



ADVANCING LIBERTY  
WITH RESPONSIBILITY  
BY PROMOTING  
MARKET SOLUTIONS  
FOR MISSOURI  
PUBLIC POLICY

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# TESTIMONY

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## CHILDREN TRAPPED IN FAILING SCHOOLS NEED HELP

*by Audrey Spalding*

Chairman Dieckhaus and Vice Chairman Cookson, and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify about House Bill 393, the Parent Empowerment and Choice Act. My name is Audrey Spalding, and I am a policy analyst for the Show-Me Institute, a nonprofit Missouri-based think tank that supports free-market solutions to state policy. The ideas I present here are my own, and should not necessarily be taken as representative of the institute.

Under Missouri law, parents have very few options when it comes to actively impacting the education of their children in the state public school system. As a parent, if your child is enrolled in a public school, you can vote in school board elections and on tax issues, and you can attend your district's board of education meetings — but you are, for the most part, incapable of taking action if the public school system is failing your child.

Of course, I am talking specifically about low-income parents who do not have the money to pay both school property taxes and pay for private school tuition. The choice for those parents has been made for them: Their child will attend the local public school.

This top-down education policy ignores several realities. Roughly 200 Missouri public school districts had a majority of students scoring below proficient on the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) mathematics test in 2010.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, a majority of districts are not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), with 63 percent of school districts falling below the 2010 target.<sup>2</sup>

Yet only two of Missouri's 522 school districts are unaccredited. According to the Missouri Supreme Court ruling in *Jane Turner v. School District of Clayton*, students at unaccredited districts should be able to choose to attend better public schools. But right now those students are being turned away, because, other public school districts say, there's no room.

In this climate of mediocre education gains, with some school districts actually becoming worse at educating students, and no feasible options available for students at Missouri's two unaccredited districts, it is time to consider new public policies to expand educational choice in Missouri.

H.B. 393, if passed by this legislature, would expand the ability of parents to

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take an active role in the public education of their children. Under this legislation, a majority of parents of a failing school can request through petition that the school be reopened as a charter school, that the school be closed, or that educational choice in the form of vouchers be made available so that students can attend and pay for better public or private schools.

As someone who has studied education public policy, I am excited about this proposal to expand educational choice for all. It is time that failing public schools be held accountable.

### **Policy Strengths of the Parent Empowerment and Choice Act**

*The three trigger options listed in H.B. 393 focus on promoting what works in education, not what hasn't worked.*

The three options available to parents under H.B. 393 are all good ways to encourage educational growth in Missouri. If a school is failing its students, awarding it more money won't remake the school into a better one. Eric Hanushek, renowned K–12 education scholar and senior fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University, has shown that it is not the amount of funding that leads to district success, but rather the structure of funding.<sup>3</sup> Research commissioned by the Show-Me Institute has found similar results here in Missouri.<sup>4</sup>

If a school is doing so poorly that a majority of parents sign a petition asking for closure or restructuring the school as a charter school, it is time to act.

If parents choose the “restart” option, the school will be reopened as a charter school, and will be managed by a charter school agency selected through a rigorous

review process. The charter school agency selected will have the ability to implement at the school a restructuring model that has previously proved successful.

If parents choose the “closure” option, students will be able to attend other schools that are succeeding within the public school district. Again, this will enable parents to choose the best option for their children, instead of waiting for a failing school to try to “get it right.”

If parents choose the voucher option, this will enable them to send their children to better public or private schools. This option is especially good policy because it allows public education dollars to follow students to good schools instead of continuing to fund schools that are failing.

*H.B. 393 does not specify which characteristics mean that a district is “failing.”*

The Parent Empowerment and Choice Act is strong because it places no limits on which schools parents can petition for reform. It would be futile for the legislature to try to add specifications about what constitutes failing schools. If 50 percent of the parents of a school's students think that the school is failing, whether because of low test scores, a high dropout rate, or safety concerns, then it is failing. If the state were to impose limits on the number or type of schools that parents can trigger, it would be cementing some students in schools that are failing — albeit failing in a way that the state neglected to identify beforehand.

*H.B. 393 could enable the creation of charter schools throughout Missouri.*

Furthermore, this legislation, whether through amendments or in concert with other legislation, would allow parents statewide the ability to petition to reopen their school as a charter school. Currently,



the state of Missouri limits charter schools only to Saint Louis and Kansas City. That law hinders the education of students trapped in failing schools elsewhere in the state. What difference is there between a child attending a failing public school in Kansas City and a child attending a failing public school in Springfield? The only difference is that one has the option of charter schools, while the other does not.

### **Suggested Improvements to the Parent Empowerment and Choice Act**

*Voucher funding language could be improved.*

The Parent Empowerment and Choice Act could be improved by changing the language that discusses the calculation of voucher amounts. As the bill reads today, the voucher amount that a student could receive would be calculated as 75 percent of the funding that the failing school district would have received from state and local sources to educate that student. However, more than 200 Missouri school districts receive more than 20 percent of their funding from federal sources. If lawmakers want to ensure that this legislation allows public education dollars to follow students, the language should be amended so that the voucher amount would be calculated from the sum of local, state, and federal funding that school districts receive to educate a student.

*Ensure that parents throughout the state could choose the charter school option.*

It is time to grant low-income parents throughout Missouri the option of sending their children to charter schools. If parents elect to choose the charter school option, they should not be limited by geography.

If this committee wants to expand educational choice throughout the state, then I encourage it to either strengthen H.B. 393 so that it will supersede existing limits to charter schools, or pass companion legislation that will authorize the creation of charter schools throughout the state.

### **Overall, the Parent Empowerment and Choice Act Would Expand Educational Choice in Missouri**

It is my opinion that the Parent Empowerment and Choice Act would expand educational choice in Missouri. Research has found that increased educational choice is good for students and good for traditional public schools. When funding limits are imposed, such as the 75-percent cap proposed in this legislation, expanded school choice can even help reduce state expenditures. I applaud your efforts to consider legislation that would empower parents to seek the best forms of education for their children.

### **Notes**

- 1 According to data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).
- 2 According to the Missouri Public School Accountability Report for the 2009–2010 school year. Published by DESE.
- 3 Hanushek, Eric, “The failure of input-based schooling policies,” *The Economic Journal*, 113, February 2003. Online here: [tinyurl.com/6am52rg](http://tinyurl.com/6am52rg)
- 4 Podgursky, Michael, James Smith, and Matthew Springer, “A New Defendant at the Table: An Overview of Missouri School Finance and Recent Legislation,” *Peabody Journal of Education*, April 1, 2008. Online here: [tinyurl.com/6am52rg](http://tinyurl.com/6am52rg)

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**For more of the Show-Me Institute’s research about education issues, visit [www.showmeinstitute.org](http://www.showmeinstitute.org).**

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# SHOW-ME INSTITUTE POLICY AREAS

## TAXES

Our economy works better when the tax system is simple, fair, and lets workers keep more of the money they earn. Show-Me Institute scholars study the impact of tax and spending policies, and develop reforms that will give us more for our tax dollars and spur faster economic growth.

## EDUCATION

The latest education research confirms what common sense has always told us: Kids learn better when their parents have more choices. The Show-Me Institute studies how to empower parents by expanding educational options and providing them with better information, so that every child can attend a school that best meets his or her unique needs.

## CORPORATE WELFARE

From eminent domain abuse to subsidies and tax breaks for the powerful and well-connected, government officials often try to pick winners and losers in the market. The Show-Me Institute develops policy recommendations to protect property rights and promote economic growth without caving in to demands for corporate welfare. Secure property rights encourage investment and entrepreneurship. Trying to create economic success through government intervention is a formula for failure.

## HEALTH CARE

The standard employer-based model for health insurance leaves a remarkable number of people out. The Show-Me Institute highlights the ways that a consumer-driven, market-based model for coverage can help more people get the care they need while taking ownership for their own health and lifestyle decisions.

## PRIVATIZATION

Many government services can be provided more effectively, and at a lower cost, by the private sector. When public services are provided by private industry, economic incentives and accountability provide a critical feedback loop that is largely absent in government bureaucracy. Show-Me Institute scholars analyze public programs to determine how taxpayers can benefit from market-based alternatives.

## RED TAPE

One thing that government officials do well is establish barriers to market innovation and erect hurdles for entrepreneurs to clear. The Show-Me Institute is committed to showing how burdensome regulations stand in the way of economic growth and individual prosperity. Market solutions lose their strength when bound by red tape.



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