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## **The Stouffer Report: School Funding Lawsuit Comes to an End**

After several years, a lawsuit pertaining to the state's K-12 school funding formula is over.

Before I explain further what this means for our state's students and taxpayers, I want to share some thoughts from our area from regular folks like you on education. These are themes I have heard over the years as a school board president and now as a legislator:

1. More money to schools does not always translate to a better education for our kids.
2. Teachers care about teaching, administrators care about administrating, and institutions care about institutions. We shouldn't let institutions get in the way of innovative ideas to provide a world-class education to students, just because it is "what we've always done." Our future depends on it!
3. Teachers should be allowed to teach and school boards should be allowed to govern. Getting the state or federal government involved usually gets in the way of both.
4. Accountability is important. According to a [popular documentary](#), our kids have 2 million minutes to be educated – we should not take that lightly.
5. Some states allow "open enrollment," where parents decide where to send their students,



if the schools are able to handle the additional students. Any innovative idea that provides competition and improves the quality of education deserves discussion.

The [Missouri Supreme Court](#) ruled the Legislature's revision of the [formula](#) in 2005 is constitutional, and exceeds the requirement of spending more than 25 percent of the state's total budget on elementary and secondary education. For the current 2010 fiscal year, this equals \$4.4 billion.

In 2005, lawmakers decided to spend money on education based on a pupil's needs instead of a district's property values. The formula starts with a school district's average daily attendance and then gives additional credits for each student enrolled in special programs, like students that qualify for free or discount lunch programs, special education students or students with low English proficiency.

The formula then sets a per-pupil spending target based on the spending levels of schools that scored well on the state performance report, and helps rural districts through an extra \$15 million in grant money. It was rural schools that were not seeing the kind of state help that larger districts were getting before.

After the 2005 funding re-write, a little over 200 districts then pursued legal action, because they felt they were being unfairly targeted as "wealthy" districts. This multi-year lawsuit has cost over \$5 million in public funds, with \$3 million having been spent by the districts — money that could have gone toward educating kids — and \$2 million having been spent by the state. The school districts involved in the suit used these taxpayer dollars in the hopes of getting the largest tax increase in state history, which would have meant *judges* would have been deciding tax rates and not voters.

Originally, over 230 school districts wanted a \$1.3 billion tax increase for school funding, claiming state aid was not enough to teach kids adequately and equally. The first court decision, in circuit court, said



the formula was constitutional. Several districts dropped out of the lawsuit at that point. But the rest continued to pursue the matter, spending more taxpayer dollars on a lawsuit, instead of using them to educate students.

Most of the school districts involved in the funding formula lawsuit were big city schools. The top spender was Hazelwood, which is just north of St. Louis. They spent a little over \$124,000 alone. When the lawsuit was filed, per-pupil spending ranged from \$4,827 to \$15,700. By 2008, it reached a range of \$5,689 to \$22,190 per student.

The goal of the legislature is to provide a world-class education to students, regardless of where they live. It is my hope the current funding formula will meet these goals. If performance indicates otherwise, the legislature will need to revisit the issue.

*Senator Stouffer serves the counties of Carroll, Chariton, Cooper, Howard, Lafayette, Macon, Ray, Saline, and a part of Clay.*

If you have questions or comments about this or any other issue, please call toll free (866) 768-3987 or by e-mail at [bstouffer@senate.mo.gov](mailto:bstouffer@senate.mo.gov).

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