



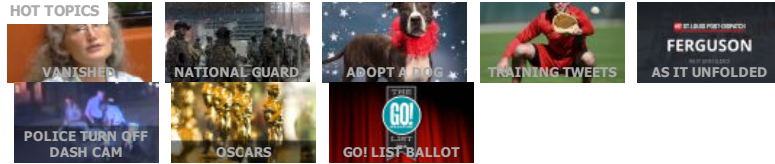
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Plenty of talk, scarcity of answers when it comes to school choice in Missouri

January 30, 2015 12:15 am • By Elisa Crouch

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ST. LOUIS • In fifth grade, Habakkuk Cooper's reading and math skills were that of a first-grader. So her mother transferred her from a St. Louis district school to KIPP: Inspire Academy, a charter middle school in the Fox Park neighborhood. Habakkuk progressed three grades in the first semester, she said, and finished eighth grade proficient or advanced in every subject.

Habakkuk is now a freshman at one of the St. Louis district's most selective schools, the Collegiate School of Medicine and Bioscience, where students must have a 3.5 grade-point average and good test scores to enroll.

Habakkuk shared her story Thursday with more than 100 educators and advocates at downtown's Central Library at an event promoting school choice.

It's the kind of story that school choice advocates champion — a child leaves a failing public school for a higher-performing one and soars, despite a low-income background.

But it ignores the unintended consequences of school choice, skeptics say. Charter schools, they argue, can deplete resources from district schools and make it harder to improve a troubled school system. Some can be worse than the district schools from which their students come. And crossing district boundaries for better schools, as more than 1,000 children from the Normandy and Riverview Gardens school districts are doing this year, can create a situation where those who leave benefit at the expense of those who stay.

"Every child deserves a quality education. Who could argue with that?" said Don Senti, executive director of EducationPlus, a support organization for area school districts. But, he added, "The 80 percent who choose not to leave aren't getting a quality education."

The effort to expand school choice has become a perennial debate in the Missouri Legislature, where lawmakers have taken up issues like charter school expansion and tax subsidized private education as they also work to alter the school transfer law.

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schools that don't work for them. They want to expand charter schools beyond urban areas. And they continue to seek some sort of taxpayer-supported subsidy for private school tuition.

Gov. Jay Nixon vetoed a bill last summer that would have allowed children in unaccredited districts to transfer to nonreligious private schools at the expense of a failing district. Wednesday, the issue of choice was revisited as the Senate began debating changes to the school transfer law.

"Some parents don't mind traveling two hours to take their kid to school," said Sen. Maria Chappelle-Nadal, D-University City, who advocated for the private school provision last year. "It should be up to the parents where their kids go."

Ray Cummings, vice president of political advocacy for the St. Louis chapter of American Federation of Teachers, said parents sometimes put their children in schools that perform worse than the ones from which they came.

"When it comes to young people I don't think it should be a craphoot," he said.

Peter Franzen, the development director for the Children's Education Alliance of Missouri, said it's more of a risk to trap children in failing schools. He's hoping for additional choice reform this year. "You have to take one step after another," he said. "We do want to move toward choice and show people that it works."

Showing that choice works was the point of Thursday's event at the Central Library. Other students told their stories.

Shemar Lee, a high school junior, said public education had failed him until he found his stride at Confluence Prep Academy, a charter high school in downtown St. Louis.

David Ledbetter, a senior at the same school, said he has seen friends disconnect with education after not getting support they need from schools. "It can really make or break a child's future," he said. "Students need an environment where they can learn and be successful."

Nick Hardwick, a junior at Vianney High School, agreed. "If you are comfortable, you are most likely to learn."

Princess Robinson, a freshman at Ritenour High School, told the crowd that she had transferred from Normandy schools to Ritenour two years ago. Her mother cried after the Missouri

Supreme Court upheld the transfer law and gave Normandy students the green light to leave.

"Getting an education there was very hard," Princess said. "And I actually wanted to learn." At Ritenour, "The teachers are different. The students' attitudes are better. They're more eager to learn." Princess has the choice to return to Normandy, but says she's not going to.

Alex Stuckey of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.

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