

ST. JOSEPH NEWS-PRESS

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Court Sends a Message

Finally, some good news out of the Kansas Supreme Court involving public school funding.

The court approved a plan Friday phasing in \$541 million in increases over three years. The plan increases aid to all districts, while targeting those with high percentages of poor students and students at risk of failing.

Local school boards also will gain additional authority to raise property taxes to supplement their state aid, according to the Associated Press, and 18 districts with relatively high costs of living will receive even more taxing authority. Such provisions were important to Johnson County, whose wealthier districts don't get extra money to help poor and minority students.

The court's 4-2 decision dismissed the lawsuit, filed in 1999 by parents and administrators in Salina and Dodge City, according to the AP. That's the good news.

Missourians understand how a court case - a federal court case here - can dominate the work of a legislative body for years.

The ruling removes the judicial hammer over legislators making funding decisions for the state's 296 school districts and 450,000 students - for now. That is the bad news.

The AP reports that a key cloud remains over the plan. Legislators didn't provide any new revenue, such as a tax increase, to finance the three-year plan, and projections show a budget shortfall by 2009.

While the court's decision ended one lawsuit, the AP reported, a similar one is pending in U.S. District Court in Wichita. And there is talk that more litigation could spring from the ruling.

"In school finance, the case can be over today and another filed tomorrow," State Board of Education attorney Dan Biles told the AP.

State Sen. Charlie Shields gets the message. The St. Joseph Republican is among a group of senators that backed a constitutional amendment that would allow only the Legislature, not the courts, to decide school funding. The proposal, unfortunately, struggles to get traction in Jefferson City.

But with the recent lesson from Kansas, we expect that Mr. Shields' proposal could resurface next year. We would hope it would win approval before Missouri schools end up back in the courts.

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