



TESTIMONY

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SENATE BILL 728: PARENTS' BILL OF RIGHTS

By David Stokes

**Testimony before the Missouri Senate Education and Workforce
Development Committee**

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony. My name is David Stokes, and I am the director of municipal policy for the Show-Me Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, Missouri-based think tank that supports free-market solutions for state policy. The ideas presented here are my own.

When reformers talk about transparency in government, one thing we often compare it to is sunlight. As the saying goes, “sunlight is the best disinfectant,” meaning that when government actions are exposed to the judgment of the public, government and its bureaucrats tend to behave better. On the one hand, government excesses are easier to detect; on the other, a culture of transparency signals to bureaucrats that wrongdoing will be known, and thus the wrongdoing is less likely to happen.

For years, the Show-Me Institute has advocated for transparency at both

the state and local levels, sending thousands of Sunshine Law requests to government entities to see how billions of dollars of tax money were being spent, to discover and review the terms of labor contracts the state sometimes didn't know existed, and to ensure that government was generally conducting itself in honorable and appropriate ways.

When the Institute started exploring curricula amidst public concerns about dubious instructional content in K-12 schools, we were startled to find that, contrary to representations by the governor and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, critical race theory (CRT) content was appearing in curricula across the state. Whatever the reason for those misrepresentations—whether they were made intentionally or arose from ignorance—it's clear that taxpayers and parents need their rights to direct and oversee Missouri schools reaffirmed in substantive ways.

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State policymakers have an obligation to ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent with the stewardship of the public interest in mind. In the context of schools and districts, transparency of teaching, spending, and performance are fundamental guideposts to establishing whether Missouri's K-12 educational system is functioning as intended—not only providing the opportunity for the state to assess its investments in education, but offering parents a clearer view on whether other educational options might better serve their children. “School choice” is an end unto itself for improving student outcomes, but educational transparency ensures that parents also have informed school choice—that they are able to clearly compare educational options without undue foot-dragging or interference from local education bureaucrats.

Lastly, for those of you who may have a general bias toward schools and districts against the prerogatives of the state, I empathize with your tendency toward local control. But “local control” is one means to achieving small, efficient, and effective government, not its end. Like President Ronald Reagan once said, trust is not enough when it comes to government—sometimes you also have to “verify” that it’s following through on its promises.

This Parents’ Bill of Rights will help to ensure promises and representations about our K-12 schooling are verified, and that’s a needed improvement for parents, taxpayers, districts, and the state itself. Let the sunshine in.



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