

Week of August 31, 2009



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## [Career Ladder Funding Threatened](#)

The 2009–2010 school year is underway as Missouri students are getting into the back-to-school routine of tests, papers and homework assignments. I'm pleased to report that our students are returning to K–12 public schools that are once again fully funded under the state's school funding formula, receiving an additional \$63 million **without** a tax increase for fiscal year 2010. We are continuing to honor our state's commitment to education, ensuring that every student who attends our schools leaves with a solid foundation of knowledge that will serve them for many years to come.

To provide a funding increase to K–12 public schools was a major victory in light of the economic crisis that has affected every corner of our state and country. By making education a priority, we were able to ensure that Missouri schools receive the funding they need to educate the next generation of leaders. (As a side note, this week the Missouri Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of our school funding formula. I will discuss the lawsuit and ruling in detail next week).

Unfortunately, not every state education program may be unaffected by the economy, which in turn affects our state's general revenue. Recently, the future funding of the successful Missouri Career Ladder Program for educators has been called into question. The program, created by the General Assembly in 1985, is one of the longest-standing teacher compensation reform packages in the nation. The purpose of the program is to reward excellent educators by providing them with incentives, a salary supplement and a career advancement program. The aim of Career Ladder is to retain bright, talented teachers who are able to bring out the best in their students.

Funding for the program is based on the state contributing approximately 45 percent and local school districts covering the remaining amount. The state's portion is allocated

retroactively during the following budget year, and with major gaps in the state's current budget, Career Ladder funding for the 2009-2010 school year is in danger of being cut (which would be allocated in the FY 2011 budget). Federal stimulus dollars were used as a temporary funding source to fund the program for 2008-2009, but once that money runs out, it will once again be the state's responsibility to provide its share of the funding. State law requires legislators to keep teachers and schools aware of how much money is available for the program before any work is done, which is why this conversation is coming up now.

In the program's first year, 63 school districts representing 2,400 teachers participated at a \$2.6 million cost to the state. 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 the state's financial responsibility for Career Ladder becomes more entrenched, it becomes more difficult to cover the program's rising costs in a lean budget year. Truly, Career Ladder has become a victim of its own success.

Education is one of my top priorities. As chairman of the Missouri Senate Educated Citizenry 2020 Committee, I fully understand the potential repercussions of removing funding from Career Ladder. This popular program helps our state attract the best, most capable teachers. However, as a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I am also well-aware that next year's budget will require serious compromises and difficult decisions if we are to maintain our commitment to taxpayers.

I am determined to work with my colleagues in the Senate to ensure that Career Ladder is funded for the current school year. Teachers and school districts are counting on the funding, and the last thing we want to do is pull the rug out from underneath them. Please be assured that we will do all we can to preserve this important program that improves the quality of Missouri education.

As always, please feel free to contact me or my staff with any questions or concerns at any time. We look forward to hearing your comments and suggestions and trying to answer any questions you may have. You can reach us by phone at 866-277-0882 (toll-free) or 573-751-2272, or by fax at 573-526-7381.

*Senator David Pearce serves Bates, Cass, Johnson and Vernon counties in the 31<sup>st</sup> State Senatorial District.*

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