Last week, Missouri got its latest grades on “The Nation’s Report Card,” (an assessment given to public-school 4th- and 8th-graders in each state every two years by the U.S. Department of Education), and the news isn’t good. On one hand, the percentage of Missouri 4th-graders who scored Proficient or above in Reading has increased by six percentage points in the last 20 years. On the more important other hand, our standing among the fifty states has gone from 22nd in 1998 to 34th. In just two decades, twelve states have passed us by. We’ve gone from the top half to the bottom third.

The news isn’t much better in math. Only 19 percent of 4th-graders were Proficient or above in 1996, but we ranked 15th out of the fifty states. Since then, we’ve doubled the percentage scoring on grade level, but we’ve slipped to 34th in state rankings. Nineteen states have leapfrogged us.

What these numbers mean is that while we’re being told that nearly every school district in Missouri is fully accredited (and therefore must be doing pretty well), we’re slowly slipping toward the bottom of the pack. This decline has real consequences. States compete for businesses, workers, and young families, and the quality of a state’s schools is a major factor in how
attractive it is to families and business owners. Unfortunately, in Missouri the public education establishment is firmly entrenched, and it appears to have no appetite for changing the status quo.

For some ideas about how Missouri might pull out of its tailspin, we could look at one state that is clearly on the way up. In the late 1990s, Florida’s 4th-graders were 43rd in Reading and 39th in math. Last year, the came in at 6th and 4th, respectively. So what happened? Florida created a choice-rich education environment, and families have responded. Florida families can take advantage of publicly funded scholarships for low-income students, students with disabilities, students in low-performing schools, bullied students, and students reading below grade level. In addition, there are over 650 charter schools in Florida, including one all-charter-school district.

Missouri has charter schools in just two of 518 school districts, and those were authorized only as punishment for the low performance of the existing public schools. Families living anywhere else in the state are stuck with their assigned public school unless they can pay for private school out of pocket or homeschool their children on their own. Just three percent of Missouri families are able to choose a charter school, while nearly half of all Florida families exercise some form of school choice. And the results show the impact that access to choice can have.

Something is backwards when Missouri’s tumble down the national education rankings is quietly accepted, while policies that put parents in the driver’s seat are considered dangerous and controversial. Twelve other states passed Missouri by in the space of a single generation. If we continue to dig in our heels and refuse to create a vibrant marketplace of educational options, we’d better get used to looking at everyone else’s back.

**About the Author**

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Susan Pendergrass was Vice President of Research and Evaluation for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools before joining the Show-Me Institute. Prior to coming to the National Alliance, Susan was a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of Education during the Bush administration and a senior research scientist at the National Center for Education Statistics during the Obama administration. She earned a Ph.D. in Public Policy from George Mason University.

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