

Sixteen percent of Missouri children now live in poverty. They are not being educated to the levels they have a right to expect.

Missouri IMPACT affirms that public school education is every child's civil right. Public education is the cornerstone of our social, economic, and political structure and is of utmost significance in the development of our moral, ethical, spiritual, and cultural values. Missouri IMPACT calls upon its members, and people of faith to support positive legislative actions that increase and fairly distribute funding for public education.

The creation of public education in our nation began with the support of many religious traditions. Advocacy and public declarations of support continue to be made; like the statement of the 35 communions of the National Council of Churches, or similar statements declared by various individual religious groups. A broad spectrum of religious bodies continue to recognize public education as a way to express a shared, faith based moral mandate (though secular in its implementation) to improve conditions for the poor, the weak, and the powerless.

Only a few voices raised in the name of religion vehemently challenge these values. The late Rev Jerry Falwell proclaimed in 1979: *"I hope I live to see the day when, as in the early days of our country, we won't have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over again and Christians will be running them. What a happy day that will be!"*

The Rev Pat Robertson stated in 1990: *"The public education movement has also been an anti-Christian movement... We can change education in America if you put Christian principles in and Christian pedagogy in. In three years, you would totally revolutionize education in America."*

These are voices that would sacrifice religious liberty in the name of theocracy.

The possibility of this philosophy doing real damage to equal public education for all is evident. Especially destructive are proposed alternatives to public education that attempt to establish special privilege for a few students deemed more worthy while they try to transfer or divert public resources constitutionally mandated to benefit every child.

Too frequently elected and appointed officials attack a "broken public education system", especially in areas where public education is struggling. Irresponsible use of positions of public trust to denigrate public

schools, public school teachers, and local school boards must never be allowed to justify modifications to education funding that weaken our schools.

Advocates of a “so called” school choice movement have promoted vouchers as an alternative for public education since the mid 1950’s. The plan originated as a way for whites to use economic power to keep schools racially segregated. Funding voucher programs:

- skims money from already poorly financed public education budgets;
- subsidizes discrimination;
- allows bizarre religious or political groups, cults, and even profiteers to operate schools,;
- allows funding of religious schools in violation of the Missouri Constitution;
- will not help poor families - and many minorities – who must rely on public schools where staff and program costs are fully covered; and
- are a calculated first step towards eliminating public education entirely.

Of equal concern are similarly motivated legislative attempts to divert tax based funding from public education by granting tax refunds or exemptions to parents of private, religious, or home schooled children.

Private schools are free to pick and choose whomever they wish as students. They are free to discriminate for reasons of race, religion, or disability and they are not answerable to the public. Funding private schools with tax money clearly violates the Bill of Rights of our state constitution which states:

Section 2. That all constitutional government is intended to promote the general welfare of the people; that all persons have a natural right to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness and the enjoyment of the gains of their own industry; that all persons are created equal and are entitled to equal rights and opportunity under the law; that to give security to these things is the principal office of government, and that when government does not confer this security, it fails in its chief design.

Section 7. That no money shall ever be taken from the public treasury, directly or indirectly, in aid of any church, sect or denomination of religion, or in aid of any priest, preacher, minister or teacher thereof, as such; and that no preference shall be given to nor any discrimination made against any church, sect or creed of religion, or any form of religious faith or worship.

Public education in Missouri must do far more than prepare students for employment. Public schools are also the place where all children have opportunity to learn to be equal citizens with equal rights.

Educated citizens strengthen our communities, our state, and our nation when they can:

- Understand complex social issues;
- Know enough to vote intelligently;
- Serve on juries; and
- Understand each others' points of view

Rev. Dr. John C. Lentz, Jr., First Hill Presbyterian Church, Cleveland Heights, OH wrote;

*“True diversity celebrates the varied gifts to be found in all children regardless of race, income, religion or status. Only the public schools have the inclusive mission to invite all the children to come together and learn from each other. This is where spirited democracy is nurtured.”*