



Senator Matt Bartle – Serving Jackson County

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Dramatic School Reform Needed

Last week I touched a bit on education and discussed some ideas for reforming our school system. In the next couple of columns, I would like to delve deeper and explore some solutions that many will consider to be rather bold. But as they say, drastic times call for drastic measures, and education in this state—and this nation—is lagging so far behind the rest of the world that we must take decisive action.

Let me say at the outset that schools in Eastern Jackson County are among the best the state of Missouri has to offer. However, there is always room for improvement in every school and sadly, schools across Missouri and in the rest of the United States often do not measure up to the quality we've become accustomed to locally. Furthermore, just as our economy competes against the economies of other nations, so too, our schools compete against schools in other countries.

One of the most alarming indicators of the state of our nation's schools is a decreasing graduation rate. In Missouri, the graduation rate is around 85 percent. This means 15 percent of students do not finish high school on average each year. According to one study, in parts of Kansas City, the graduation rate is a miserable 46 percent.

Another study reveals that U.S. students scored far lower in science and math literacy than many of their peers in the same age group in the 29 developed countries that were reviewed (16 of 29 and 23 of 29, respectively). As competition increases and business becomes more global, the average American education will no longer cut it.

In my view, we need to make at least four significant changes to get our schools on the road to recovery, and we can start right here in Missouri to create a model for the rest of the nation.

The first two changes involve our teachers. First, we must eliminate the bottom 15 percent based on poor performance and replace them with people who will get the job done. Such a move will have to be coupled with a second proposal—exchanging tenure for a merit-pay system that rewards excellent teachers with dramatically increased salaries. I'll discuss both of these ideas in further detail next week.

The third and fourth adjustments involve the way we teach our kids. We must consider

changing to a year-round school schedule with at least two different start times. Our traditional, nine months on, three months off school year—which is based on the agrarian calendar—undermines learning.

By changing to a year-round schedule with longer breaks for holidays, and other breaks distributed throughout the year, we can continuously educate our kids while still giving them the time off they need to recharge. It has been shown that much of the learning disparity between kids in poor districts versus kids in more affluent areas comes from the differences in learning activity (or lack thereof) during the summer months. A mind that receives no real stimulation for weeks on end suffers terrible harm.

Under a year-round school system, students would be able to retain information they have learned and progress to the next level without any lapse in instruction. Likewise, teachers could more effectively teach because they would not be required to constantly repeat material lost from a long summer vacation.

Malcolm Gladwell's fascinating book, *Outliers*, provides statistical backing for the plan outlined above. As he points out, many countries that compete with the U.S. are already operating on year-round school schedules. I believe merely changing our school calendar to do the same would produce dramatic results.

Change is always uncomfortable. Critics will argue that we've never done it that way before and that a shorter summer break will impact tourism. However, we are not necessarily talking about more days in school, just making the days we spend now count for more.

Let me reiterate, education in America has reached a crisis point. Something has to change if we are to adequately prepare our children to compete in today's world and if our economy is to remain tops in the world. This will require us to take some bold steps and will bring about some inconvenience, but this is a small price to pay. It is time to stop looking at what we've always done and instead, start laying the foundation for a bright future based on common-sense reform.

If you have any 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 e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.mo.gov or by phone at (888) 711-9278. My web address is <http://www.senate.mo.gov/bartle>.

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