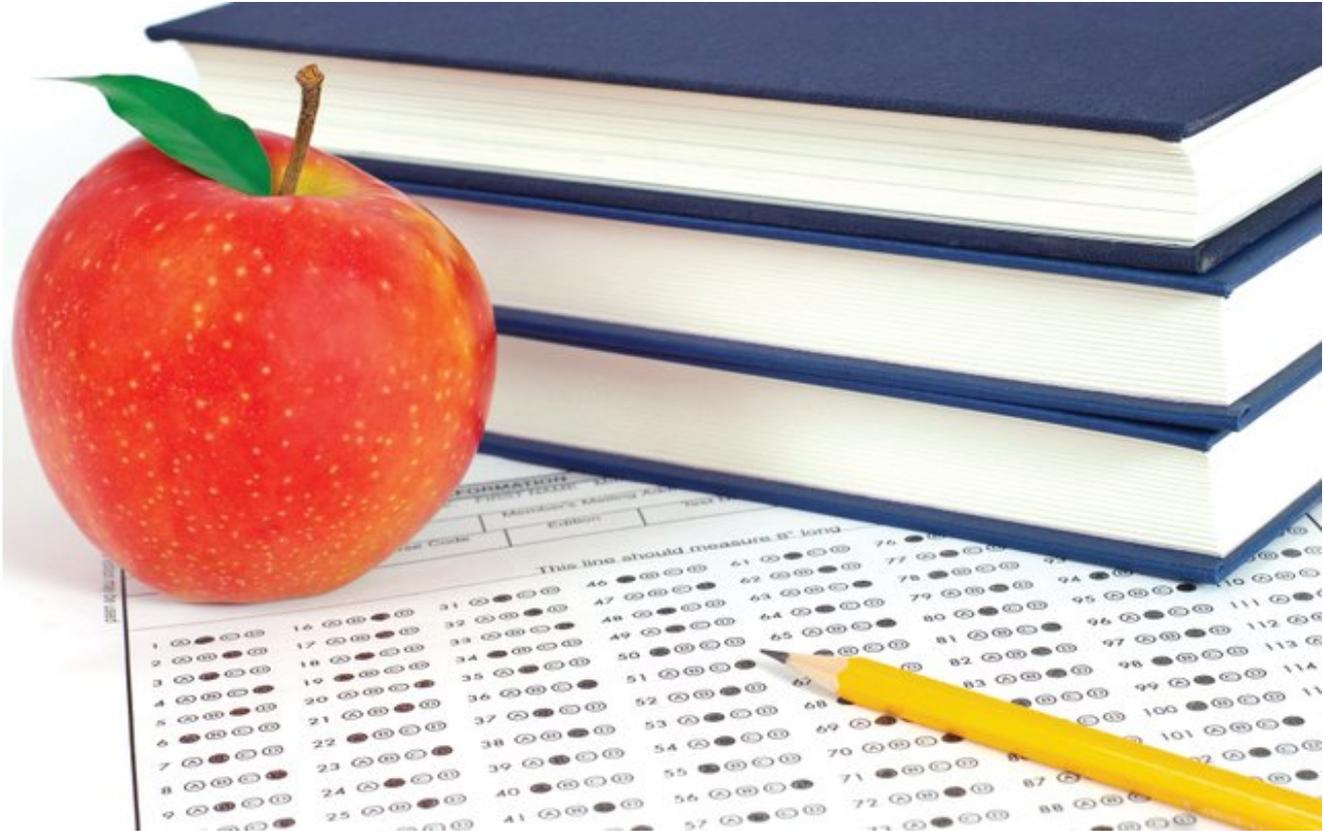




# We Need to Shut Down Failing Schools

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By: *Audrey Spalding*

On Monday, Missouri Commissioner of Education Chris Nicastro said in an exceptionally strongly-worded letter that the Imagine charter schools in Saint Louis City should close. Nicastro's letter came after the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published a [series of articles showing the derelict state of education at Imagine schools](#) , and after Saint Louis Mayor Francis Slay [publicly called for the schools to close](#) .

According to the *Post-Dispatch*, not only does the charter school company appear to have rushed to open a school [without providing textbooks and other school supplies, and with some classes held in hallways](#) , but the school hired a developer who pled guilty to fraud earlier this year (in an unrelated matter). That developer also received historic tax credits for redeveloping an Imagine Schools property, and [charged the charter school company \\$150,000 for the service of acquiring nearly \\$480,000 in tax credit money from the state](#) .

[In her letter to the sponsor of the Imagine charter schools](#) , Nicastro minced no words:

We do not view it as the intent of the Missouri General Assembly that the department engage in intrusive regulatory oversight of charter schools, or to perform the administrative responsibilities of the sponsor. However, it appears

from your public statement that [you desire] our recommendations in this matter. Let me be specific:

1) Announce immediately that the Imagine charter schools will close at the end of the current school year.

Some may rush to use Imagine schools' negligence as evidence that many, if not all, charter schools are inferior, and that the expansion of charter schools in Missouri is bad public policy. On the contrary, it is necessary that bad schools close in order to enable good schools to thrive. In any endeavor, whether it is business, art, or even education, there will always be some successes and some failures. It is important to encourage success and limit failure.

The establishment of charter schools, which are outside the traditional school district framework, is one way to do this. The theory behind charter schools is that the good ones will thrive on their own merits, and the charter schools that do a poor job of educating students will lose students and funding.

Based on the *Post-Dispatch* coverage, along with the mayor's and the education commissioner's statements, the Imagine schools in Saint Louis City certainly appear to be failing. As such, students and funding should be shifted to schools that do a better job of educating students. If the sponsor of the schools has been negligent in monitoring whether they have been successful (an intricacy created by our convoluted education law), then calls from the mayor and education commissioner to close schools are certainly warranted.

However, I think that this controversy can also be a learning experience. Yes, Imagine schools appear to be failing. But failing is not unique to charter schools. There are certainly many public schools that are failing their students — be it in providing safety, an adequate mathematics education, or curtailing dropout rates.

For example, Yeatman-Liddle Middle School in Saint Louis City has had increasingly fewer students score proficient or better on the state mathematics test. During the 2007 school year, 35.5 percent of students at the school scored "below basic" on the eighth-grade state math test. In 2010, 64.9 percent of students scored below basic, a proportion almost twice as high as the students scoring below basic just a few years ago. A much more thorough review would have to be conducted, but it appears Yeatman may be doing a poor job of teaching math to its students.

Letting a failing school continue does not help current students. During the past Missouri legislative session, [I testified before the House Education Committee to discuss a proposal that would enable parents of students at a failing school to trigger reform](#), a proposal that

I think might help address the problem of failing schools.

Rather than treating Imagine as an isolated incident, let's recognize that schools can fail — regardless of structure — and consider ways to allow that failure while encouraging successful schools to grow.

## About the Author



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[2] [http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/imagine-schools-real-estate-deals-fuel-company-growth/article\\_dbf9b959-0c73-586c-97e7-6fca3a729b39.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/imagine-schools-real-estate-deals-fuel-company-growth/article_dbf9b959-0c73-586c-97e7-6fca3a729b39.html)

[3] [http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/article\\_3d31a8ff-ff75-5902-995c-d8241bba6c6d.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/article_3d31a8ff-ff75-5902-995c-d8241bba6c6d.html)

[4] [http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/imagine-opens-school-in-just-days/article\\_4dc4b260-b6c6-5c1d-abf8-dfc07f63dbd2.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/imagine-opens-school-in-just-days/article_4dc4b260-b6c6-5c1d-abf8-dfc07f63dbd2.html)

[5] <http://mayorslay.com/docs/20111107-DESE-letter.pdf>

[6] <http://showmeinstitute.org/publications/testimony/education.html>

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