



# ESSAY

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## ACCOUNTABILITY IN MISSOURI'S PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

*By Emily Stahly*

### INTRODUCTION

The topic of accountability often arises in debates over school choice programs, whether in reference to charter schools, vouchers, or education savings accounts. School choice opponents argue that these programs are not “held accountable,” whereas traditional public schools are.

But what is accountability? What does it mean to hold a school accountable for student performance? Who should be holding schools “accountable,” and how?

When it comes to maintaining a system of public education, the state

is ultimately responsible. Like every state, Missouri has constitutional provisions requiring that the legislature establish and maintain a system of free public schools that children may attend. From Article IX of the Missouri Constitution:

*A general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence being essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people, the general assembly shall establish and maintain free public schools for the gratuitous instruction of all persons in this state within ages not in excess of twenty-one years as prescribed by law.<sup>1</sup>*

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But what if simply funding and opening schools is not enough? What if schools fail to successfully promote the “general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence”? The search for answers to these questions has driven the creation of accountability systems to provide quality control for the schools that children in the state attend.

The purpose of this essay is to describe Missouri’s accountability system for struggling districts (those districts that are not diffusing knowledge and intelligence) and how the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and State Board of Education (SBE) have applied it to specific districts in the past 10 years.

In addition, this essay will challenge the accepted wisdom that public schools are “held accountable” while schools of choice are not. As it turns out, there are few real, concrete penalties for low performance in traditional public schools, and numerous schools and districts that have clearly and demonstrably failed to meet the goals the state has set for them have been allowed to persist in educating children for years.

## PUBLIC SCHOOL QUALITY IN MISSOURI

Missouri is in the middle of the pack in terms of K-12 education quality. Missouri ranks 21st in the nation according to the *US News and World Report*,<sup>2</sup> and *Edweek* gave the state a C– in their 2018 State Report Cards, slightly below the national average of C.<sup>3</sup> On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only about one-third of fourth- and eighth-graders were at the *Proficient* or *Advanced* level in reading and math in 2015.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, little progress has been made since 2011 on the NAEP reading test, while scores have gone down slightly in math.

DESE, the agency in charge of monitoring schools’ and districts performance, provides an even clearer picture of the quality of our schools across the state. Several districts have not been fully accredited in over a decade, and nearly 10 percent of schools fail to meet DESE’s standards on the Annual Performance Report (APR).<sup>5</sup> Clearly, underperforming schools are a significant problem in our state, and examining the state’s approach to dealing with these schools must be a part of the conversation.

Before exploring whether public schools actually are held accountable here in Missouri, some terms need to be defined. First, this paper will define *accountability* as tangible consequences for teachers, principals, superintendents, and board members in the school system. While labelling districts as unaccredited or providing more resources and support may be a part of the accountability system, these elements without structural or personnel changes do not constitute accountability as defined here.<sup>6</sup>

Second, *failing* will be defined by Missouri’s APR standards, where a score of less than 70 percent places districts out of the accredited range. Debating the merits of how the APR system grades performance is an important debate but is beyond the scope of this paper, which will focus on the state’s accountability system and its implementation.

## MISSOURI’S ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

Briefly, let’s look at how DESE assesses district performance and how the state’s accountability system works in general. As part of the Missouri School Improvement Program, which was first implemented in the early 1990s and is now in its fifth iteration (MSIP 5), Missouri uses the APR to determine how well each school district is doing at meeting certain academic standards.<sup>7</sup> How DESE scores these standards changed significantly between MSIP 4 and MSIP 5 in 2013, going from grading districts on a 14-point to a 140-point scale.

According to the APR system, DESE measures Academic Achievement (56 points), Subgroup Achievement (14 points), College and Career or High School Readiness (30 points), Attendance (10 points), and Graduation Rates (30 points) of each school and school district. While the math used to translate districts’ raw scores and percentages into APR points is complicated, the concepts behind these standards are straightforward<sup>8</sup>:

- **Academic Achievement:** assesses student performance on Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) tests in English, math, social studies, and science, including both proficiency and growth.
- **Subgroup Achievement:** weighs on how minority students, low-income students, English language learners, and students with disabilities perform on MAP tests.

- **College and Career Readiness:** gauges how well students perform on college entry exams like the ACT and SAT, how students perform in advanced placement courses, and how many students attend college, enter the military, or have employment after graduation.
- **Attendance Rate:** evaluates how close the district is to the state standard of 90 percent of students attending 90 percent of the time.
- **Graduation Rate:** considers four-, five-, six-, and seven-year graduation rates and compares them to target rates set by the state.

Some of the details of scoring the Academic Achievement standard are important to know for later discussions of districts' performance targets and APR results. Within Academic Achievement, districts can receive up to 16 points each for English and math. These points are earned through a combination of Status (16 points) plus either Progress or Growth (each 12 points), whichever is higher. The rest of the academic achievement points come from science (16 points) and social studies (8 points); neither of these standards takes into account Growth.

Status and Progress are measured by the MAP Performance Index (MPI). The MPI measures the Status (the proficiency rate) and Progress (change in the proficiency rate from the previous year) of the district on a scale of 100 to 500. For reference, a score of 300 means students on average are scoring at the *Basic* level on the MAP tests and a score of 400 would signify that students on average are scoring at the *Proficient* level.

While Status and Progress measure the performance of the whole district, Growth on the APR measures the improvement in scores for individual students. The Growth score is calculated by comparing students' scores in grades 4 through 8 with valid MAP score pairs from the prior year in either reading or math. So even if a district did not score any points for Status, if its students demonstrated high growth the district could receive as many as 24 out of 32 points possible for English and math. For a full explanation on how MPI and Growth points are calculated, see the Comprehensive Guide to MSIP.<sup>9</sup>

Districts' scores in each of the five standards are then compiled into a report card for an overall APR score. (There are a number of elementary-only districts whose total APR is less than 140 points because they are not eligible for the high-school related points.) Figure 1 is an example from a K-12 district, Kansas City.

The districts' scores are used to determine whether or not a district is accredited. DESE classifies districts scoring under 50 percent as unaccredited, between 50 and 70 percent as provisionally accredited, and over 70 percent as fully accredited. The SBE, whose members have the final say over classification, considers the trend of the district's performance over the last two or three years. Thus, Kansas City (shown above) may have scored 70 percent in on its latest APR, but it remains provisionally accredited because that was its first year to reach the threshold. If its score improves next year, then the SBE may grant it full accreditation or wait to see if the trend holds for a third year.<sup>10</sup>

According to each districts' accreditation classification, DESE has prescribed specific support and intervention actions outlined in MSIP 5.<sup>11</sup> Currently, Missouri has 512 accredited districts, six provisionally accredited districts, and no unaccredited districts.<sup>12</sup> Figure 2 summarizes DESE's approach based on the needs of the districts.

As performance worsens, the state becomes increasingly involved in the operation of the district. One part of MSIP 5 that applies to all districts is the requirement that districts and local school boards implement a Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP). To state the difference between MSIP and CSIP briefly: the MSIP sets the standards for the whole state, and a CSIP is how individual districts plan to meet those standards.<sup>13</sup> As seen in Figure 2, DESE has more control over individual CSIPs for poor-performing districts; otherwise, districts have quite a bit of flexibility with their plans.

Even if a district is fully accredited, DESE intervenes if its performance starts slipping. DESE will monitor the district more closely if it scores less than 75 percent on the APR, its score drops by more than 5 percent for two consecutive years, one of the schools scores less than 70 percent on the APR, or there is a large achievement gap in the district. Even if this happens, the local school board is still primarily responsible for overseeing

progress. After two years without improvements in these areas, however, DESE will begin reviewing the district’s CSIP, will oversee its implementation, and may perform a “target audit(s) conducted by a review team.”<sup>14</sup>

For accredited districts, even those with persistently struggling schools, this is, for all intents and purposes, the extent of state intervention.

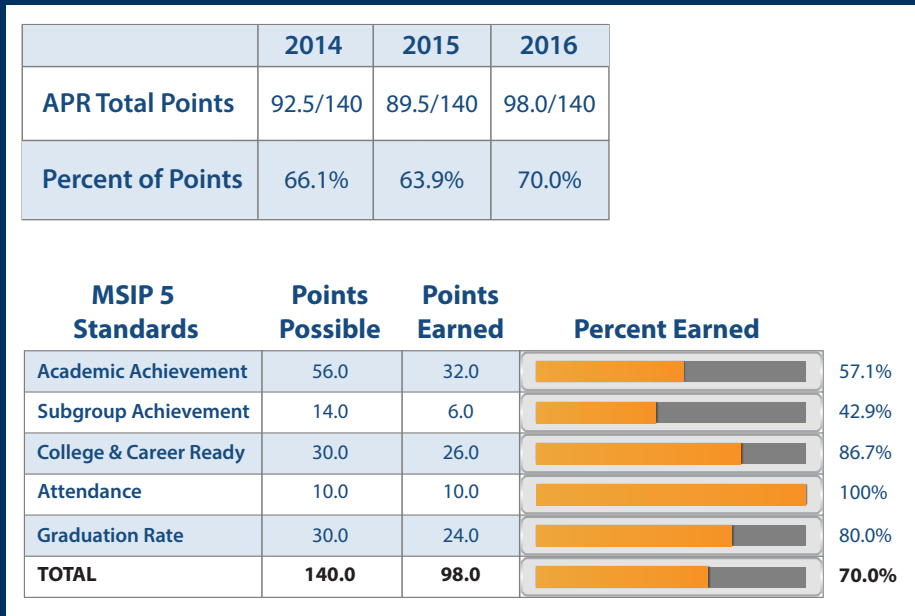
The next tier down in performance is provisional accreditation, which applies to districts scoring between 50 and 70 percent on the APR for several years. MSIP 5 requires that the Regional School Improvement Team (RSIT) review relevant data, conduct audits if necessary, develop a new CSIP, and implement a performance contract. The following items are required to be in the performance contract:

- “Provide high-quality early childhood education”
- “Create opportunities for meaningful parent/ community involvement”
- “Extend school year programming”
- “Extend opportunities for school day programming”
- “Provide a structured afterschool program for students who are not proficient in English language arts and mathematics”
- “Provide a structured afterschool program in partnership with a community agency, non-profit group, or other organization”
- “Participate in the Missouri Leadership for Excellence,

Figure 1

## 2016 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) Final LEA Summary Report MSIP 5 Kansas City 33 (048078).

Higher scores for College and Career Readiness, Attendance, and Graduation Rate help compensate for low Academic and Subgroup Achievement scores.



Source: DESE, Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. “Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5.” Kansas City 33, 2016 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) – FINAL, LEA Summary Report, MSIP 5, <https://mcds.dese.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

Achievement and Development (MOLEAD) program or Leadership Academy”

- “Determine and provide local wraparound services.”

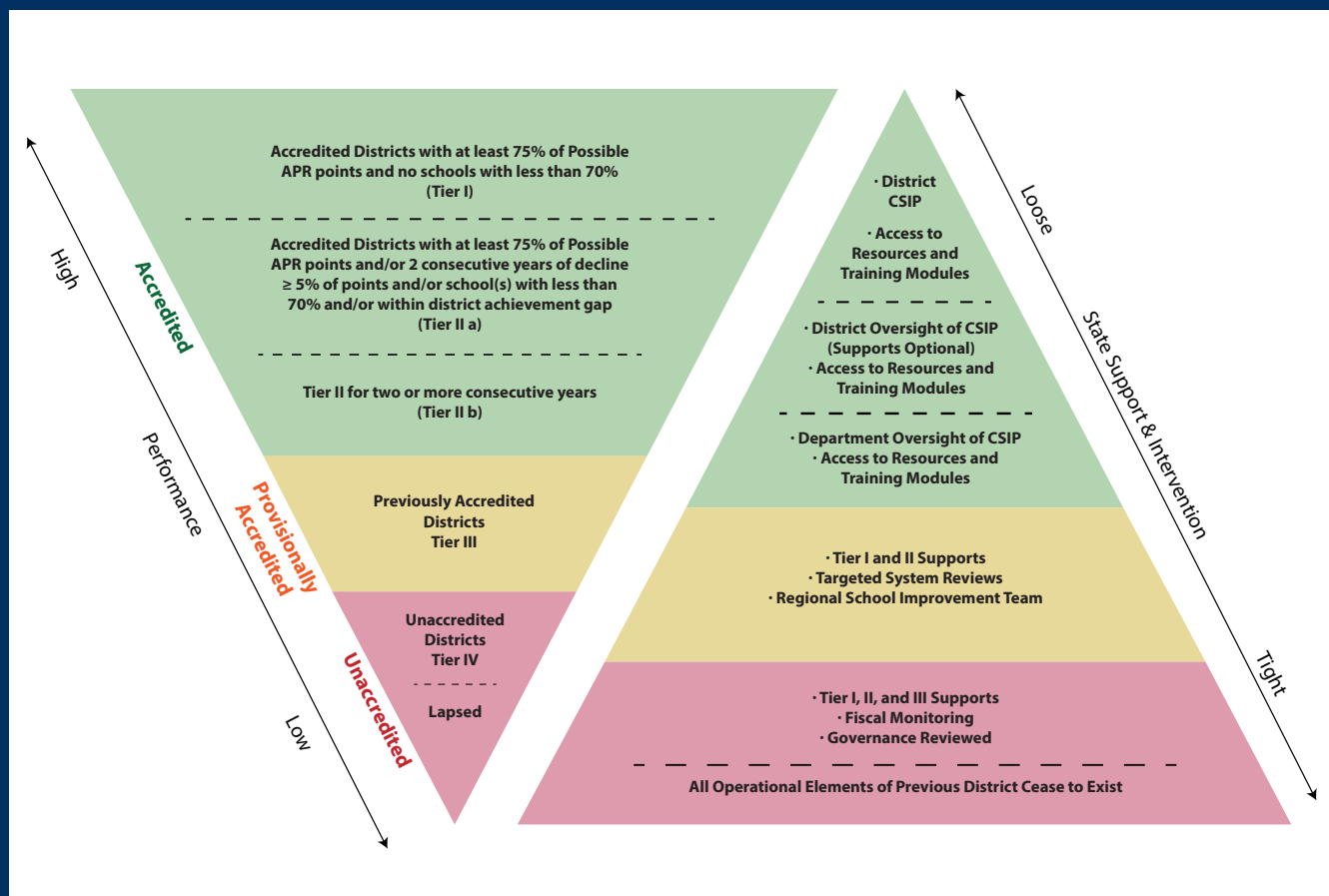
If district’s performance continues to worsen and its APR score falls below 50 percent for several years, the SBE can then classify it as unaccredited. Under the Missouri Revised Statutes, the SBE may review and potentially dismiss the unaccredited district’s governing structure, appoint a “special administrative board” (SAB) or a different governing structure, merge the failing district with another district, or split up the failing district into smaller districts.<sup>15</sup> While Missouri law gives considerable authority over unaccredited districts to the SBE, DESE



Figure 2

## Missouri School Improvement Program: Support and Intervention

DESE uses a tiered approach to increase supports and interventions as district performance worsens.



Source: Missouri State Board of Education; DESE. "Consideration of FY2017 Budget Request – School Support and Intervention." Available at: <https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/FY17BudgetS&I6-15.pdf>.

regulations begin with the least drastic of the four interventions and then become more involved if the district does not sufficiently improve:

- Option A: local school board remains, creates a 3-year performance contract with the SBE.
- Option B: replaces local school board with SAB, allows SAB to oversee future contracts.
- Option C: lapse the district and placed under direct control of SBE.

- Option D: dissolve the district and either combine it with another district or create multiple districts within the original boundaries.

In addition to the above interventions, students have some options if their district becomes provisionally accredited or unaccredited. First, provisionally accredited and unaccredited districts are also required to pay tuition for students who decide to enroll in the Missouri Virtual Instructional Program.<sup>16</sup>

Second, charter schools may operate in unaccredited districts if they are sponsored by the Missouri Charter Public School Commission or a higher education institution.<sup>17</sup> While charter schools are technically allowed in unaccredited districts—and even in accredited and provisionally accredited districts if sponsored by the local board of education—no charter schools have been authorized outside of Kansas City or St. Louis.

Third, students within an unaccredited district may transfer to a nearby accredited district and the unaccredited district must pay for their tuition and transportation according to state statute.<sup>18</sup> Previously, this provision only applied to schools falling under Option A and B outlined above and not Option C districts because they have “new school status.” The Missouri Court of Appeals, however, held that in the case of Normandy Schools Collaborative (which fell under Option C) the district would remain unaccredited and students would still retain the right to transfer.<sup>19</sup>

It is worth noting that the transfer law works independently of the MSIP system since it was instituted by state law, not DESE regulation. This provision was passed into law in 1993, but was not tested in the courts until 2013, when it was upheld by the Missouri Supreme Court.<sup>20</sup>

Currently, DESE is working on changes to Missouri’s accountability system to be expressed in its Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan that has been approved by the U.S. Department of Education and in the update to the Missouri School Improvement Program, MSIP 6.<sup>21</sup> Missouri’s ESSA plan was designed to meet the basic requirements of ESSA, leaving the bulk of accountability reform with MSIP.<sup>22</sup> In presentations to the SBE, DESE states explicitly that ESSA plays a small part in shaping the state’s accountability system.<sup>23</sup>

MSIP 6 will grade districts based on performance and process standards. The performance standards include Academic Achievement and Success-Ready Graduates. The process standards include Climate and Culture, Effective Educators and Instructional Processes, and Leadership and Governance. How exactly all of these will come together to determine how districts and schools are performing is yet to be determined. Currently, it does appear that student

academic growth as opposed to proficiency will make up a larger portion of the Academic Achievement Standard than it did under MSIP 5.<sup>24</sup> This is good news in that it will more accurately rate schools that have disadvantaged student populations.<sup>25</sup>

This description of Missouri’s accountability system is not meant to be comprehensive; rather, it provides the context necessary to discuss the cases of particular districts. In the next section, we will look at how this accountability system has been applied to districts that have been provisionally accredited or unaccredited in recent years.

## HOW THE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM HAS BEEN APPLIED TO DISTRICTS

As of January 2018, six school districts are provisionally accredited and no school district is unaccredited.<sup>26</sup> Notably, the St. Louis City Public School District regained its accreditation and Riverview Gardens and Normandy Schools Collaborative were upgraded to be provisionally accredited in the past year.<sup>27</sup> This section explores how the accountability system is being applied to districts that currently are provisionally accredited or unaccredited in addition to some that regained accreditation in recent years. To be clear, these are not complete accounts but glimpses at these districts based on documents made available online by DESE.

While the accountability system may seem fine as described on paper, it is important to note that the SBE is given significant discretion when classifying districts. Thus, looking at how the SBE and DESE applied the MSIP system in specific situations is crucial in determining whether or not districts were held accountable. In some cases, the gap between accountability in theory and in practice is wide.

Before delving in, it is worth briefly explaining here problems with the 2017 APR scores that were released in November. First, the 2016 and 2017 English and math scores not analogous because the English II and Algebra I tests results were excluded based on errors in the tests.<sup>28</sup>

Second, due to these rejected tests and the state changing the standardized tests several times in the past few years, districts were able to earn points through “hold harmless” guidelines in English and math. This means that DESE

counted districts’ highest English and math point totals since 2014 for their final score. For example, St. Louis earned 3 points in English for its 2017 score, but its 2015 score of 12 points was used for the current year’s APR.

Thus, it is hard to determine whether the districts discussed are improving based on the latest scores. While some data from 2017 will be included in this section, it is important to keep in mind the issues with the English and math points and the overall score.

This section begins with provisionally accredited districts and then addresses unaccredited districts in the order of intervention Options A, B, C, and D as discussed earlier. Districts are organized into subsections based on their highest level of state intervention, not on their current classification. For example, St. Louis is discussed under *Unaccredited – Option B* even though it is currently fully accredited.

***Provisionally Accredited***

Districts that are provisionally accredited receive additional support and monitoring from the state to help them regain full accreditation. Unfortunately, several districts have stalled at this level, where they’re performing just well enough to preclude further intervention from the state but haven’t improved enough to shed the provisionally accredited classification. The worst current example of a district stuck in this limbo is the Hayti school district—a small, rural, and low-income district that became provisionally accredited a decade ago. Calhoun, also small and rural, has been provisionally accredited since 2012 and Hickman Mills, near Kansas City, since 2013.

DESE documents related to school accountability do not appear to show a change in approach to these districts that have not made sufficient progress towards full accreditation over the years. In other words, even though their

efforts do not appear to be improving the districts, they continue with the same approach year after year. The other provisionally accredited districts, Kansas City and Riverview Gardens, were more recently upgraded from unaccredited; it remains to be seen if they continue to improve.

**Calhoun R-VIII** is located in Henry County and serves about 130 students. It has been provisionally accredited since 2012 and has scored inconsistently on the APR since then—71.1 percent in 2013, 64.6 percent in 2014, 90.9 percent in 2015, 66.7 percent in 2016, and 89.9 percent in 2017.<sup>29</sup>

The district last presented to the SBE in February 2015 and listed “Key Strategies and Interventions” including tutoring, more professional development for teachers, longer school days and school years, utilizing data, and focusing on chronic absenteeism.<sup>30</sup> This presentation also included performance targets for the district to reach by 2016: 55 percent proficiency in English, 45 percent in math, 52 percent in science, and 48.5 percent in social studies. As shown in Table 1, actual performance has fallen short.

**Table 1: Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced**

Subject	2014	2015	2016	2016 Targets
English Language Arts	30.3%	39.3%	51.5%	55.0%
Mathematics	28.9%	37.5%	42.4%	45.0%
Science	30.3%	26.5%	35.7%	52.0%
Social Studies	N/A	N/A	N/A	48.5%

Source: DESE, Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. “Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5.” Calhoun R-VIII, 2016 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) — FINAL, LEA Supporting Data, MSIP 5, <https://mcds.dese.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

Table 2: **Hickman Mills APR Scores Under MSIP 5**

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>APR Score</b>	51.8%	70.7%	59.3%	67.9%	65.4%

Source: DESE, Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. "Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5." Hickman Mills C-1, 2017 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) – FINAL, LEA Summary Report, MSIP 5, <https://mcds.dese.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

are black or Hispanic. Since being classified as provisionally accredited, the district's APR scores have fluctuated (Table 2) and little lasting progress seems to have been made.

In its last report to the SBE in January 2015, the district set out performance targets—which have not been

met—and interventions like professional development and early childhood education to reach these targets similar to other districts. Unlike other districts, however, Hickman Mills listed specific schools for targeted interventions: Burke Elementary, Dobbs Elementary, Hickman Mills Freshman Center, Santa Fe Elementary, Smith Hale Middle School, and Symington Elementary.<sup>33</sup> Results for these schools have been mixed (Table 3).

To put these scores—and the rest of the districts' scores—in context, the MAP tests and state standards have changed in the past few years, so it is more difficult to gauge how well

the district is actually performing over time. Moreover, as Dennis Carpenter (the former superintendent of Hickman Mills) noted, frequent changes to tests and standards make it more challenging for teachers and schools trying to improve student performance.<sup>34</sup> That said, these are the targets that the district and state worked together to identify, and they have not been met.

While there are minutes available online from the local board of education's meetings for the past three years,<sup>35</sup> these documents are light on details when it comes to school and district accountability. A number of meetings included presentations and updates that were not available online.

Table 3: **APR Scores for Selected Schools\***

	2013	2014	2015	2016
<b>Burke</b>	60.0%	68.6%	54.3%	64.3%
<b>Dobbs</b>	62.9%	42.1%	42.1%	55.0%
<b>Santa Fe</b>	49.3%	65.7%	72.9%	87.1%
<b>Smith Hale</b>	15.0%	58.0%	58.0%	58.0%
<b>Symington</b>	77.1%	65.7%	52.9%	37.1%

\* Hickman Mills Freshman Center is not included because it was created 2 years ago and DESE will report its scores after three years of data.

Source: DESE, Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. "Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5." Hickman Mills C-1, School Summary for Annual Performance Report - Public, <https://mcds.dese.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

The other performance targets include the rest of the MSIP standards (graduation rates, attendance rates, and college and career readiness) and teacher evaluation scores, for which data were not found. These targets are probably part of the district's performance contract with DESE,<sup>31</sup> but failing to meet these targets does not prompt further state action as long as Calhoun stays above the unaccredited threshold.

Only the minutes from the six most recent local board of education meetings were available online; none mentioned district performance.<sup>32</sup>

**Hickman Mills**, in the southeastern portion of Kansas City, has been provisionally accredited since 2013 and enrolls about 5,800 students, over 85 percent of whom

*Text continued on page 10*



## A TALE OF TWO DISTRICTS

Hayti, a rural district located in the bootheel of Missouri, and Jennings, a district in the St. Louis area, have a few things in common: both are high-poverty districts where 100 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, they both have majority African-American student populations, and both were provisionally accredited for an extended period.

Hayti, however, has been provisionally accredited for a decade now, while Jennings has rebounded and regained full accreditation in 2015. While neither Jennings nor Hayti reached their performance targets for 2015, Jennings was upgraded after showing consistent enough improvement for the SBE.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Jennings had a 97 percent graduation rate in for the class of 2017 and its entire graduating class was either going to college, had found a job for after graduation, or was entering the military.<sup>37</sup>

How did Jennings manage to turn around district performance while Hayti continues to struggle? Most signs point to Dr. Tiffany Anderson, the former superintendent of Jennings. Anderson took over the district in 2012 and aggressively addressed obstacles to learning created by poverty while strengthening the academic programming.<sup>38</sup>

The district now operates a homeless shelter and a food bank for students and provides access to health care and washers and dryers to families.<sup>39</sup> In addition to providing support to families in need, Anderson implemented Saturday school, a college-prep program starting in sixth grade, and a dual-credit program to help students earn college credit before leaving high school. Moreover, she addressed the district's strained budget.<sup>40</sup>

Anderson restored music, dance and drama programs that had been cut, as they so often are in high-poverty schools, finding the money for those and other innovations by closing two half-empty schools, cutting expensive administrative positions and welcoming new grants and a tide of philanthropic contributions. The district was running a deficit of \$2 million before Anderson arrived and balanced the budget.

Unlike other districts that regained accreditation, Anderson presented to the SBE "Lessons Learned" from Jennings's experience and highlighted four components of its success: better training for teachers and school leaders, wraparound services, visiting and learning from high performing schools, and "greater access to data, instructional supplies, college readiness resources, and support services."<sup>41</sup>

Jennings seems to differ from other districts in that it took aggressive steps to tackle to the underlying problems that prevented the district from making academic progress. By identifying the needs of the students and adjusting district operations accordingly, Anderson, with a considerable amount of autonomy and the help of community members, was able to put Jennings on track for academic success. While no two districts are the same—thus, their turnaround strategies will not be identical—Jennings highlights the need for energetic leadership and community involvement for any school or district to be successful.

With such different outcomes for districts that started out in similar situations, here are some questions to consider when discussing the state's accountability system:

- What kind of impact does the state have on district performance?
- Does the current accountability accurately measure district performance?
- How can the state attract more dynamic leaders and support more dramatic strategies to turn around school districts?

Additionally, in the past three years, there were two instances of the district interacting with DESE officials noted in the minutes. In February 2015, district officials presented the Five Year Strategic Plan to the Regional School Improvement Team (RSIT) but the details of the update are not provided online.<sup>42</sup> On July 15, 2017, former DESE Commissioner Dr. Margie Vandeven visited the district and presented to the local board, recommending “a focus on English and Language Arts.”<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, the full extent of the local board’s interaction with DESE is hard to determine from the board’s minutes.

**Caruthersville**, a district in the bootheel of Missouri, was classified as provisionally accredited in 2009 under MSIP 4 and then regained its accreditation in 2016 after three years of scores under MSIP 5.<sup>44</sup> The district’s presentation to the SBE in February 2015 highlighted its progress in the MSIP 5 standards and listed “research-based strategies” for improving district operations.<sup>45</sup> The district also set targets for its 2015 MAP scores, none of which were met (Table 4).

Despite these results, Caruthersville earned 51 out of 56 points possible in academic achievement and had an overall APR score of 95.7 percent for 2015. It may be the case that these targets, set by the district itself, were not part of the district’s performance contract with DESE,

so they would not be binding or affect the district’s classification. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that even when the district did not make significant progress in its MAP test results—actually getting worse in science and social studies—and did not meet its own targets, it was still rewarded with full accreditation.

The Caruthersville Board of Education’s minutes available online only go back to January 2016, right after the district was upgraded to be fully accredited.<sup>46</sup>

In addressing each of the provisionally accredited districts profiled above, the state either allowed districts to stay in provisionally accredited limbo for years, or upgraded districts that failed to meet their own targets. In none of these cases did district or school leaders face consequences for bad performance, so in that sense none of these districts were really held accountable. More state oversight and support for the districts can hardly be considered as a consequence in and of itself, especially when the state did not even ensure performance targets were met before upgrading Caruthersville and Jennings. MSIP 5 guidelines have few accountability measures for provisionally accredited districts to begin with; unfortunately, the application of these rules by DESE and the SBE failed to hold any of these districts responsible in practice.

### *Unaccredited – Option A*

Losing accreditation is supposed to be the most severe form of accountability that the state imposes on districts. When districts first become unaccredited, however, the level of state intervention is not substantially different from when they were provisionally accredited. Kansas City provides an example of a district retaining its school board and being given at most three years to fulfill its performance contract with the state before further interventions would take place.

The most significant change to a district when it becomes unaccredited is that students may

Table 4: **Performance Targets and Results: Caruthersville School District**

	ELA	Math	Science	Social Studies
<b>2014 MAP Results</b>	42.3%	38.8%	36.9%	67.1%
<b>2015 Target</b>	45.3%	42.9%	39.9%	70.1%
<b>2015 MAP Results</b>	43.5%	42.2%	35.5%	49.4%

Source for MAP Results: DESE, *Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. “Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5.” Caruthersville 18, 2015 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) - FINAL, LEA Supporting Data, MSIP 5, <https://mcds.des.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.*

transfer to a nearby accredited district at no cost to them. This law can exert significant pressure on the district if a large number of students choose to leave the district. In addition, charter schools may open in unaccredited districts if authorized by a university or the Missouri Charter Public School Commission under state law.

**Kansas City (KCPS)** was classified as unaccredited in 2012 and was upgraded to be provisionally accredited in 2014. In 2013 (and after the first APR score under MSIP 5), then-Superintendent Dr. Steve Green requested that the SBE reclassify KCPS with an APR score of 60 percent.<sup>47</sup> While DESE declined to recommend provisional accreditation for KCPS in 2013, the SBE raised KCPS's classification to provisionally accredited in 2014 after it scored 66.1 percent on the APR.<sup>48</sup>

In DESE's presentation to the SBE in August 2014, former DESE Commissioner Chris Nicastro noted the KCPS's mixed results from 2013 and 2014 APR scores.<sup>49</sup> She reported growth in English and math, improved College and Career Readiness measures, a five-percent increase in attendance rate, and an increased five-year graduation rate. On the other hand, the district's 4-year graduation rate had decreased, its scores in four out of the five standards were at "the floor" (what DESE designates as the lowest level of performance), about 70 percent of students were not at the *Proficient* level or above in each academic area, and the district had not yet established a "consistent trend of improvement." Nevertheless, the SBE voted *unanimously* to upgrade KCPS.

We should note that a legal battle delayed the transfer program from being implemented in Kansas City. Five nearby school districts, Blue Springs, Independence, Lee's Summit, North Kansas City, and Raytown, sued in an effort to stop students from transferring out of KCPS to their school districts. On December 10, 2013, the Missouri Supreme Court upheld the law and students were allowed to transfer.<sup>50</sup>

Since then, KCPS scored 63.9 percent on the 2015 APR, 70 percent in 2016, and then 63.9 percent in 2017. In the district's last presentation to the SBE in December 2016, Superintendent Dr. Mark Bedell highlighted the challenges faced by the district—including high populations of English language learners, students in poverty, and homeless students as well as a high mobility

rate (how often students change schools during the year).<sup>51</sup> To overcome these obstacles to full accreditation, KCPS said it is increasing "social and emotional supports," introducing new curriculum and technology, reaching out to the community, focusing on retaining quality teachers, and working to make the operations of the district more effective. Given the problems with the 2017 APR and the drop in KCPS's score, it is hard to determine whether the district is making progress.

### *Unaccredited – Option B*

If a district fails to improve after three years, the SBE may dissolve the local board of education and appoint a Special Administrative Board (SAB). The newly appointed SAB is authorized to oversee future contracts in the district and is given the discretion to renew or terminate existing contracts with staff and vendors.<sup>52</sup> Depending on the situation in the district, the SAB can make big or small changes to district personnel.

It is worth noting that this is the first intervention by the state that removes and replaces personnel in a local school district even after a district has been provisionally accredited for extended period of time and then unaccredited for three years after that. Under MSIP 5, it also does not specify an amount of time that a district may be under Option B before further interventions take place.

In the cases of St. Louis and Riverview Gardens, these districts were held somewhat accountable when the SBE dissolved their local boards of education. The SBE failed to hold them responsible, however, when it voted to upgrade both districts before they had met their performance targets. As the data show, both districts have improved but still continue to struggle academically.

**St. Louis (SLPS)** was classified as unaccredited in 2007, was upgraded to be provisionally accredited in 2012, and recently was granted full accreditation in January 2017.<sup>53</sup> Since SLPS lost accreditation before MSIP 5 was implemented, its local school board was dismissed and its SAB was put in place at the same time that it lost its accreditation. According to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, SLPS's SAB was "the first of its kind in Missouri" and it will remain in charge of the district until the SBE votes to return control to an elected school board.<sup>54</sup>

Table 5: **Percent of Students *Proficient or Advanced*, SLPS**

Subject	2014	2015	2016	2017
English	28.60%	33.70%	36.90%	33.90%*
Math	25.80%	22.00%	26.20%	23.40%*
Science	24.70%	28.60%	25.70%	27.30%
Social Studies	31.60%	40.10%	40.90%	38.90%

\* Scores cannot be compared with 2016 because Algebra I and English II tests were thrown out.

Source: DESE, Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. "Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5." St. Louis City, 2017 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) – FINAL, LEA Supporting Data, MSIP 5, <https://mcds.dese.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

appear to show significant progress. Consider, however, the scores on the MAP tests and the other APR standards (Tables 5 and 6).

By 2016, the last year of data the SBE considered before upgrading the district, SLPS barely improved the number of students performing at grade level in math and science. While English and social studies scores improved, these were still modest gains. Moreover, the graduation rate went down between 2015 and 2016—yet SLPS earned 100 percent of the points for graduation on the 2016 APR. Despite these results, SLPS's APR score jumped almost 33 percent between 2014 and 2015 and then almost stayed the same in 2016.

Table 6: **Selected Data from SLPS District Report Card**

	2014	2015	2016	2017
Graduation Rate	72.10	72.69	71.45	52.2
Attendance Rate	83.8	83.3	87.9	83.7
Percent of Graduates taking the ACT	70.9	74.1	85.3	85.9
Composite ACT Score	16.3	16.8	16.3	17.0

Source: DESE, Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. "Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5." St. Louis City, 2017 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) – FINAL, LEA Supporting Data, MSIP 5, <https://mcds.dese.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

The increase in SLPS's score is partially due to receiving points from Growth, not Status. It received six points for Growth in English and 12 points in math but zero points in both for Status. While districts should be commended for helping students grow academically, it is worth asking if a district where most students are not achieving at the *Proficient* or even *Basic* level is ready to be fully accredited.

Then, after only two years of scoring over 70 percent, the SBE voted *unanimously* to grant the district full accreditation for the first time since 2000, even though only about one-third of students are at the *Proficient* level in English and just one-fourth in math. Now, the

While SLPS made significant improvements in its governance and fiscal health, gains in academic areas have been much more modest over the past few years.<sup>55</sup> SLPS's APR scores—43.2 percent in 2014, 76.1 percent in 2015, 74.6 percent in 2016, and 68.2 percent in 2017—

process of transitioning power back to an elected school board has begun, although there is no DESE regulation or state law that sets out a clear procedure for the transition.<sup>56</sup> Considering that SLPS only scored 68.2 percent on the



2017 APR, however, it may be premature to return control to an elected school board before more consistent improvement has been demonstrated.

**Riverview Gardens** was upgraded to be provisionally accredited in December 2016 after losing its accreditation in 2008 and having an SAB appointed in 2010. While the SAB has the authority to renew or terminate contracts for all school staff, the SAB meeting minutes do not indicate that it made major changes—if any—to the school personnel.<sup>57</sup> As with SLPS, Riverview Gardens' SAB will remain in control of the district until at least 2019 and then may be extended if the SBE finds it necessary.<sup>58</sup>

Riverview Gardens' case highlights two issues with the accountability system: a general problem with the APR system and the SBE's dealing with the district in particular.

First, concerning the APR system in general, Riverview Gardens scored 45.4 percent in 2014, 79.3 percent in 2015, 74.6 percent in 2016, and 70.7 percent in 2017, which were similar to SLPS' APR scores. Because APR points are calculated based partially on Progress and Growth, Riverview Gardens scored as well as or higher than SLPS while having worse raw scores (Tables 7 and 8).

For Riverview Gardens, as with SLPS, progress in overall APR scores is driven mostly by Growth points, which make up for the district's scores in other areas. Riverview Gardens received all 12 Growth points in both English and math while its absolute scores remained very low.

**Table 7: Percent of Students Proficient or Advanced, Riverview Gardens**

Subject	2014	2015	2016	2017
English	16.6%	23.0%	25.0%	29.5%*
Math	14.2%	12.3%	14.0%	15.0%*
Science	7.4%	17.2%	14.4%	16.9%
Social Studies	13.3%	39.5%	44.7%	46.2%

\* Scores cannot be compared with 2016 because Algebra I and English II tests were thrown out.

Source: DESE, Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. "Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5." Riverview Gardens, 2017 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) – FINAL, LEA Supporting Data, MSIP 5, <https://mcds.dese.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

**Table 8: Selected Data from Riverview Gardens District Report Card**

	2014	2015	2016	2017
Graduation Rate	79.4	83.3	85.2	81.2
Attendance Rate	78.9	77.1	84.2	81.5
Percent of Graduates taking the ACT	56.0	62.0	79.7	84.0
Composite ACT Score	15.6	15.3	14.6	14.1

Source: DESE, Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. "Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5." Riverview Gardens, 2017 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) – FINAL, LEA Supporting Data, MSIP 5, <https://mcds.dese.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

On one level, these scores could help explain why the SBE voted to grant full accreditation to SLPS and not Riverview Gardens even though the two districts have similar APR scores. On another level, these scores

Table 9: **Performance Targets and Results, Riverview Gardens**

	English	Math	Science	Social Studies
<b>2015 MPI</b>	235.9	195.6	243.7	314.7
<b>2016 MPI Target</b>	244.9	205.2	252.7	323.7
<b>2016 MPI Actual</b>	237.7	211.5	235.3	318.4

Green indicates targets that were met.

Source for MPI Actual: DESE, *Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. "Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5." Riverview Gardens, 2016 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) - FINAL, LEA Supporting Data, MSIP 5*, <https://mcids.dese.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

highlight an issue with the APR system: Riverview Gardens scored over 70 percent for the third year in a row, so MSIP 5 guidelines suggest they are qualified to be fully accredited. Under our accountability system, it is feasible that a district where only about a quarter of students are at grade level in English and not even 20 percent in math may get the state's seal of approval.

Second, with regard to Riverview Gardens in particular, the district was upgraded without meeting its performance targets. In January 2016, DESE proposed a framework for the SBE to use to evaluate Riverview Gardens' performance before reclassifying the district. The targets include 70 percent of available points in College and Career Readiness, Attendance, and Graduation and a nine point increase in each subject on the MPI.<sup>59</sup> Table 9 shows the subject-area targets for Riverview Gardens set by DESE, along with the 2016 results.

Riverview Gardens met the targets in math, attendance, and graduation while failing to meet DESE's goals in English, science, social studies, and college and career readiness (66.7 percent of available points). When the SBE revisited Riverview Gardens in December 2016, DESE's presentation did not mention the district failing to meet these performance targets set in January and recommended the district be classified as provisionally accredited.<sup>60</sup> The SBE voted 7 to 3 to upgrade the district.<sup>61</sup>

Again, because the district earned enough Growth points, it was able to earn a good overall APR score despite missing the performance targets. If these lower-performing districts are going to rely more heavily on Growth points, then performance targets should be set in those terms and then the districts should be held to those standards.

On one hand, St. Louis and Riverview Gardens were held accountable when their local boards were replaced with SABs. On the other, the SBE chose to upgrade the districts when their levels of academic achievement were still very low. While progress and growth should be celebrated in chronically struggling districts, the APR system

can be so loose with awarding points that it is difficult to trust the accreditation levels to accurately reflect the quality of the district. It also undermines the reliability of the accountability system when the SBE is willing to upgrade districts that do not even meet their own targets.

### *Unaccredited – Option C*

If a district continues to decline academically and/or financially while under Option A or B, the SBE may deem the district to be lapsed and replace the local board or SAB with direct oversight by the SBE.

Originally under MSIP 5, districts in this category would have had "new school status," which meant they were unclassified for three years and students no longer had the right to transfer to an accredited district.<sup>62</sup> This rule was overturned, however, when the SBE tried to apply it to Normandy and a judge ruled the district had to remain unaccredited and students retained the right to transfer.<sup>63</sup>

**Normandy School District**, after two years of being unaccredited, was taken over by the SBE in 2014 and is now governed by a Joint Executive Governing Board (JEGB) with members appointed by the SBE.<sup>64</sup> Before being classified as unaccredited in 2012, Normandy had been provisionally accredited since before 2000—the earliest year DESE reports. Then, in December 2017, the

SBE voted to upgrade Normandy to be provisionally accredited.<sup>65</sup>

Since MSIP 5 was implemented and the first scores posted in 2013, Normandy has shown some improvement. In 2013, it scored 11.1 percent on the APR, 7.1 percent in 2014, 30.4 percent in 2015, 54.6 percent in 2016, and 62.5 percent in 2017. While the district is improving, its raw scores are still lacking (Tables 10 and 11).

Normandy's scores are far from satisfactory, but is the district even meeting its own goals? The JEBG presented an accountability plan to the SBE in October 2014 and set targets for 2015 and 2016 (Table 12).<sup>66</sup>

The JEBG then presented an updated accountability/strategic plan for 2016–2017 with new performance targets (Table 13).<sup>67</sup>

For the past three years, Normandy has failed to meet most of the targets set by the JEBG. In more detailed reports by the JEBG, however, month-to-month progress is still being made according to eValue assessments.<sup>68</sup> For instance, 94 percent of students were at the *Below Basic* level in math in September 2016; by March 2017, only 51 percent were *Below Basic*, 19 percent were *Basic* (up from 4 percent), 21 percent were *Proficient* (up from 2 percent), and 9 percent were *Advanced* (up from 0 percent).<sup>69</sup>

On one hand, the state certainly did hold Normandy accountable by dissolving the district's leadership and taking over operations. On the other, these interventions only came after over 12 years of the bad performance that continued to slip to dismal levels—like 94 percent of students being at the *Below Basic* level in math.

Table 10: **Percent of Students *Proficient or Advanced*, Normandy**

Subject	2014	2015	2016	2017
English	20.0%	24.4%	32.9%	34.0%*
Math	19.3%	12.3%	16.0%	19.2%*
Science	5.9%	8.1%	7.6%	11.1%
Social Studies	14.6%	10.1%	11.1%	17.4%

\* Scores cannot be compared with 2016 because Algebra I and English II tests were thrown out.

Source: DESE, Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. "Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5." Normandy Schools Collaborative, 2017 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) – FINAL, LEA Supporting Data, MSIP 5, <https://mcids.dese.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

Table 11: **Selected Data from Normandy District Report Card**

	2014	2015	2016	2017
Graduation Rate	61.7	75.9	78.8	81.0
Attendance Rate	68.2	65.2	74.3	73.4
Percent of Graduates taking the ACT	21.8	58.7	90.7	88.5
Composite ACT Score	16.1	15.3	14.5	14.8

Source: DESE, Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. "Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5." Normandy Schools Collaborative, 2017 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) – FINAL, LEA Supporting Data, MSIP 5, <https://mcids.dese.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

Furthermore, the district did not meet its academic goals last year; nevertheless, the SBE rewarded Normandy with provisional accreditation anyway. Based on the SBE's decisions regarding Normandy and other districts, it seems that these targets have little to no influence on the SBE's actions.

Table 12: **Performance Targets and Results, 2015–2016, Normandy**

	2015 Target	2015 Actual	2016 Target	2016 Actual
English*	290	242.8	298	267.1
Math*	280.7	191.4	289.5	225.6
Science*	234	229.2	246	219.2
Social Studies*	233.5	244.9	244	219.4
CCR Assessments**	48.8	34.4	48.8	33.4
Advanced Placement**	20	11.9	21.7	23.6
Postsecondary Placement**	70.4	80.0	70.4	90.2
Attendance**	79.2	65.2	79.2	74.3
Graduation**	59.7	75.9	66.7	78.8

\* Scores represented in MPI points.

\*\*Scores represented as percentages.

Green indicates targets that were met.

Postsecondary Placement is defined as the percentage of students who enrolled in college, participated in vocational training, joined the military, or had a job within 6 months of graduation.

Source for MPI Actual: DESE, *Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. "Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5."* Normandy Schools Collaborative, 2016 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) - FINAL, LEA Supporting Data, MSIP 5, <https://mcds.dese.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

If we are to trust the state to be the main institution keeping schools accountable, it cannot be so slow to respond when districts are failing to provide an adequate education for its students, nor can it rubber-stamp districts' performance if they are continuing to struggle.

### **Unaccredited – Option D**

Option D is the option of last resort; the district is formally dissolved and the students can be reassigned to adjacent districts, or the SBE may create one or more new districts within the original territory.<sup>70</sup> DESE has not used this option since implementing MSIP 5 in 2013, and

only two districts were dissolved by the state before then. **Wyaconda**, a rural K-8 district of only 35 students, was lapsed in 2008 and the students were sent to Clark County and Scotland County.<sup>71</sup> **Wellston**, which neighbored Normandy and enrolled 550 students, was dissolved in 2009 and the entire district was merged with Normandy.<sup>72</sup>

For Wellston, the state decided that it was unlikely to improve academically and it had a weak financial base that could not support the district. On top of that, the state's transfer law, which mandates that the home district pay for students' tuition to go to another district, exacerbated the district's debt problem.<sup>73</sup> There were also criticisms of merging the district with the already-struggling Normandy, which lost accreditation only a few years after accepting Wellston's students.<sup>74</sup>

The transfer law and dissolving poor-performing school districts are both ways in which districts are held accountable in a meaningful way but, they can bring about unintended consequences. The transfer law requires that the unaccredited district pay tuition and transportation costs set by the receiving districts—albeit

with some limits set by the state—which can strain districts that are already financially stressed.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, merging two poor-performing districts, as in the case of Wellston and Normandy, can put the remaining district in a tough spot. If students are to continue attending residentially assigned schools, the state must prioritize the needs of students in underperforming districts in its accountability policies while avoiding counterproductive measures that can make their schools worse.



## A BETTER WAY

Based on how the state has dealt with these struggling districts, it becomes clear that the current system does not actually hold schools or districts accountable for underperformance. As mentioned before, this paper is not meant to be a comprehensive account of the accountability system given the limited state and local documents available. Rather, it is meant to present examples of how the state has dealt with poor-performing districts and facilitate a broader conversation about school accountability. Several districts mentioned above were able to remain in the limbo of provisional accreditation for years without ever tangibly improving student outcomes. Others were able to improve their accreditation distinction without substantially moving the bottom line of their students' performance.

One could argue that the transfer law—which is not even a part of DESE's formal accountability system—is a better form of accountability because it gives students a choice to leave their struggling schools. While this only applies to public school districts when they are unaccredited, this is the constant state of accountability for charter and private schools. If parents are not satisfied with their child's school, they go elsewhere. Thus, these schools must provide a quality education or risk losing students and potentially closing if enough choose to leave. Unfortunately, students in the public school system only gain the right to transfer when their home district is unaccredited. Ideally, students should be able to change schools whenever they think it is necessary, not when the state says they may.

So all of this raises a question: How could we do a better job of holding schools accountable? I'd like to offer five elements of an improved accountability system:

1. **Transparency:** More transparency from DESE and local boards on accountability processes would benefit everyone—parents, policymakers, and researchers—involved in education policy. For instance, DESE should publish its performance contracts with districts so the public can know exactly what is expected of these districts. In addition, more detailed and readily available board documents would give outside observers a clearer picture of what steps local

Table 13: **Performance Targets and Results, 2017, Normandy**

	2017 Target	2017 Actual
English*	300	265.3
Math*	300	239.7
Science*	260	228.5
Social Studies*	260	251.5
CCR Assessments**	38.6	34.6
Advanced Placement**	28.3	17.1
Postsecondary Placement**	93.2	99.4
Attendance**	79.2	73.4
Graduation**	85.4	81

\* Scores represented in MPI points.

\*\*Scores represented as percentages.

Green indicates targets that were met.

Postsecondary Placement is defined as the percentage of students who enrolled in college, participated in vocational training, joined the military, or had a job within 6 months of graduation.

Source for MPI Actual: DESE, *Missouri Comprehensive Data System, District Info. "Annual Performance Report (APR): MSIP 5."* Normandy Schools Collaborative, *2017 LEA Annual Performance Report (APR) – FINAL, LEA Supporting Data, MSIP 5*, <https://mcds.dese.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

boards are taking to improve their districts. School and district performance data should also be easy to understand and more accessible for parents and families. Better accountability begins with better information.

2. **Aligning Targets and Goals:** Performance targets should be aligned to how districts can score points on the Academic Achievement standard. While having targets for proficiency rates is fine, if a district is going

to gain most of their points from Growth, they should have growth-specific targets in their performance contracts too. Creating more consistency between the APR scoring system and the performance contracts would help ensure that districts cannot disregard performance targets because they score enough APR points in a different category.

3. **The State Board Should Keep Its Word:** Given some of the recurring problems with unmet targets, the SBE should uphold the performance contracts and targets before upgrading districts. In the case of Riverview Gardens, DESE set performance targets, the district did not meet them, and the SBE voted to upgrade the district anyway. The SBE must follow through with performance contracts and not be too hasty in reaccrediting districts; otherwise, the accountability system cannot effectively hold districts to a high standard.
4. **Limiting Limbo:** Districts should not be able to stay in the provisionally accredited limbo for an extended period. The state should set a limit—perhaps three or five years—on how long a district can be provisionally accredited before it is reaccredited or loses accreditation, similar to a charter school’s contract. This would protect students from being stuck in “just good enough” schools for an indefinite number of years: Either their district is improving, or they can exercise the right the transfer.
5. **Choice:** We should also recognize that there are more fundamental problems with relying on districts and the state for school accountability. As a school or district gets worse, the state gets more involved and the primary decision-makers become even more removed from the students in failing schools. At the same time, as long as students are compelled to go to schools according to their ZIP code, this system will be necessary as a quality control measure. The better alternative is a choice-based education system. This would allow parents to quickly respond to worsening schools by sending their child elsewhere instead of waiting five or ten years for the state’s accountability measures to lead to modest improvements. Making schools continuously improve and compete for students is the strongest form of accountability.

Nevertheless, there are problems with the current accountability system that feasibly could be fixed when MSIP 6 is finalized. Instead of primarily focusing on test-based measures like MSIP 5, MSIP 6 will include Academic Achievement, Success-Ready Graduates, Climate and Culture, Effective Educators, and Instructional Practices, and Effective and Stable Leadership and Governances as its standards.<sup>76</sup> This may be a step in the right direction or it may make the system too subjective; only time will tell.

## CONCLUSION

If accountability is defined as tangible consequences for district and school personnel, were the districts profiled here actually held accountable by the state? Based on DESE’s policies and the SBE’s actions, I would argue that at most only the unaccredited districts were held accountable, whereas provisionally accredited districts—regardless if they were provisionally accredited for an extended period of time—were not held accountable in any meaningful way.

For years, the state has allowed provisionally accredited districts to idle without facing any meaningful sanctions—to the detriment of their students, who do not have the right to transfer or the means to attend a charter or private school. When Caruthersville and Jennings did regain accreditation, they had not even met the performance targets they established. If the state will not hold these districts to the low bar they set for themselves, claims of accountability ring hollow.

Even when a district is first unaccredited and students may transfer, as in the case of Kansas City, all district personnel remains and the districts’ budget is only impacted if students choose to leave. Moreover, based on available board documents, it is not clear that the SABs for St. Louis and Riverview Gardens or the JEGB for Normandy made any significant changes to existing school staff when they took over the districts, despite having the authority over their contracts. Later, however, Riverview Gardens had to implement a hiring freeze and Normandy closed one elementary school while firing about 100 teachers and other staff because of the budget constraints caused by the transfer of tuition payments.<sup>77</sup> These layoffs, then, were a result of the transfer law, not the accountability system itself.

In short, the state held six districts accountable to varying degrees in the last decade. Given that there are 517 districts in the state, this represents only a tiny sliver of districts (although a larger proportion of students, since some of these were larger districts). This wouldn't be so troubling if we weren't seeing such disheartening patterns in student achievement across the state and below-average performance overall. Should less than 1 percent of districts—which educated about 5 percent of Missouri's students—be the only ones to be held accountable?

If you take nothing else away from this paper, I hope it causes you to question the strength of the public school accountability system in Missouri and to question the assumption that public schools are held responsible for their performance in some meaningful way, whereas schools of choice are not. It is true that charter schools and private schools do not have the same accountability regulations as traditional public schools, but this does not mean there is *less* accountability for charter and private schools. In some ways, they are held more accountable either through performance contracts with authorizers or parents choosing to enroll their children elsewhere.

Proponents of school choice argue that markets powered by choice are an even better source of accountability because schools must answer directly to parents—who may take their government funding with them to a different school. As is seen with the transfer law, when students are given the opportunity to leave failing schools, they will take it. Moreover, students' ability to move between schools puts pressure on school leaders to improve their schools enough to encourage students to come back. This is real accountability and is the only way to ensure that schools will meet the needs of the children in their care.

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## NOTES

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