

Remarks to the Joint Committee on Education

Presented by Chris L. Nicastro, Ph.D.

Commissioner of Education

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

I'm Chris Nicastro. For the past six weeks, I've been serving as the Commissioner of Education. I am pleased to be here today and pleased to have this opportunity to talk with you about public education in our State.

Last week, I talked with the State Board about a vision for public education in Missouri. It's important that we all have a picture of what the future might look like, a description of where we're going and what we as a state want public education to look like for our children. My competitive spirit and my unyielding faith in the people of our state make me want a slogan like "Missouri First" or a statement of intent that we can all rally around. I believe we all want to produce citizens who are ready for school, ready to graduate, ready for higher education, ready for work...and who will compete internationally. The purpose of public education is to prepare our children for a future filled with options. All of these options require that our children—every one of them—be guaranteed a program that meets high standards and offers no excuses. Educational opportunity cannot be a function of family wealth, geography, gender, race or ethnicity. The promise of public education is to educate all. Your essential role, of course, is to set education policy to fulfill this promise. We will do everything we can to help.

Public schools prepare young people to exercise their democratic responsibility, teaching them about our country and giving them the knowledge they need to make informed decisions. Our schools provide for the acculturation of generation after generation of American citizens. Not only do we teach the reading, writing, calculating and other skills necessary for success; but society has called upon the public schools to do much more. We teach children to drive, to establish healthy eating habits, to give service to the community and to display appropriate behavior in a variety of settings. We impart to children the character traits the community expects. We teach them to work hard, show up on time, and set high standards for their own and others' performance and to finish what they start. Our country—the oldest established democracy in the world—is a testament to how well public education succeeds in this transfer of culture.

Since the Outstanding Schools Act was passed in 1993, education in Missouri has improved significantly. The State Board has established high standards for achievement and has developed and implemented an effective framework for instruction and assessment based on these standards. The vast majority of Missouri's schools have made tremendous progress toward reaching

these standards, including addressing the needs of previously underserved populations.

Nevertheless, there remain districts with unacceptable performance and little sign of improvement. These districts are unaccredited or provisionally accredited—ranging from the City of St. Louis to Kansas City to Hayti to Spickard R-II—and serve close to 68,000 children. We cannot afford to allow over 7% of our student population to be at risk because of where they live. Our greatest challenge is to find a way to meet student needs in every school, in every district, throughout the State. Missouri is not alone in this challenge. Throughout the country, schools in urban centers and schools in remote rural areas—usually characterized by high concentrations of poverty—are failing to meet standards and failing to meet the needs of their children. In an age when international competition continues to grow, we cannot afford to squander the potential of even one child.

In addition, there are districts making progress, which have maintained full accreditation, but which continue to have performance concerns. And, there are districts in the State known for excellence, doing an outstanding job with the majority of their students but still failing some individual or groups of children. All these districts, too, need support and assistance to continue their improvement efforts and ensure success for every child. State law (Section 161.122, RSMo) provides in part that the Commissioner of Education shall “...seek in every way to elevate the standards of efficiency of the instruction given in the public schools of the state.” This is the job I’ve just taken and one I don’t take lightly.

This challenge to achieve universal proficiency is daunting. Too often, the schools and districts that struggle to meet the needs of their children are characterized by dysfunctional governing bodies, competing community politics, and a lack of coordination between and among agencies serving children. While the current system supports most schools and districts in making improvement, it is clearly not sufficient to overcome these systemic deficits. We must come together, as a State, to make school improvement and proficiency for all children a priority and chart a course of action to make this goal a reality. The lines between early childhood, K-12 education, higher education and the workforce must be erased if we hope to sustain a consolidated vision of improvement and success for Missouri.

In recent years, there has been significant interest in doing something to “fix” failing schools. Tuition tax credits, vouchers, charter schools and other proposed solutions have been put forward as silver bullets to solve the problem. I’ve come to believe that it’s not that easy. Well intentioned leaders—educational, political, business, and community—must come together to develop a comprehensive strategy for delivering high quality educational services to all the children of the state. This strategy must draw on the best practices and most innovative ideas from across the world. It must insure a systemic solution—a solution that endures political and social change. Leaders must acknowledge

that some children are not being served by the ongoing debate and the polarizing proposals we've seen in recent years. Education—as this body knows so well—is a bi-partisan issue. We share common goals regarding the future of Missouri's children.

A major priority this year is to provide support and leadership in the national competition for \$4.3 billion in *Race to the Top* funding from the Department of Education. This application must be submitted by the Governor, signed by the president of the State Board of Education and me, and broadly supported by all constituencies. A successful application will require the best thinking of a diverse, representative group from across the State. We are working with the Governor's office to develop a plan for convening such a group and developing our proposal.

The selection criteria cover 19 separate points in broad areas covering standards and assessments, data systems to support instruction, quality teachers and leaders, and turning around struggling schools. The Department of Education estimates the application will take over 680 hours to complete; therefore, I anticipate Missouri competing in the second round of grants due next spring. As we work through this process, and as the need for legislation becomes apparent, we will keep you apprised.

As Commissioner of Education, I hope to work with the State Board of Education, with all of you, with other state departments, and with our mutual constituencies to develop a vision and strategies for ensuring high quality educational opportunity for all of Missouri's children. I believe strongly in the power of engagement and the efficacy of diversity. Missouri has many human resources. Each and every one must be employed to confront the challenge we face in meeting the educational needs of all Missouri's children. More than ever, the future of our State depends on our collective will to ensure the superior preparation and performance of all Missouri's children in a high quality and equitable system of schooling.

To this end, I have presented the State Board with four major goals to drive the work of the Department. These include:

1. *Missouri students will perform in the top quartile of all states as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) or other nationally recognized assessments. Average is simply not good enough to drive the progress Missouri citizens expect and deserve.*
2. *Missouri will provide quality, universal early childhood educational opportunity to all three and four-year olds as measured by numbers of children served and a research-based kindergarten readiness assessment. An early start for many of our children will not only improve performance in school; studies have shown participants are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, be employed and have higher income levels, and less likely to require special education services or commit a crime.*

- 3. Missouri will recruit, prepare and support quality teachers and administrators as measured by the number of qualified professionals entering the profession, demonstrated mastery of skills and competencies, and research-based standards of excellence. We know quality teaching and leadership make a difference in improving student achievement. We need to do a better job of identifying and supporting those individuals who reflect our high expectations for professional performance.**
- 4. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will improve departmental efficiency, operational effectiveness and relationships with external constituencies. To support improvement statewide, we in the Department need to tend to our own business first. Especially in these tough economic times, we must take every possible measure to model high standards of performance. This includes an emphasis on collaboration, cooperation and communication.**

Finally, the Department stands ready to assist the Committee with your priorities in conducting the open enrollment study, assessing the need for changes in the current charter school law and ensuring effective governance in urban schools. We know that this will be an extremely difficult year for all of us. As you work to serve your constituents, please call upon the Department for information and support.

Thank you for this opportunity to address the Joint Committee. Mr. Chairman, I will be happy to answer any questions the Committee might have.