

Week of July 12, 2010



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Governor Signs Top Legislative Priorities

This week marked the deadline for the governor to sign the bills that were sent to his desk during the 2010 regular legislative session. One bill that received the governor's signature was one of my top priorities for the year, [Senate Bill 733](#), a bill that makes significant changes to two of the state's major college scholarship programs, Bright Flight and Access Missouri.

For 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—I wanted to ensure that awards are protected for our state's military. Many times, they cannot attend college in the traditional time-frame and cannot maintain full-time student status because of their military commitment. These circumstances should not affect a military member's eligibility for Bright Flight, so SB 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 service. The last thing we should be doing is standing in the way of our military personnel paying for college based on a technicality.

Senate Bill 733 contains several other Bright Flight provisions, including 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 meets 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; and allowing a student to renew a scholarship for as long as he or she meets the renewal requirements (rather than just through the fourth academic year).

The other 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 intended to increase accessibility to a student's school of choice. I, along with several of my colleagues, have worked for nearly two years on getting this change enacted into law, so to see it signed by the governor is a great finish to a long process.

Essentially, this part of the bill 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.

What we wanted to do was create a level playing field for public and private schools in our state. Taxpayers should not be funding higher awards for attending private schools, regardless if they cost more to attend. We must support Missouri’s top-notch public colleges and universities and we must strive to make higher education affordable for every student, regardless of where they choose to go to school.

This week we also wrapped up the special session that has been going on in Jefferson City since June 24. We passed two bills, the first being [HB 1](#), which will implement several cost-saving measures for the state pension system. Basically, employees hired by the state after January 1, 2011, will contribute 4 percent of their pay to the retirement system; work a longer amount of time for normal retirement; and work for the state for at least 10 years to be vested. This proposed change does not apply to teacher retirement or current state employees, nor does it create an investment board. It will, however, save taxpayers approximately \$660 million over the next 10 years.

[House Bill 2](#), better known as the Manufacturing Jobs Act, was also approved after more than 20 straight hours of discussion. This bill provides tax incentives for qualified suppliers or manufacturing facilities that create or retain Missouri jobs and bring new product lines to the state. Though it could apply to similar companies, it’s mainly targeted at Ford and its Claycomo plant, which employs more than 3,700 people. Tax incentives will be capped at \$15 million annually for 10 years, and recipients must meet a stringent set of requirements.

The issues are just the beginning in terms of big steps that must be taken in the coming years regarding economic development and cost-savings. Though it isn’t easy to make these kinds of decisions, they are necessary to ensure our state’s financial stability.

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.

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