubleau R-3 School District has spent about \$1,500, and the Stockton R-1 District has spent more than \$4,100, and all three districts continue to participate in the lawsuit against the state. Information regarding the amounts spent by the remaining two school districts in the ongoing legal battle was unavailable.

School districts, especially in rural parts of the state, face a myriad of financial difficulties, including rising fuel costs, demands for higher teacher salaries, and rising health care costs. Some school districts have been forced to eliminate some athletic programs or other extra-curricular activities, while others have had to consolidate with neighboring districts to make ends meet. And yet, school administrators in more than half of the state's 524 school districts decided to spend scarce resources on a misguided attempt to squeeze blood from a turnip.

Making sure that Missouri's children receive a quality education is the job of teachers, administrators and parents. Our part in the process, as legislators, is to make sure schools have the funding they need in order to accomplish this goal, and I believe we have done our part.

The judge's strong rebuke against the suing school districts should end this matter.

If you have questions or comments about this or any other issue, please feel free to contact me at 573-751-8793 or by e-mail at: delbertscott@senate.mo.gov.

Senator Delbert Scott represents the people of Barton, Benton, Cedar, Dallas, Henry, Hickory, Pettis, Polk and St. Clair counties in the Missouri Senate.