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Nixon urged to sign school bill, provide more choice to students

By [DALE SINGER \(/PEOPLE/DALE-SINGER\)](#) • MAY 7, 2015

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Updated 9:20 a.m., Thurs., May 7 with comments from Education Plus -- Even though it doesn't make changes in student transfers that could save Normandy from bankruptcy, several education groups urged Gov. Jay Nixon Wednesday to sign the school bill approved by the Missouri legislature because it expands options for students in failing schools.

"Over the past few years, Missourians have demanded a solution to the student transfer issue," said Ryan Stauffer, outreach director for StudentsFirst in Missouri. "This year, legislative leaders in both chambers responded in a powerful bipartisan manner to give more children a chance to receive a great education.

"By passing House Bill 42 (<http://house.mo.gov/billsummary.aspx?bill=HB42&year=2015&code=R>), the legislature has done its part to give students in some of the state's worst performing schools more options to attend a quality school close to home."

But Don Senti, who heads EducationPlus, urged Nixon not to sign the bill. In an interview Thursday, he called it a 168-page "hodge podge" that does nothing to help the transfer situation.

And, he said, because it would open the option of charter of virtual schools to thousands of students who now attend private or parochial schools, it would put additional pressure on a school foundation formula that is already underfunded.

"It really makes a bad situation worse," Senti said, "and it certainly doesn't solve the issue of transfers.

"Every child deserves a good education. I can't argue with that. But kids who don't transfer also deserve a good education."

Instead of putting limits on the amount of tuition that districts could charge for receiving transfer students from unaccredited schools, the bill expands charter schools to St. Louis County and most of Jackson County near Kansas City. It also expands access to virtual schools.



Additionally, the bill requires accreditation of individual school buildings, not school districts, so students in failing schools would first have to transfer to a non-failing school within their home district.

The bill does address tuition for transferring students in one respect. Sending districts and receiving districts may negotiate to agree on a reduction from the receiving district's usual tuition rate. In return, receiving districts that charge reduced tuition may get certain academic incentives.

<http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kwmu/files/styles/xlarge/public/2011/09/schools400FI.jpg>

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Gov. Jay Nixon vetoed last year's school bill (http://www.senate.mo.gov/14info/bts_web/Bill.aspx?SessionType=R&BillID=27723589) because it allowed the use of public money for students to transfer to nonsectarian private schools. That provision is not in this year's legislation. During a visit to the University of Missouri-St. Louis Wednesday, where he announced the release of \$10 million in state matching funds for a new business education building on the campus, Nixon noted that the bill has grown far beyond simply making changes in transfers.

"It's going to take a fair amount of time to do a deep and thorough review of all of the educational policies that were involved with it," Nixon said.

"I'm going to reach out to the folks that have all of the concepts and all of the ideas and I'm going to understand that bill deeply before I make a decision as to whether to sign or veto it."

Lawmakers did not attempt to override Nixon's veto last summer. This time around, the Senate passed the bill (<http://news.stlpublicradio.org/post/missouri-legislature-sends-student-transfer-bill-nixon>) by the minimum number of votes needed to override a veto, 23-11, but the House tally fell far short of such a majority, passing only 84-73.

Passage of the bill may clarify one question about the future of Normandy as a district. As of an April 1 deadline, 639 students had signed up to transfer out of the Normandy Schools Collaborative in the coming school year. While some applications may be denied, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has said that if more than 530 students transfer, based on the average tuition rate for the current school year, Normandy may not be able to survive financially.

As the bill was moving through the legislature, education commissioner Margie Vandeven said she would not want the district to begin the school year if financial calculations showed it would not be able to finish the entire year. Before the House and Senate voted Tuesday night, DESE released this statement from Vandeven concerning the bill, a statement it stood by on Wednesday:

"We appreciate the dedication of legislators in pursuing quality education opportunities for all kids. We remain concerned about the absence of a tuition cap, limited virtual school accountability and potential unintended consequences of specified interventions."

One provision of the legislation could help keep Normandy in operation. It says that the state board of education cannot take action against a school district unable to meet its financial obligations "solely on the basis of financial difficulty resulting from paying tuition and providing transportation for transfer students."

Officials in Normandy said they would have no comment on the bill.

More choices for students

Senti said Thursday that the legislation grew far beyond any attempt to simply fix the transfer situation that has drained money from the budgets of Normandy and Riverview Gardens.

"We haven't learned anything since Normandy," he said. "We should have learned that transferring kids out of the district, and taking resources from them, just doesn't work."

He also questioned the speed with which the bill was passed; a conference committee reported out its work on Monday and the House and Senate approved the bill Tuesday night.

"I'm doubtful some legislators knew what was in there," he said.

Other reaction to the bill on Wednesday concentrated on the expanded opportunities for charter schools. Robbyn Wahby, who recently left her job as education aide to St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay to head the new Missouri charter school commission, said in an interview that creating more options for students is a good response to problems with failing schools.

“The idea here is to get as many kids in high quality schools as possible,” Wahby said. “That’s the end goal for everyone, isn’t it?”

“Families with means have always had choices. How do we expand the choices for people without means? How do we make sure that they have local options for quality, as well as if they want to attend another district that they have that option?”



Robbyn Wahby

CREDIT COURTESY ROBBYN WAHBY

Supporters of traditional public school districts often look with distrust, or worse, at charters, which are funded by tax money but operate outside district control. Wahby said as charters expand, such adversarial relationships should fade.

“Any change is hard,” she said, “whether it’s in education or even rearranging the furniture in your home. Those are difficult things, when things change around you. There’s uncertainty.

“As more and more families who have not had the experience get a great public school in a charter school, there will be more champions for expansion and more champions for this whole idea that quality public schools, whether in a district or not in a district, are important. What’s important is that they’re quality, not whether they’re in a district or not in a district.”

Peter Franzen is the associate executive director of the Children’s Education Alliance of Missouri, which has played a lead role in helping families in Normandy and Riverview Gardens exercise their right to transfer to accredited schools.

He called the legislation “a step in the right direction” toward providing more choices for students in unaccredited schools. Maintaining Normandy, he added, can’t be the main goal.

“I understand what people are saying about a tuition cap,” Franzen said, “but from our perspective, the most important aspect is that kids are not stuck in schools and families have a choice about where they go.

“Preserving a school district that has a long track record of failure is not the highest priority. The highest priority is ensuring that kids have access to good schools. We can’t put institutions over kids.”

Doug Thaman, who heads the Missouri Charter Public School Association, urged Nixon to sign the bill. Alluding to the mistrust that expansion of charters has bred, he said in a statement:

“Unfortunately, efforts have been made to place concerns in the minds of county residents. The insinuation is charter schools in Jackson and St. Louis County would damage school districts financially as private school students may choose to attend public charter schools.

“This is an unfortunate argument. Parents of students in private schools also pay local and state taxes and deserve the same right to quality public education and choice as any other Missourian.”

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'The highest priority is ensuring that kids have access to good schools. We can't put institutions over kids.' -- Peter Franzen of the Children's Education Alliance of Missouri



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Maybe someone will be competent enough to write about virtual schools. Start by talking to democrat representative Bob Burns.

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Kjoe777 • 6 days ago

Not much I can do about what has happened, given the unwillingness of the media to fully report about charter schools. The huge warning sign went off Sunday, when the front page story on Normandy by elisa Crouch had the note at the end....underwritten by the Ford foundation. The invention of a nine member board, (which has already done things which would cause suspicion among most education reporters), headed by Robbyn Wahby, might be a competitor or just reinforcements for Thaman's older 12 member association, which appears on the dese site. This is an all-out publicity set up by people from the charter industry who know what they are doing. I recommend people read my nephew's wife's book, "Follow the Money"....Sarah Reckhow. She is one of the nation's foremost experts. NPR had a thirteen minute long interview with her a month or two ago.

I should just count my blessings.....none of this garbage is going to affect me personally, but there is some major league exploitation on the way.....based on a calculated pattern by wealthy experts.....but based even more on the attitude created...."gosh, things are terrible. We should give charters a try." Some stats are terrible....the good stats are inevitably accompanied by manipulation and cherry picking. Diane Ravitch talks about this stuff almost daily. Mayor DeBlasio is another

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