



# Education leaders to spar over Stream’s school transfer bill

February 21, 2014 / by Collin Reischman, Managing Editor / 0 Comment

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — A bill filed in the Missouri House that would change how the state handles students in unaccredited school districts is likely to be the site of a contentious debate this session as lawmakers and educators continue to solve the state’s student transfer problem.

House Budget Chairman, Rep. Rick Stream, R-Kirkwood, has filed a wide-ranging bill that he sees as the first step toward a solution to the transfer problem. State law and a recent court ruling say that students in unaccredited districts may transfer to superior schools in the area at the cost of their home school. The ruling has caused some chaos as hundreds of students from Normandy and Riverview Gardens school districts transfer to schools like Francis Howell, Kirkwood and Mehlville.

Normandy is teetering on bankruptcy, citing the massive cost of paying the receiving district’s far higher tuition rate. Receiving districts say the influx of students has caused its own share of confusion.



More than a dozen bills have been filed in the House and Senate with a broad range of solutions for the transfer issue. Stream’s bill, however, has strong backing from House Speaker Tim Jones, R-Eureka, and is the most likely vehicle for any reform package in the House.

Stream’s bill would accredit schools by individual building, rather than by district, cap tuition rates for sending districts at 70% of the receiving district tuition rate, create a statewide schools achievement district for unaccredited schools, and require proof of residency for any unaccredited student looking to transfer. The bill would also allow students to transfer to private, non-sectarian schools if other options are unavailable and expands access for unaccredited students to attend charter schools.



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*Rep. Rick Stream* The bill highlights a battle taking place in Missouri for the past several years between established voices in education like school board administrators, superintendents and teachers and self-described education reformers looking to expand voucher programs and end teacher tenure.

Stream is fully aware that he is inviting a bitter debate.

“I knew moving forward with this bill that there would be a lot of people who had issues with it,” Stream said. “But my goal is very simple: we need kids in these under performing districts to have access to good education right now, not in three or five or ten years.”

Stream’s bill technically continues student transfers, while plans offered by the Missouri Council of School Administrators and the Missouri School Board Association largely end the transfers by bringing in state schools board or DESE-appointed teams to evaluate struggling schools and implement new education plans. Stream said he’s open to most alternatives, but that those solutions do nothing for students in schools right now.

“To me that’s just adding a level of bureaucracy to the system,” Stream said. “If you’re a student in an unaccredited schools and DESE sends in a team and they look at what’s wrong and say ‘here’s a 5-year plan to get back on track’ that sounds like they are kicking the can down the road. And how does that help me, the student in the school right now?”

MSBA spokesperson Brent Ghan said that keeping students in poor schools with mandated steps to improve from the state is superior to continuing the transfer system, which he says will bankrupt school districts and disrupt “the vast majority of students choosing not to transfer.”

At the heart of the debate is precisely what to do with the current transfer system. Bills like Stream’s essentially refines the process for those in troubled schools while also implementing steps for those schools. Plans like those originally offered by school administrators and school boards generally implanted improvement plans while also halting all student transfers.

State Director for the Children’s Education Alliance of Missouri, Kate Casas, said that attempts to end the transfers right now was a disservice to Missouri students.

“If you change an unaccredited district to provisionally accredited and then try to implement all these changes, all you’ve done is change the name,” Casas said. “The students are still stuck in an unaccredited district that hasn’t made changes yet, only now they won’t even have a right to transfer to a better school. It does nothing to help current students.”

Casas said that schools didn’t need new contracts with the state board of education or DESE because their very existence is a contract.

“School districts are invented, but children are real,” Casas said. “And the fact that these schools exist and get public funds means they’ve entered into a contract. They have a constitutional requirement to give every Missouri student a quality education, and many of them are failing that contract.”

Stream’s bill will appear before the House Education committee, chaired by Rep. Steve Cookson, R-Poplar Bluff. Cookson intends to give the bill a friendly hearing and is largely supportive of Stream’s legislation. The legislation’s path to becoming law remains extremely uncertain, as reformers and education professionals continue to jockey for power.



Katie Casas, CEAM

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