



TESTIMONY

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EXPANDING OPPORTUNITY THROUGH COURSE ACCESS IN MISSOURI

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Testimony Before the House Elementary and
Secondary Education Committee

TO THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THIS COMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Michael McShane, and I am Director of Education Policy for the Show-Me Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, Missouri-based think tank that advances sensible, well-researched, free-market solutions to state and local policy issues. The ideas presented here are my own. This testimony is adapted from a Show-Me Institute research essay entitled *Course Access in Missouri: Diversity, Personalization, and Opportunity*, which I coauthored with Brittany Wagner.

In 2009, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) announced a new initiative: *Top 10 by 20*. By 2020, they hoped,

Missouri would rank among the top ten performing states in the country. DESE included objectives addressing access to early childhood education and teacher quality, but one of the key metrics of success for *Top 10 by 20* was the goal that “all Missouri students will graduate college- and career-ready.”

College and career readiness requires enrollment in appropriate courses in high school. However, during the 2014–2015 school year, of the 507 school districts that offer high school in the state, 255 districts had no students enrolled in calculus, 213 districts had no students enrolled in physics, 102 districts had no students enrolled in Chemistry, and 285 districts did not have a single student enroll in an AP class. Between 2001 and 2015, at least 110 Missouri school districts ended their gifted and talented education programs.

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

According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's 2014 report *Leaders and Laggards*, only 9.5 percent of Missouri students in the class of 2014 graduated having passed an AP exam, ranking Missouri 47th in the Nation (and 48th if you count the District of Columbia).

Almost all of the districts that saw no students take these advance courses were small districts with a single high school. It is not feasible to ask them to offer every possible class that students would like to take—there simply is not enough capacity. But by leveraging outside providers, a new policy can help these schools provide the diversity in coursework that their students need to succeed in the knowledge-intensive world of today and tomorrow.

WHAT IS COURSE ACCESS?

Course access programs allow students to direct a portion of their annual per-pupil funding to approved course providers outside of their traditional public schools and to receive credit for classes they successfully pass. Students access the course from an approved location such as the school library or travel to an off-site location like a local community college.

Minnesota passed the first course access law in 2006. Multiple states have since developed course access programs. Often, these programs are referred to as “supplemental online programs” or “course options,” meaning that students have access to individual courses during the regular school day.

A true “course access” program meets the following conditions:

- (1) Public school students access online coursework for a part (not all) of a traditional school day.
- (2) The supplemental online learning program requires little or no additional state funding—it redirects existing state funds to an alternative provider.

Each state's course access program is unique. One important distinction is how much local control school districts are granted. Some states allow school districts to make decisions about student eligibility, course pricing, and limits on enrollment. Others, such as Utah and Michigan, allow local school districts to independently review courses added to the online catalog, although most states have implemented a statewide review process in which the state education department has the authority to approve or reject online courses. Minnesota, for example, has developed a continuous quality improvement process that includes a three-year review cycle for all approved providers.

While six states allow students in K-12 grades to participate, states such as Texas limit eligibility to third-through twelfth-graders, and South Carolina limits eligibility to sixth-through twelfth-graders. Most course access programs also place limits on the amount of time a student can spend on online coursework during the school day. Wisconsin allows students to enroll in 2 courses per year, whereas Michigan allows students to enroll in 2 courses per

academic term. Oklahoma requires students to enroll in at least one course in a regular classroom during the traditional school day.

Course providers are typically paid half of their fee up front and the other half when the student successfully completes the class, creating a strong financial accountability system.

WHY COURSE ACCESS IS GOOD FOR MISSOURI

The Show-Me State already has much of the infrastructure to create a course access program through an underused program known as the Missouri Virtual Instruction Program (MoVIP), which was signed into law in 2006. MoVIP provides access to online courses through approved providers. Course offerings are vetted by DESE and can be credited toward graduation. Under the current organization, though, the state only provides funding for students deemed too medically fragile to attend school with their peers; any other interested students have to pay tuition.

Missouri's existing virtual program provides a strong foundation for the implementation of a course access program. The courses are already there, and the framework for awarding credit has been on the books for almost a decade. More courses and more diverse courses could be added to the marketplace, and online courses could be supplemented with in-person courses offered by local community colleges, other school districts, tutoring providers, or technical training groups. With some modifications to

how online courses and providers are funded, every public school student in Missouri could have the opportunity to enroll in classes not currently offered by their brick-and-mortar school.

There would be some cost associated with vetting the courses and ensuring that providers are paid properly, but other than that, the actual cost of the courses could be covered by the funds that the state already sends to public schools.

Course access can be a win, win, win: A win for students, who gain access to courses that they would not otherwise be able to take; a win for schools, who now don't have to make hard decisions around offering one course or another based on conflicting student demands and limited resources; and a win for school districts that can produce coursework to sell in the marketplace. Those three wins make it a win for Missouri, and a policy worth supporting.

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