



SENATOR LUANN RIDGEWAY DISTRICT 17

CAPITOL REPORT

Senator Luann Ridgeway – Serving Clay County

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Preserving Funding for Access Missouri

These days, a college degree is practically a necessity to open up doors to future employment opportunities. Our young people are being asked to compete in a global economy, and higher education is one of the best ways to gain the valuable knowledge, skills and even experience that employers are demanding from their employees—even those straight out of college.

For many Missouri students, however, the rising costs of a college education may stand in the way of their degrees. The challenge of paying for school, particularly in these tough economic times, makes the financial aid opportunities available through the state's Access Missouri scholarship program even more important, and quite frankly, necessary.

Unfortunately, this need-based scholarship program, available to Missouri college students attending both public and private institutions, for two-year and four-year programs, has experienced a tumultuous few months. First, the Legislature is considering measures to equalize the aid amounts for private and public students, striking a big blow to those who wish to attend any of the state's fine private schools—which, of course, are more expensive because they are not subsidized with taxpayer dollars. Also, in light of the state's historic budget crisis, there has been talk of significantly cutting Access Missouri funding, and possibly even eliminating scholarships to private school students under the program altogether.

Scholarship money belongs to Missouri students. It should be distributed much the same as in the GI Bill, which allows students to choose the college or university that best suits their education goals, without regard to whether it is a public or private facility.

Access Missouri was implemented during the 2007–2008 school year. Last year, the Missouri Department of Higher Education distributed more than \$92 million to 42,244 students through the program. Currently, students attending a public two-year school may receive between \$300 and \$1,000; students at public four-year institutions may receive between \$1,000 and \$2,150, while students attending private schools may receive between \$2,000 and \$4,600. A bill making its way through the Legislature this session, [Senate Bill 784](#), would leave these current scholarship levels the same through the 2013-2014 school year (at which point the program is set to expire), but beginning with the 2014-2015 school year, would put in place new, equalized aid amounts for private and public students. The bill would also remove the provision in the legislation that ends the scholarship program. By removing the sunset clause, the scholarship program would stay in existence.

I'm totally opposed to cuts or changes in scholarship amounts to Access Missouri. As a graduate from William Woods University in Fulton, I relied on scholarships to get my undergraduate degree. The Senate Appropriations Committee is currently working on the fiscal year 2011 budget, which we will begin debating on the floor soon, and I am working on getting several senators together to stop any potential cuts when the budget bills are brought before the full Senate.

My goals are to: 1) remove the expiration date from the Access Missouri scholarship program (it is currently set to expire, which means no one gets any scholarship money after the 2013–2014 school year); 2) cap a student's ability to use the scholarship at four years (the current limit is 10 semesters); 3) maintain the current scholarship levels for public and private institutions (private universities and colleges are allowed a greater percentage because they do not receive tax money); and 4) make any changes effective only after 2014, so as not to adversely impact any student who is already in college on an Access Missouri scholarship.

If Missouri is to emerge as an economic leader in the next decade, we must invest in the education of our young people. I'm profoundly concerned about what the cuts or changes to Access Missouri could mean for our students and Missouri's private schools. If you feel the same way, please forward this report to your friends and urge them to contact their own state senator and express their concerns about this issue. To find your senator, go to www.senate.mo.gov, click on "Senators," then on "Find Your Legislators," enter in your zip-code and click on "Lookup Legislators."

Update on Legislation that Affects You

- Health Care Freedom Act ([Senate Joint Resolution 25](#)): The Senate last discussed this measure about two weeks ago after it stalled during debate, though it will probably be brought to the floor again soon. This is our state's response to the federal government's recently passed health care bill. If passed by the Legislature, and approved by voters, this legislation would prohibit any federal law from forcing a patient, employer or health care provider to participate in any government or privately run health care system.
- Fair Tax ([Senate Joint Resolution 29](#)): A new version of this legislation was brought up on the Senate floor for discussion this week. Upon voter approval, this proposed constitutional amendment would repeal the corporate income, corporate franchise, bank franchise, and state sales and use taxes effective Jan. 1, 2013. It also would phase out the state individual income tax, so for each tax year beginning Jan. 1, 2013, the tax rate would be reduced by 20 percent from the previous year's rate until it reaches zero. Effective Jan. 1, 2018, state taxes on income would be prohibited. Also, beginning July 1, 2013, a new state tax on taxable purchases and services would be imposed at a rate not to exceed 7 percent.

I'll continue to keep you updated on these and the other issues that are important to you as the 2010 legislative session winds down.

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