



Senator Matt Bartle – Serving Jackson County

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Keeping and Rewarding Our Most Qualified Teachers

Last week I introduced a plan to improve education in our state. My focus is on changing the way we teach our kids. This involves moving Missouri schools to a year-round schedule with at least two different start times. Studies show that these fairly simple changes would have a dramatic impact on the quality of education in our state. This week, I would like to continue that discussion and focus on our teachers—the people on whose talent and competence we all depend to educate our children effectively.

Recently the Senate passed a comprehensive education bill that contained an extremely important education reform that, if adopted, will move the state forward quickly. [Senate Bill 291](#) allows teachers to be rewarded with stipends of up to \$15,000 per year for demonstrating superior performance. If the teacher chooses to accept the merit-based pay, he or she must forgo the right to a tenured position within the school district.

If passed, the legislation would only apply to the St. Louis City School District, but I would like to see it expanded statewide. Educating our children should not be treated differently from any other business enterprise. In the private sector, we pay more to hold onto employees who are valuable and reward them with more money. This brings me to my final and perhaps most controversial point.

In the vast majority of businesses, when employees continuously fail to deliver results and prove to be unfit for the job, they are dismissed. Why is it then, in education, we are content to allow employees who are not providing our children with a quality education immunity from consequences and pay them the same thing we pay the top performer? This backwards concept flies in the face of what we all know to be true of human nature—proper incentives (such as higher pay) will encourage people to do better and try harder; immunity from consequences will promote mediocre performance.

Simply put, to truly succeed in our goal of transforming education, we need the best teachers. This dramatic change to the way we've always done things will necessarily require that we replace the bottom 15 percent of teachers with people who will excel.

We are blessed in this state with thousands of great teachers. The beauty of this plan is that these teachers would be rewarded with higher salaries. Only those who might have talents that are better applied outside the realm of education have any need to be concerned.

The common question that arises is "how will you determine who are the lowest-performing teachers?" For starters, we can measure all educators by their basic comprehension of the subject matter they are hired to teach. All teachers would be required to retake their original subject certification exam and if they do not pass, they would have the opportunity to receive remedial training. If at the end of their training, they still do not pass the exam, they would be let go. Likewise, we can examine the improvement of the students themselves to see how effective the teacher has been.

I have no doubt that other criteria could be developed and I believe teachers themselves would be the most qualified to develop these criteria. I invite discussion on how we can come up with the most comprehensive and accurate measures for judging teacher performance. However, we cannot afford to listen to those who would derail reforms with tired claims of impossibility. We are quite literally dealing with our children's future success or failure and with the ability of our nation to compete in a global economy—merely protecting the status quo is not an option.

The American education system is under immense competitive pressure. Many of our schools, in the United States and in Missouri, are failing and falling further behind. Our current course is leading us towards disaster, but there is light at the end of this tunnel if we have the foresight and courage to make bold, and perhaps uncomfortable, changes. We are the most innovative country in the world and we can do far, far better. The time for meaningful reform has come and for the sake of our children's future, I urge all parties to come to the table to discuss how we can best institute these reforms.

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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Contact Information

Capitol Office
State Capitol Building
Room 319
Jefferson City, MO 65101

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

Phone Number:
888.711.9278 (toll-free)
573.751.1464

Fax:
573.751.8442