

February 18, 2021

Dear Representative Chuck Basye,

I appreciate your passion for education and look forward to an earnest discussion on education issues. I am disappointed your letter addressed to me was sent to the press before we have had an opportunity to have any discussions on the items you raise in your letter.

As we've seen too many discussions devolve into less than professional debates over policy matters, I believe that we should represent professional conduct for our citizens - particularly our students - who are observing our actions. We are all better served by using verifiable facts and data. That is the the basis MSBA uses for our positions and our testimony and I take issue with allegations that our statements are less than truthful and factual. I hope that we have the opportunity to look for common ground based on fact, not rhetoric, in the near future - our students need us to work together on their behalf.

School board members in Missouri are unpaid, volunteer, non-partisan elected officials. In fact, we are the largest group of elected officials in the state. School boards were created by Missouri law to protect the interests of two groups: our children and our taxpayers. As fiduciaries charged with those responsibilities school board members are in a unique position. We view proposed legislation from the lens of (1) is it in our children's best interest; and (2) is it a proper and wise use of the funds entrusted to us by the taxpayers and the legislature.

One area that I would hope we could find agreement on is that charter schools and any entity receiving public taxpayer dollars through a voucher or appropriation to educate our children should be held to the exact same standards, transparency and accountability as public schools. These laws were put in place by our legislators to protect children and to protect taxpayers. We believe that our children and our taxpayers should have assurance that when charters or private entities are receiving dollars to educate children, they are subject to the same rules that were crafted for public schools.

We are particularly concerned that House Bill 349 does very little to protect children.

Unlike public schools, the private entities that receive the voucher funds created by this bill are not accredited by the state board of education or monitored at all to ensure that students are receiving an education. In fact, the bill prohibits the state from monitoring these schools. It's very disappointing that this would be recommended to be in the law as it would create dangerous policy. This means there are no health or safety requirements, no background checks, no requirement that students are taught by certified teachers, no student data privacy requirements, no requirement that the Missouri learning standards are used to ensure the student is learning what is necessary to advance in their careers or postsecondary world. These funds could go to for-profit education institutions that are focused on shareholders instead of students or the funds could go to organizations that routinely violate the law and the state has no recourse.

We are also concerned that House Bill 349 does not protect taxpayers. Identical voucher programs have been used fraudulently in other states, so we believe there should be rules to prevent fraud, but unfortunately that is not the case with House Bill 349.

The private schools that receive and spend the voucher funds are not required to be audited or fiscally transparent. In fact, very little is required of the private schools that stand to receive millions of taxpayers' dollars under this bill. Further, the bill allows for education assistance organizations to continue to operate unless the treasurer finds an "intentional" and "substantial" violation. That is a high standard and means that the organization gets to keep receiving state money even if the state treasurer finds gross negligence or mismanagement.


Parents can spend the voucher on broad, undefined items like "educational therapies," "extracurricular programs," "summer or after-school education programs" and fees to financial management firms. And under the law, a parent can continue to receive these scholarship funds unless the treasurer finds an "intentional" program violation, meaning that a parent grossly mismanages funds and claim that they did not know better and still receive state funds. There are numerous instances in other states where parents used these taxpayer funded vouchers to pay for things such as vacations.

House Bill 349 is using taxpayers dollars on institutions without any guarantee to the Missouri taxpayers that the students will receive a quality education. And when they do not, these students come back to the public schools or enter the workforce far behind their peers.

Again, our fiduciary duty as school board members is to students and taxpayers. Because of that, we feel strongly that House Bill 349 is bad public policy and we do not support it.

You and I are both passionate about education. I admire that about you and value your public service. I would appreciate the opportunity to visit with you in person to look for ways we can ensure Missouri's students are the highest priority in proposed legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Melissa Randol". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Melissa Randol

Executive Director