

Week of February 15, 2010

State Senator
David Pearce
District 31



Capitol Report

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Investing in a college education is truly one of the best ways young people can expand their future employment opportunities, especially in the era of global competition. For many Missourians, however, the rising costs of higher education may stand in the way of a college degree. This makes the financial aid available through the state's Access Missouri Financial Assistance Program even more important, as it helps make college a more feasible option for many students in an uncertain economy.

Access Missouri is a need-based program designed to increase access to a student's school of choice. Last year the Missouri Department of Higher Education distributed more than \$92 million to 42,244 students through Access Missouri, a big jump from the \$24 million allotted for the program just three years ago. Although many students in our public universities receive a scholarship, a disproportionate share is going to private schools. It doesn't seem right that the students who choose to attend one of Missouri's top-notch public colleges or universities receive less financial aid through Access Missouri—a primarily state-funded program—than those attending a private school.

This is why I support a proposal to even out the Access Missouri scholarship levels for public and private schools. 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. [Senate Bill 784](#), which we are considering this legislative session and I co-sponsored, would leave these current scholarship levels the same through the 2013-2014 school year, but beginning with the 2014-2015 school year, would put in place new, equalized aid amounts for Access Missouri.

Under the bill, a student attending a public two-year school would be eligible for an award between \$300 and \$1,250. A student attending a public four-year school or approved private institution would be eligible for an award between \$1,500 and \$2,850, making the assistance amounts equal, regardless of whether the student chooses to attend a

public or private college or university. If this legislation passes, it will mean increased aid amounts for University of Central Missouri students here at home. Last school year, 2,581 UCM students benefited from more than \$4.2 million in Access Missouri scholarship funds, with an average award of \$1,651.

This issue ultimately comes down to fairness. Regardless of where a student decides to go to school, the award amount should be the same. Right now private schools are getting more than double the amount of what is being offered to students at our public schools, which just isn't fair. We are penalizing those who choose to attend a public Missouri college or university, which is detrimental to our goal of making college affordable for all students. Senate Bill 784 calls for an equitable distribution of Access Missouri funds, making higher education accessible and affordable for those who need financial assistance the most.

Senate Bill 784 received a hearing this week in the Senate Education Committee, on which I serve as chairman. A hearing allows people an opportunity to voice their support or concerns about a bill, and the bill must be voted out of committee before it can be debated by the full Senate. This is the year that we must level the playing field for all students, regardless of their school choice, and I look forward to working on this bill in the coming weeks with my colleagues.

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 31st State Senatorial District.

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