

Title: **K-12 Education - Is More Money the Answer?**
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K-12 Education - Is More Money the Answer?

Once state legislators get past the soap opera that surrounds the Governor's office, they will have to make some tough decisions affecting the people in Missouri. One is state funding for education. The Governor's proposed budget for fiscal 2019 calls for an increase in K-12 funding, making it over a third of the state's projected \$9.8 billion operating budget. That may not be the best use of taxpayer dollars.

Why the increase? People with more education, on average, have higher levels of lifetime income. States with higher average levels of education also tend to have higher levels of household income. Increasing educational attainment seems like a no-brainer: individuals and the state would be better off, right?

Unfortunately, throwing more money at K-12 education will not solve the problems with education, nor the state's economic woes.

This sobering conclusion comes from Stanford University professor Eric Hanushek's study of Missouri's educational system. His analysis, available from the Hammond Institute, shows that even though Missouri's schools are graduating students, the average graduate has a lower level of competency compared with graduates in many other states.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test is a standardized test covering math, reading, science, and writing. Scores on the NAEP allow us to compare educational achievement across states. Instead of just looking at time in the classroom, Hanushek uses state average NAEP scores to assess what students actually are getting out of their education: Their "cognitive skills."

Hanushek's analysis reveals that Missouri students lag far behind those in too many other states. "In a national labor market," he notes, "this shows the disadvantage of Missouri's students." Their skills are inferior to those of graduates in other states, making it more difficult to land high-paying jobs.

Because Missouri's workforce is comprised largely of home-grown graduates, the state is at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to attracting potential employers. Think of Amazon quickly dropping St. Louis as a home for its second headquarters.

And to make matters worse, many Missouri students who achieve higher levels of cognitive skills often leave Missouri to

seek better opportunities. This brain drain aggravates the negative economic consequences of Missouri's undistinguished educational system.

While it always is possible to graduate students, especially if one is not concerned about the educational attainment of those graduates, if those graduates lack the skills appropriate for the modern economy, handing out more diplomas will not improve economic prospects of the students nor the state.

So why increase K-12 funding? It is politically prudent: those employed in the K-12 industry represent a formidable voting bloc. "Simply increasing funding for schools," Hanushek argues, "is unlikely to lead to increased academic performance unless more attention is given to how money is spent."

How state dollars are spent on K-12 education, not how much, should take priority in the debate. One concern is accountability for student performance. Hitting some graduation quota will not solve Missouri's skills gap with other states. Individual schools—teachers and administrators and parents—must be held accountable for the abilities of those they graduate to the next level, or into the workforce.

Increasing school choice options provides more alternatives for students. Hanushek notes that school vouchers are one approach. Another is adopting the kind of privately managed, publicly funded system as used in the Netherlands. The evidence is still coming in, but choice schools are doing as well if not better than regular public schools in graduating skilled students.

"The costs of not improving the educational system in Missouri are extraordinarily large," concludes Hanushek. If policymakers and those who vote for them are serious about improving the economic future of students and Missouri residents, it is past time to believe that throwing more money at the problem is a viable solution.

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