



Commentary

The Honorable Brian L. Baker
Missouri State Representative

For 10 years Missouri has worked under the idea that the best way to fund education is to look at the taxing ability and tax demographics of a local district and then decide how much state aid should be provided to schools.

However, the ideology of that formula and its components caused the funding system to grow out of control. The formula was flawed in that it did not look at student need or student success. One must also remember that the past funding model was simply that—a model—with no basis for accounting for student need or assessment.

Missouri has undertaken a 180-degree change in its method of funding education. Instead of looking at numbers and tax abilities of districts, it now looks at student need and student success.

Today, Missouri—like many states—is facing a lawsuit by school districts claiming that the state is not equitably or adequately funding education. This group of 250 school districts claims this lawsuit has driven the state to make changes.

This is not the truth. The process to review and rewrite the formula began before the lawsuit was filed. In fact, an interim committee headed by State Senator Charlie Shields traveled the state to start collecting input before the school districts united in their lawsuit.

Further, in the development of the new formula, not one major education group testified against the “Successful Schools Funding Model.” These groups offered small changes and ideas, but overall supported the direction of the new formula.

Beginning in 1993, this foundation formula took four years to be fully phased in. This new for-

mula, because of its sweeping change in direction, will take seven years to fully phase in, but will add an additional \$900 million to education in that time period.

Still, school districts claim it is not enough.

Today, the 250 school districts suing the state are asking for \$2 billion in new tax revenue. Many of the school districts hope the lawsuit will create a Robin Hood approach where growing districts with large local effort will send their local tax dollars to small and poor districts. This method of funding schools was ruled unconstitutional in Texas.

It is apparent that the 250 school districts suing the state are dealing with several conflicts within their own group. It would even seem that the lawyer representing these school districts is facing a conflict of interest with these school districts.

Other schools want the state to invest \$1 billion in new taxes to help build schools. However, Missouri has always allowed local school districts to fund buildings with local dollars. Very few states can or will invest dollars in buildings.

Missouri is unlike every other state that has faced a lawsuit regarding funding. Voters approved a state constitutional measure that requires the state to spend 25 percent of its funds on education. Missouri is exceeding that mandate.

Missouri has seen its student population flatline in the past five years while education funding has increased 10 percent in that same time period.

Every state that has faced a lawsuit has seen the judicial branch favor the school districts’ claims. However, in Arkansas, when school districts won their lawsuit, the legislature developed the political

Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis *Regional Economic Development*, 2006, 2(1), pp. 66-67.

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willpower to consolidate districts. School districts truly risk a worse scenario as they seek a judicial action.

In the end, one very important question needs to be addressed. Which branch of government is responsible for funding and defining what education needs? Even if the judicial branch were to favor the school districts involved in the lawsuit, how will the courts enforce any of their rulings? The day is coming where the authority of the judicial branch on the legislature will be challenged.

Missouri's new funding formula moves away from the practice of basing funding on the taxing capacity or tax demographics of a school district. Instead, it looks at the annual performance report of school districts and finds the average spending of the districts that score a perfect 100 percent. Then, it weights the needs of special education, poor students, and English proficiency students. It takes into account the cost of living and the local funding effort of a school district.

The Successful Schools Funding Model looks at student success and student need to account for the state input into education. It allows for growth and works to continue providing an adequate and equitable education for students.

Missouri faces many challenges. Yet, amidst the arguments facing education, Missouri has developed a legitimate and sound funding model that truly address equity and adequacy.