



MISSOURI SENATE

Jeff Smith
4th Senate District

JEFFERSON CITY

CAPITOL BUILDING, ROOM 425
JEFFERSON CITY, MO 65101

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**Contact: Stacy Morse
(573) 751-3599**

Senate Supports Senator Smith's Early Childhood Education Project

Bill Amendment Advances Sen. Smith's Top Legislative Priority

Jefferson City —The Senate gave first-round approval this week to a measure proposed by Senator Jeff Smith, D-St. Louis, that would increase access to early childhood programs at licensed child care facilities for some of the state's most stressed school districts.

Sen. Smith's proposal received resounding support as an amendment to Senate Bill 726, which would create a five-star rating system to help parents choose a child care center. The measure fully subsidizes preschool for approximately 1,250 children whose family incomes fall below 130 percent of the poverty level and who reside in school districts that are not accredited by the state Board of Education.

Those districts include St. Louis Public Schools and three other unaccredited districts: Riverview Gardens and Wellston in St. Louis County and Wyaconda in northeast Missouri.

"These are critical years in a child's life," Sen. Smith said. "More neurological development occurs by the age of 4 than in the rest of a person's life – and impoverished children are at great risk of not receiving the early brain stimulation that can never be recaptured. This bill will help our most vulnerable kids whose families could not otherwise access early childhood education."

Sen. Smith's innovative initiative creates the Missouri Preschool Plus Grant Program as a pilot program within the Missouri Preschool Project. The program targets children who are one to two years from entering kindergarten and will be administered by the Department of Elementary and Secondary

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Education in collaboration with the Coordinating Board for Early Childhood. Preference will be given to children whose parent or parents are on active military duty, and at least 50 percent of the slots must be offered through non-sectarian community-based organizations. All participating learning centers must comply with current early childhood standards and must collect short-term and long-term data to measure the project's success. Grants will be available for three years and are renewable.

“Children unable to read by third grade are unlikely to graduate high school – and will thus cost taxpayers dearly in increased social service costs,” said Sen. Smith. “This bill is a modest investment that will help kids come to kindergarten ready to read and learn, and set them on a path to success in life. That’s why it’s supported by a broad spectrum of groups ranging from children’s advocates to teachers’ associations to the business community. I appreciate groups with such diverse perspectives coming together to support a bill that we all agree will have a very positive economic impact for Missouri.”

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