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Missouri must measure what matters in education

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Imagine going to a basketball game but being told before tipoff that the scores for each team would make up less than half of the determination of which team won the game. In this scenario other metrics, such as the coach's degree or the quality of the transportation to and from the game, would play an outsized role in deciding the winner.

That's exactly what's happening in Missouri education today. Studies will tell you that student academic growth and student academic achievement are by far the most important metrics in determining if a school is succeeding in providing a quality education. Yet in Missouri, these two metrics only count for 48% of a school districts Annual Performance Report (APR.) Instead, areas such as Improvement Planning, Graduation Follow-up, Required Documentation and Success Ready Student Planning make up the majority of the APR. These categories are not intuitive to parents and community members and take significant time and effort to understand.

Student growth in particular must be a bigger part of determining success. We know that students enter the classroom from a variety of backgrounds. Some students are further behind others on the first day. That's what makes being able to measure that student's progress so important. These kids have more room to grow academically and schools who can help them do so should be rewarded.

Pre-pandemic, Missouri ranked in the bottom half of states on NAEP, declining in three out of four subjects tested over the last 10 years. Now more than ever, Missouri needs an accountability system that provides a clear picture of where students are, connects to what teachers are doing in the classroom, and incentivizes the strategies research shows help students learn best.

Now is the time for Missouri to start measuring what matters. During the next legislative session, Quality Schools Coalition would like to work with legislators, parents, teachers and administrators to pass legislation that makes student achievement and growth 80% of the calculation for school performance, as well as ensuring transparency for parents by providing clear and accessible information on how their child's school is doing.

We know that the more a parent is involved in their child's education, the more likely that student is to succeed. But currently, Missouri makes it very difficult for a parent to even determine how a school or a district is performing. If a parent can wade through the state's current accountability standards, they

will eventually get to classifications such as “Floor, Approaching, On Track, Exceeding,” which have little meaning for most parents.

A strong accountability system that provides transparent information to families empowers them with data to understand how their student and school are performing. And importantly, this should be done at the individual district and charter and school level, as opposed to the district level. A simple grading system that is easily understood and accessible to parents and community members is essential.

Once we have a system in place and understand how our schools and students are doing, we need to have measures in place to address underperforming schools. When schools are consistently underperforming, interventions are essential to students and families. We want to work with all stakeholders to come up with a tiered approach to address the unique circumstances and needs of underperforming schools, knowing this will ensure the best outcomes for students and families.

These reforms will not be easy, but they are absolutely critical. Now is the time for parents, teachers, advocates, activists, administrators and elected leaders to work together to get “The Quality Education Act” legislation across the finish line. In doing so, the real winners will be our kids.

Quality Schools Coalition believes state government has the responsibility of setting conditions for all our public schools to flourish and ensuring that all students have access to a high-quality education. Though Missouri’s accountability system has continued to evolve over the years, it is not currently accomplishing an environment where students are performing at the highest levels.

Additionally, if we are going to ask more of our schools and students, we absolutely must invest in the Missourians on the front lines of learning — our teachers. Earlier this year, the Missouri legislature passed and Gov. Parson signed an increase in the minimum teacher salary from \$25,000 to \$38,000. While this one-year fix was needed, next legislative session is the time to make this increase permanent. Great teachers are the backbone of every great school. To ensure that our children have the highest quality educators, it is critical that we value their work and the essential role they play in our communities. A strong accountability system that measures what matters and ensures parents have transparent access to clear information about our schools will help our students regain the learning lost in the past decade and truly move our state forward to become an exemplar for others.

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