



Feedback that Matters

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Governor Jay Nixon - July 29, 2014

Good morning and thank you. It's always an honor to address those who have taken on the challenge of educating our kids. The mission you have chosen to accept has never been more vital or, quite frankly, more difficult.

I don't have to tell anyone in this room about the critical importance of public education to our ability to succeed in a high-tech, highly competitive worldwide economy.

No one here needs to be convinced of the advantage that competing states and nations will gain if they have a better-trained workforce... or be reminded of the solemn responsibility we share to keep the doors of educational opportunity open to every child.

Each one of us understands that the future of our state and our nation depend on a strong public education system – one that continues to raise the bar with high expectations and accountability.

But what I want to talk about today isn't so much our shared commitment to the value of public education... but rather the magnitude of the threats conspiring to undermine that value... and the level of effort that will be required to defend it.

A lot has happened since I stood before you at this time last year.

Working together, we assembled a coalition of Missourians across the state and defeated an unaffordable and ill-conceived tax bill.

Thanks to this effort, we averted a fiscal catastrophe and I was able to put forward a plan to fully fund the K-12 foundation formula by 2016 with an additional \$278 million for education this year – a goal that had eluded us for far too long was finally within reach.

But our victory was short-lived

This past legislative session represented, by any measure, the worst six months for public education in recent memory. Let me repeat that: the 2014 legislative session was the worst six months for public education in recent memory.

First, the General Assembly rushed through and overrode my veto of another deeply flawed and irresponsible tax cut that will drain at least \$620 million annually from priorities like education starting in less than three years.

Second, the legislature was able to pass – for the first time – a bill to divert public dollars to private schools with a dangerous voucher scheme. Just nine years after my predecessor, Governor Blunt, mustered a mere 62 votes in the House for school vouchers – even after taking to the floor and lobbying for the bill himself – a voucher bill sailed through the House and Senate last session with support from members of both parties.

Third, in another precedent, the legislature subjected public education to a conditional funding mechanism with something they called a “surplus revenue fund.” Under this budget gimmick, schools are last in line ... and have to wait until every other budget item has been spent before receiving their full appropriation. The legislature decided that earmarks and special projects – things like Asian carp eradication – should get the first dollars in the door ... while our schools wait for the last.

Fourth, with almost no opposition, the General Assembly put an initiative on this year's ballot that would, for the first time in two decades, allow revenues generated from lottery ticket sales to go to something other than public education.

Fifth, while the legislature was busy taking an ax to the financial foundation of our schools, deep-pocketed special interests were also coming after our teachers with a ballot measure that would eliminate teacher tenure in Missouri.

And for anyone who thought they were done... that their appetite for attacking public education had been satisfied, legislators came back in the final hours of the legislative session and passed another \$776 million in tax breaks.

Emboldened by their victory on Senate Bill 509, members rushed through more than a dozen special carve-outs that would divert money away from vital public services and into the pockets of a wide variety of special interests. And, no surprise, public education would be the hardest hit.

In addition to reducing state general revenue and derailing our efforts to fully fund the foundation formula, this grab bag of giveaways would take a \$93.7 million bite out of Proposition C sales tax revenues for schools. More than \$104 per student gone... from formula and hold-harmless districts alike... all for the sake of giving special breaks to commercial dry cleaners, fast food restaurants, power companies – even buyers of personal seat licenses at stadiums.

I vetoed that misguided voucher scheme and those irresponsible tax breaks... and took a clear message to all corners of the state: I will not allow money to be taken from our classrooms and communities, and simply given away to corporate interests.

But without your commitment this September, those vetoes will be over-ridden. The special interests will win. Our schools, teachers and kids will lose.

I need you this Sept. 10. Your communities need you.

This September, the responsibility is ours to keep public funds in public schools, and to stop the giveaways for special interests at the expense of our schoolchildren.

But that's only the beginning.

The litany of setbacks I just mentioned didn't occur because Missourians suddenly stopped supporting public education.

They happened for the simple reason that anti-public education forces are better organized ... and better funded ... than ever before.

Bankrolled by one very wealthy ideologue ... millions of dollars pour into campaign accounts ... onto television stations ... into our communities ...

Designed to impose an anti-public education agenda ... and intimidate you, our public school teachers ...and the public officials who stand with you ...

This effort is real, it is damaging... and it is not going away.

As we have already seen, the powerful forces arrayed against us will not be content with half-measures or symbolic victories.

If we don't stand up and fight them now... the six- and seven-figure contributions will keep pouring into campaign war-chests... the ranks of highly-paid political operatives will continue to grow... the steady assault will continue... until public education as we know it no longer exists.

Whatever other hurdles we have to overcome... whatever disagreements we may have, this dwarfs them all.

Make no mistake... this is not a conflict between me and the legislature.... or between Republicans and Democrats. This is a battle between those who believe in public education, and those who don't.

And right now, our side is losing ground.

So how do we turn the tide?

Like never before, we have to be unified... assertive...and absolutely relentless.

In short, your jobs just got a lot harder.

Each one of you is a CEO that is facing a constant barrage of attacks on your bottom line, a fundamental threat to your business – the business of educating our kids.

We will never be able to match our opponents' resources – so we've got to win with grit, tenacity, and a dogged determination to fight for what we believe in at all costs.

Here's an example of what I'm talking about.

In addition to siphoning money from Proposition C funding for schools and state general revenue, the tax breaks passed on the last day of the session that I vetoed would also drain resources from cities and counties... fire protection and ambulance districts... police departments and public libraries.

Since these tax breaks passed, they've drawn intense and forceful opposition from local elected officials in every corner of the state. These folks have written letters, passed resolutions, made phone calls, and confronted the legislators who voted to take funding away from critical services.

Here are just some of the things they've said publicly in the past few weeks:

This is quote, "totally unacceptable." "Devastating." "Catastrophic to our fiscal viability."

In Hannibal, the police chief told the local newspaper that if my vetoes were not sustained, emergency response times would go up.

In Farmington, the city administrator told a crowd of citizens that the cuts resulting from these bills would be the equivalent of defunding their entire parks system.

More than fifty municipalities and organizations have already gone on record with formal resolutions expressing their opposition to these measures.

Many of these officials are on the ballot this fall ... maybe they're not doing what's politically safe ... maybe these special interests will finance their opponents ... but they are not pulling any punches.

Because for their communities, and the people they serve, everything is at stake.

In order to be successful, we need that same level of passion and energy from the people in this room – and everyone with a stake in public education: business leaders and board members, principals and parents, coaches and counselors.

Pick up the Springfield News-Leader this morning – in which three superintendents mince no words when it comes to the threats to their schools – and you'll get a sense for the kind of bold, forceful action I'm talking about.

But up to this point, the response from some in the education community has been more muted. To members of the legislature, and to people in your community, silence speaks volumes.

Friends...silence is no longer an option.

We need you at the Capitol.

We need you making calls and writing letters.

We need you holding events in your communities.

We need you challenging your legislators to stand with public education.

And if they don't, their constituents – our constituents -- need to hear about it.

No free passes. Not on these bills – not on any bill that imperils our schools and opportunities for our students.

Missourians support public education by overwhelming margins. They believe in and want to invest in their schools. They support their teachers. And they certainly don't want money siphoned out of their classrooms just to let some big fast food chain get a tax break.

We know that many legislators – on both sides of the aisle – agree.

But to make sure these legislators start reflecting those values consistently in their votes, Missourians need a strong voice for education in the Capitol... and in their communities.

We must be that voice. And that means all of us.

We need to be tough, unyielding advocates for our principles... who show strength to our adversaries... and give courage to our allies.

We're a diverse state... and each one of your districts has its own priorities, and faces its own challenges. But as Missourians who believe in public education... we share some basic, bedrock principles.... values over which we simply cannot negotiate.

First and foremost, we know that without resources... public education cannot survive. In one of lowest-tax states in the nation, we can't let fiscal experiments divert one more penny from our classrooms. Period.

We believe that we have an obligation to educate every child that walks through the schoolhouse doors;

We believe that teaching is an honorable profession that should be respected and rewarded;

We believe in lifting our schools up to reach higher standards with greater rigor and transparency;

And we believe that public funds belong in public schools.

These are the consistent, unwavering standards against which every policy – and every policymaker – must be measured.

When your senators and representatives come to you and say they support education, that's a promise they need to be held accountable for keeping. Not simply with their words... but with their deeds – and most importantly, with their votes.

For example, there are candidates on the ballot this year who sought, received – and are now touting on the campaign trail – endorsements from educators.... even while promising to pass even more fiscally irresponsible tax cuts. Tax cuts that would further erode support for public education... Tax cuts our schools, our students and our state simply cannot afford.

These self-proclaimed supporters of public education can't have it both ways.

In the test of whether the State of Missouri is going to support education or abandon it... there can be no excuses, extensions or doctor's notes... every answer must be graded.

It won't be easy.

I've said it before – but it bears repeating: we have the harder job.

Because it's always easier to tear something down than to build something up.

The other side doesn't go to work every day responsible for educating every child, regardless of ability or circumstance.

They don't have to confront the complexities of preparing students to compete in a rapidly changing global economy.

But if we don't take on this challenge -- no one else will.

And I know we can succeed.

Just ask the folks down in Nixa. After the anti-education crowd failed to drain state funding for schools with an override my veto of House Bill 253... they came after local funding at one of the highest-performing school districts in the state.

Flush with a \$900,000 contribution from a single billionaire two hundred miles away, the Club for Growth flooded Nixa with mailers opposing a local bond issue to improve school facilities – and even attacking the school superintendent.

But the people of Nixa had different ideas. They stood up and spoke out, exposing this anti-education campaign for exactly what it was. Folks in Nixa didn't compromise.

They didn't say that they would accept less for their schools. They fought back.

And, guess what? Their bond issue passed with 68 percent of the vote.

Together, they demonstrated that with a full-throated, all-hands-on-deck effort – public educators can go toe-to-toe with these well-funded ideologues and they can win.

In the face of enormous challenges, it's worth remembering that we have a lot working in our favor:

Visit almost any public school in Missouri (and I've visited quite a few), and you will find a community with a strongly held and abiding belief in public education, and a talented group of educators and administrators dedicating their careers to helping students succeed.

In a testament to the tremendous efforts of the people in this room, math scores are up... reading scores are up... we've increased the number of students taking – and passing – AP tests, and our graduation rate is now in the top 10 in the nation.

Eight public schools in Missouri were honored last year with prestigious national Blue Ribbon Awards... and fifteen were recognized by the Washington Post as among the most academically challenging in America.

To build on this progress, we cannot just dig in and defend the status quo.

We're going to continue to raise our game, and redouble our efforts to improve academic performance and outcomes for our students.

With greater access to early childhood education – so that every child starts kindergarten ready to learn....

With more rigor, accountability and transparency in the classroom....

With new, innovative partnerships to put students on the path to a rewarding career while they're still in high school...

And of course, by cultivating good teachers – who have the toughest, most honorable job there is – with the support and compensation they need and deserve...

Our kids – and the dedicated public servants who teach them – are counting on us... on you... to step up and make sure this past legislative session is not the beginning of the end of public education in Missouri, but rather a clarion call for us to protect and improve it.

Against a relentless effort to tear apart the fabric of public education – the responsibility is ours to strengthen it.

With your efforts and energy, I know that we will.

Thank you and God Bless.