



April 3, 2024

Dear Senator Trent and Senator Rowden:

The Freedom Principle MO is urging you to bring SB 814, the Educational Freedom Act, sponsored by Senator Jill Carter to the floor immediately and get it passed this legislative session.

We support parental choice when it comes to education, including parents' rights to send their children to quality public schools.

Requiring public schools to use the MAP test as an assessment to measure the quality of education and determine if these schools should be accredited while at the same time exempting private schools from these same requirements. Public schools should have the same ability to choose which assessment program fits the best needs of their students as private schools.

In a January 2023 article, Dr. Mark Elgart, president, and CEO of Cognia, a global education nonprofit, stated state accreditation programs are counterproductive to student achievement. Dr. Elgart said, "In too many cases, state accountability and voluntary accreditation collide, reducing the impact of both processes. Accreditation identifies what graduation rates, test scores, and other indicators cannot tell on their own – what takes place in the school that leads to these results. However, state accountability and accreditation too often cross wires, leading to confusion or narrowing the scope of what can be explored."

This is what is happening in Missouri. One of the main reasons for our decline in public education is that we have tied the hands of public schools by forcing schools to use a statewide assessment instrument, the MAP test, to measure academic standards. However, the MAP assessment test is developed without input by a third-party, outsourced company and prohibits administrators, educators, and parents from knowing what is contained in this assessment.

Superintendents and teachers don't know what these MAP standards are. Teachers and administrators are held to these standards but don't know what metrics are being measured to achieve these standards.

Missouri is one of 15 states that require state accreditation through a state department of education. Dr. Elgart states, "These states use a checklist of discrete data points with quantifiable cut scores for performance to determine which schools get more money for high performance or special attention to improve. Though called state accreditation, this approach neither involves professionals reviewing practices in the schools nor does it focus on improving quality and results. The results of the process are used for fiduciary purposes and are not focused on growth or improvement."

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Since the Outstanding Schools Act was passed in 1993, the quality of Missouri's public education has rapidly declined. Yet, we continue to double down with mandates and more government control through threats of loss of accreditation from DESE. Giving DESE more power or more ability to make rules over public and charter schools is not the answer. We challenge you to embrace the innovation in SB 814.

SB 814 would establish the Educational Freedom Act. The Educational Freedom Act would remove the reliance on one-time, end-of-year assessments. Under this Act, school districts and charter schools would have the freedom to create, purchase, or adopt an interim assessment system that measures students' knowledge at the beginning of each school year and measures academic growth throughout the same school year. SB 814 will shift public and charter school accreditation to the local level. This is what parents in our state expect.

Additionally, the Educational Freedom Act would remove the burdensome mandates imposed by the Missouri School Improvement Program Annual Performance Reports. Under these mandates, the teachers are teaching children what the MAP requirements are and not focusing on what will help children succeed. These requirements tend not to be focused on the educational curriculum but instead more focused on things like "Social, Emotional Learning" and other WOKE indoctrination.

In his article, Dr. Elgart states, "The most effective policies that reflect those in five states – Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, New Hampshire, and Utah – that have collaborative agreements that make it possible for schools to meet accreditation requirements or qualify for state incentives by pursuing regional accreditation, avoiding duplication of effort and redundant reporting." He further states, "A separation of these programs—and allowing accreditation to be voluntary—assures that the unique benefits of both systems persist and strengthen one another. Maintaining their distinctions requires policymakers to resist the urge to legislate accreditation policy beyond identifying preferred regional accreditors or providing incentives (not mandates) for schools to engage in the accreditation process."

We must think beyond DESE, which is not doing the job for our parents and students. SB 814 is out-of-the-box thinking and it is the type of innovation that grassroots organizations, teachers, school administrators, and parents have been clamoring for - for decades. Putting more restrictions or requirements on public schools but at the same time exempting these same restrictions on private schools is not the answer. Expanding taxpayer-funded access to private schools at the expense of public schools is also not the answer. The answer is to treat public and private schools the same. SB 814 does this.

Dr. Elgart states it best, "We know that every student learns in a unique manner, and our accountability systems have to integrate how student-centered learning affects student outcomes. We need to ensure that student success is the focus of improvement and that teachers are teaching not only 'what' students need to learn but 'how' to learn so that they have the capability and capacity to be life-long learners to support their career and/or personal aspirations."

SB 814 was voted "Do Pass" unanimously by Republicans and Democrats of the Education and Workforce Development Committee. SB 814 is supported by conservative and progressive grassroots and education organizations. When was the last time you heard of a bill that received bi-partisan support not being passed? Never. There is no reason why this bill shouldn't be immediately passed.

Missouri taxpayers are required to pay for public schools. If we are going to be forced to pay for something, why not make sure our public schools are the best in the United States? It's time for you to pass SB 814.

Respectfully,

Byron Keelin,
President, Freedom Principle MO