

Week of May 10, 2010



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Scholarship Bill Sent to Governor as Session Winds Down

By the time many of you read this column, the 2010 legislative session will officially be over, and we will know the fate of the more than 1,800 pieces of legislation that lawmakers introduced this year. Traditionally, most of the biggest bills containing the session's top priorities cross the finish line in the last few days.

Such was the case with one of my top priorities for the year, [Senate Bill 733](#), a bill that would make significant changes to two of the state's major higher education scholarship programs, Bright Flight and Access Missouri. I'm proud to say that with more than two days left in the legislative session, the General Assembly gave the measure final approval and sent it to the governor for signing into law.

One of the most important provisions relating to the Bright Flight Scholarship Program—which is a merit-based scholarship that encourages top-ranked Missouri high school seniors to attend Missouri colleges and universities—protects the reward for military members. Senate Bill 733 specifies that if a scholarship recipient cannot attend an approved institution because of military service, the student will still be able to receive the scholarship if he or she returns to full-time status within six months of completing military service. We had to make changes to the program so that military members would stop being penalized for their service when it comes time to receive college scholarships. I firmly believe that if they fulfill Bright Flight's other requirements, their military commitment shouldn't prevent them from being able to pay for school.

Other Bright Flight provisions include:

- Providing that a student must be a Missouri resident to be eligible for a Bright Flight scholarship.
- Expanding scholarship eligibility to those who have received a GED, or completed a homeschooling program of study, secondary coursework through

Missouri's Virtual Public School, or any other academic program that satisfies the state's compulsory attendance law.

- Specifying that all students in the top 3 percent of Missouri ACT or SAT test-takers will receive awards prior to any student in the top 4 or 5 percent receiving an award (current law states that in fiscal year 2011 and beyond, a student scoring in the top 4 and 5 percent of Missouri ACT or SAT test-takers will receive a \$1,000 scholarship).

The second part of the bill changes and equalizes the financial aid amounts available through the Access Missouri Financial Assistance Program, which is a need-based program designed to increase accessibility to a student's school of choice. I advocated for this change last year, and I'm pleased that we were able to take decisive action on the issue this session. Senate Bill 733 maintains current Access Missouri aid amounts through the 2013–2014 school year, and adds new financial assistance amounts for the 2014-2015 academic year and beyond. Under the new aid amounts, a student attending a public two-year school will receive between \$300 and \$1,300, while a student attending a public four-year school, or an approved private school, will be eligible for an award of \$2,850 maximum and \$1,500 minimum.

This issue ultimately comes down to fairness. Regardless of where a student decides to go to school, the award amount should be the same. Currently, we are penalizing those who choose to attend one of the many excellent public Missouri colleges or universities, which is detrimental to our goal of making college affordable for all students. Senate Bill 733 will make sure there is an equitable distribution of Access Missouri funds, making higher education accessible and affordable for those who need financial assistance the most. I'd like to thank my colleagues for their efforts in getting SB 733 through the legislative process and to the governor's desk.

As for the outcome of some of the other top priorities for the year, it's still too early to tell whether they will pass before the last swing of the gavel. Several large bills that address issues relating to K–12 education, ethics and "Rebooting Government" may still yet pass, even though it may be in the final hours. All of these bills have an expiration date of 6 p.m. on Friday, May 14—time will tell which ones make it to the very end.

As always, please do not hesitate to contact my office with your 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.

Contact Information

Capitol Office
State Capitol Building
Room 419
Jefferson City, MO 65101

Website:
<http://www.senate.mo.gov/pearce>

Phone Number:
866.277.0882 (toll-free)
573.751.2272

Fax:
573.526.7381

