



School Transfer Law Should Include Private School Option, Lawmakers Say

By Dale Singer

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Despite opposition from a coalition of Missouri school groups, a bipartisan panel of lawmakers said Friday that to win passage, school transfer legislation needs to include the option of non-sectarian private schools.

State Sens. John Lamping, R-Ladue, and Maria Chappelle-Nadal, D-University City, along with House Speaker Tim Jones, R-Eureka, discussed the issue at a forum on tax-credit scholarships. With three weeks left in the legislative session, a transfer bill that passed overwhelmingly in the Senate is now moving through the House.

One of its many provisions allows students who live in unaccredited school districts to transfer to an accredited non-sectarian private school in the same district. Tuition for the students would be paid only out of the district's locally generated funds, not state funds.

Presently, in the two unaccredited districts in St. Louis County – Normandy and Riverview Gardens – only one such private school exists, in Riverview Gardens.

The private school option prompted strong debate in the Senate before the [bill](#) passed in February on a vote of 27-5, and it stirred discussion when it was presented to a House committee this week. One effort to have the provision removed was defeated, but others are expected when the bill reaches the House floor.

On Thursday, the Education Roundtable – made up of several Missouri statewide school groups representing teachers, administrators, school boards and PTAs – issued a statement strongly denouncing the idea.

“The student transfer bill approved by the House Elementary and Secondary Education Committee is essentially a voucher bill that would allow students in unaccredited school districts to transfer to private schools at public expense,” it said.

“This represents a radical and unconstitutional use of public money to subsidize private schools that are not accountable to the public. The committee also missed an opportunity to provide a proactive approach in providing assistance and resources to struggling districts, before they become unaccredited.”

But the lawmakers at Friday’s panel discussion, sponsored by the Show-Me Institute, said the private school option is one tool of many to help students in unaccredited districts.

Chappelle-Nadal, who also is a member of the University City school board, said she once was against such an option. But, she said, her experience as a transfer student herself, living in St. Louis and going to Clayton schools, has helped shape her opinions.

Now, she added, she has been particularly moved by students in Normandy and Riverview Gardens who originally transferred to accredited districts, then decided to come back to their home schools even though they were unaccredited. She does not want them to be stuck without options if they want to be close to home.

“I’m looking at the behavior of my students who are willingly going back to an unaccredited school district,” she said in an interview after the forum. “If they are willingly doing that, I want them to have options. I’m not saying all those options are great, but what they’re in right now is not great at all.”

'What's the alternative?'

At the panel discussion, Lamping criticized the educational establishment in Missouri, calling it “the single strongest lobby in the Capitol, bar none.” He said that many Democrats and rural Republicans generally follow the policies that the school groups adopt, making it difficult to pass changes in education policy.

“The education establishment is quite comfortable with nothing happening,” Lamping said.

Jones said that after the transfers from Normandy and Riverview Gardens that began this school year, and the prospect of more transfers if additional districts lose their accreditation, some changes have to be made.

“What’s the alternative?” he asked. “Doing more of the same? That’s what we’ve been doing, and we have more and more unaccredited schools, not less.”

Estimating the chances of passing a bill at 60-70 percent before lawmakers adjourn May 16, Jones said:

“I wish I could say higher, but we don’t have a good track record on this.... I think we have to

pass something. There truly is a crisis. Something has to be done to advance the ball down the field.”

Chappelle-Nadal seemed more confident that a bill would be sent to Gov. Jay Nixon. “There is not going to be a bill without a private option,” she said flatly.

And, she added, those who are not in favor of transfers to non-sectarian private schools have to be willing to compromise for the sake of achieving a larger goal.

“What I have said to all of my constituents,” she said, “is that you can get 70 percent or you can get zero. And for those who strictly want the local private option out, they will be getting zero. They are the minority vote.”

As far as concerns that the private-school option is tantamount to a voucher system, Chappelle-Nadal said:

“A voucher uses state money and you redeem money back from the state. There is no state money involved in this bill when it comes to the local private option. It’s local money. . . . Local private option is not a voucher. Those people who call it a voucher are not educated enough on what a voucher is.”

Asked whether the local private option would open the door to vouchers, she replied:

“We have a short-term goal that is immediate, and we have a long-term goal. And we’re going to be fixing the educational system for some years. But right now, we need to address the options for students in unaccredited districts right now. That’s the most immediate thing.”

The lawmakers aren’t the only ones wrestling with what changes should be made to Missouri schools. The state board of education, and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, have spent time coming up with a plan to deal with underperforming districts, but their efforts will be shaped by any bill that comes out of the General Assembly.

In an [interview last week](#) with the St. Louis American, Chris Nicastro, commissioner of elementary and secondary education, said there would be problems with vouchers because of the Blaine Amendment to the Missouri constitution, which bars the use of public money for faith-based schools.

But, she added, a transfer option to non-sectarian schools may be palatable.

“Some only want vouchers for non-sectarian schools,” she said, “and that appeases some people. We may be in a position where we have to take the worst among a bunch of bad solutions in order to get things done.”

Tax-credit scholarships

The first part of the forum, held at Lindenwood University, dealt with tax-credit scholarship programs in Arizona and New Hampshire. Under such programs, taxpayers or corporations donate money to scholarship organizations and receive a tax credit in return. The scholarship groups then give the money to families for students to use at private schools.

Because the money is never directly handled by government, said Jason Bedrick of the Cato Institute, the funds shouldn't be considered tax dollars.

A former legislator in New Hampshire, Bedrick added that such scholarships can provide better schooling for students who live in poor areas because they "break the link between housing and education."

He said a survey in New Hampshire shows that families are strongly satisfied with the private schools where they have used the scholarship funds and most agree that their students have improved academically.

Jonathan Butcher, education director of the Goldwater Institute in Arizona, which has the nation's oldest tax-credit scholarship program, set out a five-point plan for any state that wants to set up a similar effort:

- Every child should have the chance for an excellent education
- Donors should get a dollar-for-dollar tax credit
- Private schools should be required to report standardized test results to an independent researcher
- Government agencies should keep track of how many students are using the scholarships
- Donors cannot be allowed to specify which students can benefit for their contributions

The biggest factor in favor of the programs, Butcher said, is that they are completely voluntary on the part of the donors and the students. "No one is compelled to do anything," he said.

Survey results

Also presented at the forum were the first numbers from a survey on school choice conducted in February and March by the Friedman Foundation in Indianapolis.

Among the highlights:

- 56 percent of respondents, and 64 percent in St. Louis, think education in Missouri is on the wrong track
- 41 percent rate education in Missouri as good or excellent, including 34 percent in St. Louis
- 62 percent favor a school voucher system
- 67 percent in Missouri favor tax-credit scholarships including 64 percent in St. Louis
- If they had a choice, 39 percent of respondents would choose private schools, 32 would choose traditional public schools, 11 percent would choose charters and 10 percent would choose home schooling

The full survey results are set to be released next month.