



TESTIMONY

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SENATE BILL 5: ALLOWS THE ENROLLMENT OF NONRESIDENT STUDENTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

By Susan Pendergrass

Testimony before the Missouri Senate 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 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 all public schools in Missouri.

While Missouri has been expanding the types of school choice available in the state in recent years, existing programs only reach a small percentage of Missouri families. Charter schools are available in only three of nearly 520 school districts, and just 25,000 of our 850,000 public school students attend charter schools. The newly implemented MO Scholars

ESA program can only accommodate a few thousand students. And while virtual programming is now available to all students, only a few thousand students have determined it is the right fit for them. A simple solution to this problem is to let families choose the best school within a reasonable distance from their home or work, regardless of school district lines. Theoretically, SB 5 would accomplish this, but there are several provisions that could be improved.

The first is that all school districts should be compelled to participate. Allowing districts to opt out of accepting transfer students greatly limits options for students. Open-enrollment surveys routinely find that open-enrollment students tend to move from low-performing districts to high-performing ones. If the high-performing districts refuse to open their doors, students will be stuck in the same way they are without the program.

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Secondly, an application deadline of December for students who wish to transfer is unreasonable. Families should be able to make these decisions until at least mid-spring.

Finally, the bill does not make the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) responsible for tracking and disseminating data regarding student participation. The legislation should include a provision for the creation and maintenance of a website with application, acceptance/rejection, and participation data by district, school, and student subgroup.

CONCLUSION

If the COVID-19 pandemic has proven anything, it's that students need to keep learning—and that often requires providing them at least one alternative to their assigned public school. By creating a strong program that allows Missouri students to cross district lines, the legislature could give families access to additional programming and additional learning environments without requiring them to move out of their homes.



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