

State Senator Robert Mayer The Mayer Memo

Senator Robert Mayer - Serving Butler, Dunklin, New Madrid, Pemiscot, Ripley, Stoddard & Wayne Counties



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Recession Impacting Career Ladder Program for Educators

School is back in session following the summer break, and I'm pleased to report that Missouri students will once again benefit from increased funding for K-12 schools and our state's commitment to ensuring that students receive a world-class educational experience.

This year, the General Assembly continued its commitment to fully fund the school funding formula, adding \$63 million for public schools, without a tax increase. That's a major victory, particularly with the recent downturn in the state and national economy. Since 2005, Missouri has increased funding for K-12 schools by \$540 million. We were able to accomplish this by crafting a state budget that puts education first.

The downturn in the economy, however, has impacted many areas of education in our state, including the successful Missouri Career Ladder Program for educators. The program, created by the General Assembly in 1985, is one of the longest lasting teacher compensation reform packages in the U.S. The purpose of the program is to reward excellent educators by providing incentives, a salary supplement, and a career advancement program — with the state contributing 45 percent and local school districts 55 percent of the funding. Among the goals of the program are to retain quality teachers and to improve overall student achievement.

With major gaps in the state's budget, funding for the program for the 2009-2010 year — which is allocated retroactively during the next budget year — has resulted in the high probability the program won't be fully funded in next year's budget. Federal stabilization dollars are being used as a temporary funding source, but after those dollars run out, it will incumbent on the state to find a way to keep the program going. The state statute stipulates legislators must keep teachers and schools aware of how much money is available for the program before the work is done, and that is what we are now doing as we begin examining the state's budget obligations for next year.

In its first year of the program's inception, 63 school districts representing 2,400 teachers participated in the program at a cost to the state of \$2.6 million. During the 2007-2008 school year, 342 districts representing 17,980 teachers participated in the program, at a cost of \$36 million to the state.

As you know, education is my top priority, and one of the top priorities of the state Legislature. This year, we passed a major education reform bill with a variety of measures to benefit Missouri K-12 schools. As chairman of the Senate Education Committee and a strong supporter of teacher protections, I am aware of the Career Ladder Program's value and importance to educators. As vice-chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I am also aware there will be many tough choices in all areas when we examine next year's budget.

Please be assured that we will do all we can to retain this valued program that recognizes and rewards the extra efforts of our teachers who are working to guarantee the success of our students.

As always, if you have 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 phone at 1-877-291-5584.

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