



## MISSOURI SENATE

JEFFERSON CITY

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**A Weekly Column for the  
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# Legislation Creates School Vouchers

JEFFERSON CITY – This week the Missouri Senate debated a bill that would essentially create a school voucher program for certain students. Senate Bill 993 creates the Missouri Special Needs Scholarship Tax Credit Program, which allows parents or guardians to claim state tax credits for donations they make to organizations providing “scholarships” to elementary and secondary education students. Students who would be eligible for scholarships include those with an individualized education program who are mentally handicapped, students who are speech and language impaired, deaf or hard of hearing, visually impaired, dual sensory impaired, physically impaired, emotionally handicapped, specific learning disabled, diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder or hospitalized or homebound due to illness or disability.

One major problem in this bill is that schools which accept these scholarships are prohibited from denying access to students based on race, color, national origin or religion, but the bill says nothing about ensuring access to students with disabilities. So we’re creating a program to help disabled students but allowing private schools to deny access to the very people we’re trying to help. Can you spell I-R-O-N-Y?

First of all, any assistance the state can give to parents of special needs students is good public policy. As a parent of a daughter with auditory perception disorder, I understand the challenges of working within the public school system to ensure your child gets the best possible education. My daughter received help from the state to get to school and received help from specialized teachers in her public school. She’s now grown and doing very well; still, I’m afraid SB 993 creates more problems than it solves.

One of our main priorities as elected officials is to protect public education in Missouri. Article 9 in the Missouri Constitution states, “A general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence being essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people, the general assembly shall establish and maintain free public schools for the gratuitous (free) instruction of all persons in this state....” Our state constitution also prohibits spending public tax dollars on religious education. I point that out because the “scholarships” created by SB 993 are basically vouchers that could be used at any private or religious school.

I’m also concerned the state tax credits offered in SB 993 would hurt public education in Missouri by diverting state tax dollars from public schools to private or religious schools. Parents or guardians could claim up to \$800,000 per year in tax credits, depending on the amount they donate to organizations that provide the scholarships. In fact, under this program, a taxpayer can claim tax credits equal to 50% of their total state tax liability for that particular tax year. Public schools in Missouri are already struggling to make ends meet with the resources they now receive from the state; reducing that state aid by diverting money to vouchers may force schools to ask their constituents for a tax increase. With the housing crisis, and the cost of gas and food continuing to climb, I’m not sure voters would agree to a tax increase right now.

We debated SB 993 for some time this week before the bill’s sponsor pulled the legislation from the floor. I’m not sure if the bill will come back up for debate this year, but I can guarantee you the folks who support school vouchers will keep coming back. I can also guarantee you that I’ll do everything I can to protect public education in Missouri.

If you have any questions or comments about this or any other issue, give my Capitol office a call at (573) 751-7852, send me an email at [wes.shoemyer@senate.mo.gov](mailto:wes.shoemyer@senate.mo.gov), or drop a line to Room 434, State Capitol, 201 West Capitol Ave., Jefferson City, MO 65101.