

CC3640 10.16.23 Monday

A message about vouchers from a rural woman in Missouri

The Senate President in Ohio recently stated that he would be working toward public funds being provided for private school capital projects. His interest, as stated, is to expand vouchers in rural areas where private schools are scarce. He seems to want to create additional problems for the rural schools which have typically been underfunded for generations.

The attached [article](#) written by a rural woman who is a parent, small farmer, and teacher is a message Ohio citizens need to consider.

Rural Schools are the Epicenters of Rural Life

Don't defund our schools with voucher schemes...

[JESS PIPER](#)

OCT 5, 2023

I am a rural woman. I am a small farmer raising beef and vegetables and children in Northwest Missouri in a town of 480 people. I live in a 125 year-old farmhouse on a few acres on the Iowa border that we purchased for less than the price of a new car. I was also an American Literature teacher for sixteen years--my children are all products of rural schools. Our youngest is still in school and her class, the entire fourth grade, consists of 24 children. We are rural.

Public schools are the heart of rural Missouri.

My daughter arrives every day to a tiny school that supports her and knows her well. All the teachers know her name and her parents. They know she loves to sing and dance, she enjoys History and English, and tolerates Math—no shade to her teacher. She stays late to help my kiddo twice a week because she knows she struggles with numbers. They know her.

We mark the cafeteria Thanksgiving meal on our calendars to eat lunch with our kids--the turkey is pretty good but we really come for the annual tradition and because our kids expect us. Entire communities gather for Christmas pageants and band and choir concerts in our rural schools. We attend Friday night football and basketball games and reserve the rest of the evenings for softball or baseball. We know the teachers and we support schools with raffles and by buying apples and beef jerky from the yearly FFA sales. Nearly every event in our small community revolves around our school.

I tell you the story of rural schools because we are in a fight to keep our public schools funded and open in Missouri.

In my state, we are 49th in funding for public schools. We don't provide public schools with the basics--we even underfund transportation costs that schools must make up through budget cuts in other areas. Missouri funds 32% of schools budgets which means that residents must pay for the bulk of their local school expenses through property taxes, the most inequitable system where in communities like mine, paying high property tax may not be an option.

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The defunding of Missouri public schools has happened over the last decade, but has been at warp speed in the last five years. The school funding formula was adjusted to lower the amount a few years back meaning we lowered the funding bar to be able to claim we met the bar. And now, even more bad news for Missouri rural schools...a voucher scheme.

In 2021, Missouri Republicans devised and signed into law a system for vouchers that will further defund public schools. This is how it works: Missouri tax payers can receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit that will pay for private school vouchers. In essence, public tax funds will be diverted to private or religious schools with no oversight or accountability for student performance. Missouri will allow folks to essentially pay their taxes directly to the private school of their choice thereby defunding public schools.

Missouri has now entered into partnering with corporations who act as middle-men and vendors for educational services paid for by taxpayer funds. We have seen this type of behavior in Idaho and Arizona and not only did vouchers prove to blow a hole in those state budgets ([900M in Arizona alone](#)), it is rife with grifters. Some folks who received vouchers in Arizona paid for ski trips, pianos, golf equipment, and ninja warrior gym memberships.

In rural Missouri, our schools are already strapped for resources and any pop-up private school opening and accepting vouchers would devastate our rural schools.

When schools are defunded, the next move is often consolidation. When a school consolidates, students may be traveling to and from school for over an hour a day. School consolidations also ravage small communities and often cause ripples that can be felt for years.

In my town, the school is the largest employer. Community members receive health insurance through their school employment and disadvantaged children are fed through the school year through free school lunch. School closures cripple small businesses and decrease property values. Our main streets can become vacant with the loss of a local school. When schools consolidate, rural communities lose their economic epicenter.

We must fully-fund public schools in an equitable way for all children to have the opportunity that a public education promises. Charter and privatization schemes purposely funnel public tax money into private hands and are harming rural Missouri public schools.

Rural students and our small communities count on public schools. Missouri children deserve better.

Jess

*Note: [This article](#) has been updated from the original posted in "Public Voices for Public Schools" in 2022.