



TESTIMONY

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HOUSE BILL 2652: CHANGES PROCEDURES AND PRACTICES FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

By Susan Pendergrass

Testimony before the Missouri House Elementary and Secondary
Education Committee

TO THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THIS COMMITTEE

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Susan Pendergrass, Ph.D., and I am Director of Research and 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 and are offered in consideration of proposals that will affect charter schools in Missouri.

Missouri has 518 school districts, and 512 of them are fully accredited under the Missouri accountability system known as the Missouri

School Improvement Plan (MSIP) 5. How is it possible that 98.8 percent of districts in Missouri are fully accredited? There were no fewer than twenty school districts in which fewer than 20 percent of students scored Proficient or higher in math in 2018–19 (the latest year for which usable data are available). There were 23 districts in which fewer than 30 percent of students scored Proficient or higher in English/language arts (ELA) in that same year.

Take, for example, the Charleston R-I district. In 2018–19, just nine percent of students scored at the Proficient level or higher in math and 25 percent did so in ELA. Charleston R-I had below-average Growth scores in both math and ELA. According to its Annual Performance Report the

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district also missed its Progress targets. A system in which 99 percent of districts are fully accredited—including districts like Charleston R-I—is not an accountability system at all.

Further, the federal law that appropriates federal education funds to states, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), requires that states “meaningfully differentiate between schools and districts.” MSIP 5 clearly does not currently do that and MSIP 6 is unlikely to do so. MSIP 6 continues the practice of allowing districts to get points for progress towards a measure, and the progress points are entirely extra credit. For example, out of a possible 100 points, districts can get up to 10 points for their students being “success ready,” as measured by things such as attending school, filling out an individualized career plan after exploring various careers, or demonstrating work ethic and character. As nebulous as those measures are, a perfect score is worth 10 points, even though a district can earn up to 10 status points and 7.5 progress points. In fact, these same measures are used for an additional 6 points (out of a possible 10 points) to count toward a district’s compliance with its Continuous Improvement Plan. These points are based on self-reported district efforts to provide five specified options for student success.

Unlike the accountability system outlined in HB 2652, in which at least 80 percent of a district’s accreditation would be based on assessments, just 48 percent of the possible points for accreditation under MSIP 6 will be based on academic achievement, as measured by status and growth. In fact, under MSIP 6, Local Education Agencies (LEAs)

will be assessed on nearly 25 measures, most of which have further breakdowns into a half-dozen categories. The points are spread so thinly that districts can overcome severe academic deficiencies by addressing the various other categories.

Missouri has an opportunity to create a new accountability system that truly holds districts and schools accountable for academic performance. A state accountability system should be simple, transparent, and easy for any parent to understand. The Comprehensive Guide to MSIP 6 requires 142 pages to describe how districts will be assessed.

But the most important reason that the legislature should send the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) back to the drawing board to create such a plan is that the existing system can be completely overridden. There is a telling statement in the new MSIP 6 Comprehensive Guide. Ultimately, DESE looks at the data and makes a recommendation on accreditation for each district. “Recommendations are made based on the Accreditation Score, score trends, previous department MSIP findings, financial status, statutory and regulatory compliance, and the employment of an appropriately certificated superintendent of schools.” In the end, DESE decides which districts are accredited and which are not. Parents of students in very low-performing, yet fully accredited, districts will continue to be misled.



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