
River's Edge Policy Institute

A Forum of Lindenwood University

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The erosion of local control of public school systems

Missourians have always claimed to be fiercely independent when it comes to control of our elementary and secondary schools. We have the opportunity to elect our school board members, attend board meetings, participate in parent-teacher organizations, volunteer at schools, and generally take the level of interest we desire in the operations of our local school districts. While we may seldom exercise these rights, we have always felt the major decisions affecting the education of our young people were made locally by our elected board members and the superintendent employed by the board.

During most of our history, that has been the case. The education bureaucracy in the state capitol was small, and the role of the State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education was largely clerical and administrative. Its purpose was to distribute public funding, maintain teacher certification records, and provide support for boards and superintendents in their efforts to manage good school systems. But during the past 30 years, there has been a steady shift of decision-making authority from locally elected boards of education to state education officers. The power shift accelerated dramatically in 1993 with the passage of the Outstanding Schools Act. While the Act brought additional tax dollars to public schools, it also included additional regulations designed to punish those districts that did not meet specific expectations.

The Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP) has mandated prescriptive rules on a wide variety of practices and standardized those practices in every school district in the state. As a result, standards dictate to school boards how many administrators they must hire, how many students can be assigned to one counselor, and how many librarians must be employed. It also created an extensive program of "curriculum frameworks" that districts are expected either to use or spend a great deal of time and money developing on their own. Most recently, the state education officials have proposed that students must pass state-mandated tests in order to receive a state-approved diploma.

While educators and parents may find merit in some of the new regulations, there can be little doubt that the concept of local control of education is rapidly evaporating. The transfer of decision-making authority is quite evident. The loss of local control is a fact.

With the transfer of decisions from local to state control, one looks for evidence that students are better off for it. Has all this input from experts resulted in significant improvement in our school systems? How can it be measured?

In the first place, the four-year drop-out rate of students from high school has remained consistent for 30 years. It has hovered around 25 percent since 1970.

Performance on student tests could be one way to measure the accomplishments of our public school students. However, the state-mandated testing process has changed so regularly that it is not possible to compare achievement from one period to the next. We have gone through the Basic Essential Skills Test (BEST), the Missouri Mastery and Achievement Test (MMAT), and now the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP), all in the last 20 years. This constant changing of assessment tools makes comparability over a period of time nearly impossible.

Many Missouri college-bound students take the American College Test. Average test scores on the ACT in Missouri, while somewhat above the national average, have also been consistent over a 30-year period.

Even those that favor local control would probably accept additional state regulation if there were evidence that it was good for students. However in spite of the massive regulatory efforts of the past two decades, there simply is no objective evidence to suggest that our public schools are better off for it.

Perhaps it is time to reverse the trend. Perhaps locally elected school board members should be given greater leeway in defining the mission of their schools and expected achievement of their own students. Perhaps the role of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education should be returned to supporting those efforts and providing assistance to those districts that struggle to achieve successful outcomes for their young people. Why not return the authority to the local level, where elected schools boards, superintendents, and teachers can again influence the education of young people in the community? Let's give local control a fresh start.

Let the dollars follow the student

BY DENNIS SPELLMANN

Lindenwood University President

Few Missourians are aware that some of their tax dollars are used to help underwrite the college education of a number of out-of-state students who study at Missouri colleges and universities. Even fewer taxpayers know that only 20 percent of our own academically qualified, need-eligible Missouri students who apply for a Missouri Student Grant will receive one.

At the same time we assist out-of-state students with our tax dollars, we are turning away 80 percent of qualified Missouri students who apply for the Missouri Student Grant, because the program is so poorly funded and because our funding priorities are misplaced.

I do not question the importance of promoting diversity in our colleges and universities. Students from many lands and many cultures and students from diverse racial and ethnic groups who study and learn together provide a richer educational environment. But the price of enticing talented students beyond the borders of our state is too high as long as four out of five academically qualified and need-eligible Missouri students are turned away in their quest for Missouri student grant assistance.

The Missouri Student Grant Program has been providing grants for eligible Missouri students since 1973. To receive the grants, students must demonstrate a financial need as determined by the Federal Needs Analysis Formula (a formula which Congress reviews every five years) and attend or plan to attend an approved Missouri public or private post secondary institution full-time.

Funding for the MSGP comes from state general revenue appropriations, federal appropriations from the State Student Incentive Grant Program and private sources. Yet, as we have pointed out, existing funding levels from this combination of state, federal and private sources are sufficient to serve only some 20 percent of applicants who are eligible for this need-based grant program. (Source, Coordinating Board for Higher Education Report, Dec. 12, 1996.)

The Missouri Coordinating Board for Higher Education has recently sponsored a series of forums across the state to inform Missourians about the "Blueprint for Missouri Higher Education." In

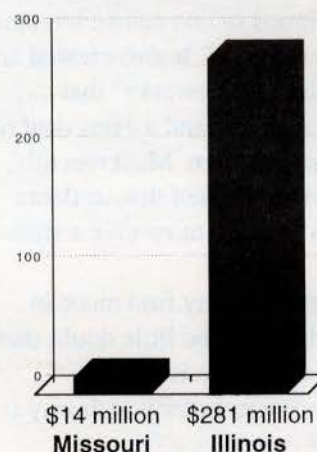
describing its points of discussion at the forums, the very first goal the Coordinating Board listed was its efforts to "promote access." (CBHE News, Jan. 1997)

Access for whom? Is not our first obligation to promote and enhance access for Missouri students? The best way to achieve the "Blueprint" goal for promoting access is to put Missouri students first now and to fully fund the Missouri Student Grant Program.

Following World War II, the G.I. Bill was one of the most successful programs ever in increasing the educational level of our nation. President Harry S. Truman supported that bill, and surely he would support the notion that we should be funding Missouri students, not institutions.

Any increases in funding for higher education in Missouri should be invested in the state's students, not the state's institutions. Doing this would freeze funding for existing tax-supported institutions at a sizable subsidy level, and any funding increases would be based on increases in the number of Missouri students an institution could attract. Let the dollars follow the students to whatever college or university they choose to attend. Whenever freedom of choice is a viable option, all competitive enterprises, including colleges and universities, have a built-in incentive to provide the highest quality of service possible for the dollars they receive.

Each year, we are pouring more and more tax dollars into institutions, many of which are educating fewer and fewer students. The time has come to put our tax money where it counts the most. The greatest need is for funding the Missouri Student Grant Program. We cannot afford to help educate children from afar until we first take care of our own. Put Missouri students *first*.



1997 budget allocations for the Missouri and Illinois student grant programs.

(As of July 1, 1997, Missouri's estimated population was 5,422,197 and Illinois' estimated population was 11,868,356.)

Who controls teacher education programs?

During the past several years, a quiet dispute has been evolving in the back rooms of the higher education establishment. The debate has been over the appropriate role of the state in the regulation of teacher preparation programs in Missouri. That debate is now becoming a major skirmish, as more Missourians become aware of the importance of the discussion.

During most of our history, the responsibility for teacher preparation programs rested with the colleges and universities. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education served as a depository of information on teacher certification but left to the colleges and universities the major decisions regarding admission to the teacher education program, the course content and certification requirements.

That passive attitude changed abruptly in the mid 1980s

when DESE aggressively began to regulate the 34 teacher preparation programs in Missouri. Developing very prescriptive regulations, DESE officials threatened some colleges with closure unless changes were made. The resulting conflict, with threats of litigation, caused the department to put the process on hold until a new set of standards and procedures was written. A draft of the new plan was recently submitted to the State Board of Education for its consideration.

Critics of the new plan claim that the new standards and procedures are highly subjective, will require a massive amount of additional paperwork and bear little relationship to the legitimate measures of a successful teacher preparation program. They complain that important segments of the education community were left out of the planning (school

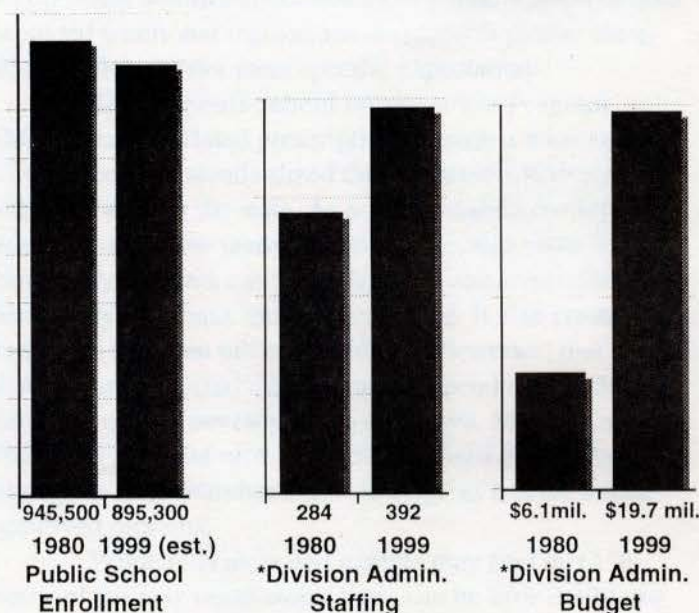
board members, superintendents, principals, classroom teachers, parents, legislators and local district tax payers, as well as higher education officials outside the Schools of Education).

They also voice concerns that the review teams that will judge teacher education programs are largely made up of college professors from competing institutions. There is also a fear that the new plan will force teacher preparation program to standardize in order to secure approval and that the creative efforts of an institution will be discouraged out of concern that they will have a negative impact on the approval process.

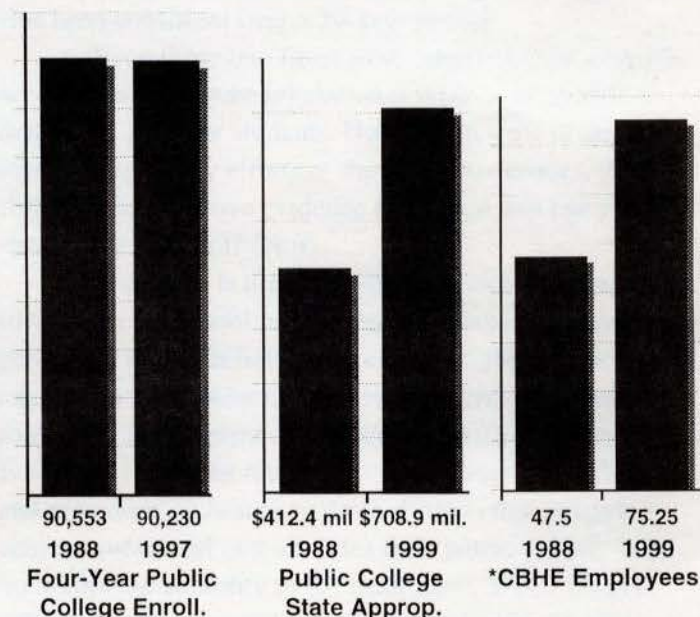
These critics believe that school districts should have a variety of institutions from which to recruit their teachers and that the ultimate success of teacher preparation programs is measured

(Continued, page 4)

DESE Comparisons, 1980-1999



CBHE Statistical Comparisons, 1988-1999



* Staffing and budget for administration of four divisions serving PK-12 Education (Administration, Instruction, Urban Education & Vocational Education). Sources: Mo. State Budget FY 1982 and DESE budget request FY 1999.

* Excluding state library personnel. Sources: Mo. State Budget FY 1990 and CBHE budget plan FY 1999 and CBHE 1997-98 Statistical Summary.

Lindenwood University River's Edge Policy Institute *Mission Statement*

The River's Edge Policy Institute is a non-profit, non-partisan forum for interested citizens and organizations committed to the premise that decisions regarding educational programs and policy should be made at the governing levels nearest the consumer as feasible and that common sense should prevail in addressing issues related to educational planning, service delivery and policy-making.

The institute, through its publications and public forums, will explore a variety of issues related to educational topics that will impact on Missouri students, educational institutions, legislation and taxpayers.

For additional information, contact:

Dr. Larry Doyle
Lindenwood University Education Center
209 S. Kingshighway
St. Charles, MO 63301
(314) 916-1905, or fax (314) 916-1906

Control

Continued from page 3

by the graduates' ability to succeed on the job during the first year of teaching.

The upcoming battle for control of teacher preparation programs will pit DESE staff and education professors against other education groups, including school board members and superintendents, classroom teachers, parents and college executives outside schools of education. The outcome will be critical to the future preparation of Missouri teachers.

Since the State Board of Education is now considering adoption of this new plan, citizens should make themselves knowledgeable of the issues and make their views known to the state board at this time.

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River's Edge Policy Institute

Dr. Larry Doyle – Executive Director
209 S. Kingshighway
St. Charles, MO 63301

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