



Without Consequences for Failing Schools, Students Lose

Published on *Show-Me Institute* (<https://showmeinstitute.org>)



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A high-school diploma is supposed to mean something. A student who earns one should be ready to attend college or a trade school, or to start working right away. But a diploma's value depends on the quality of the school that stands behind it. And down in the bootheel of Missouri, Hayti High School's class of 2019 has gone all the way from kindergarten to its junior year in high school without ever attending a good school by the standards set by the State Board of Education's (SBE).

In statewide testing, less than half of the students in the district scored proficient or advanced in English and only about a third scored proficient or advanced in math. The latest average ACT score was 16.5, nearly five points below the national average of 21. Has the Hayti School District sufficiently prepared the class of 2019 to succeed after graduation?

Hayti has been provisionally accredited for over a decade, but that does not necessarily mean the state has taken adequate steps to make sure the district improves. The state monitors provisionally accredited districts, but there are few real consequences if their performance stagnates—and the SBE has been quick to upgrade districts even before sustained progress has been made. Unfortunately, the Missouri School Improvement Program is a series of graduated

but mostly meaningless interventions.

My recent essay for the Show-Me Institute, [“Accountability in Missouri’s Public School System,”](#) goes into greater detail about our state’s struggling districts and argues that if accountability is defined as tangible consequences for district and school personnel, the state has been at best inconsistent in holding districts responsible for poor performance.

Some examples: Jennings and Caruthersville, both formerly provisionally accredited, were reclassified as fully accredited by the SBE even though they failed to meet the academic goals the districts set themselves. Not far behind Hayti, Calhoun R-VIII, and Hickman Mills have been provisionally accredited for 5 or more years.

Unaccredited districts also have been let off the hook despite a lack of significant progress. The SBE voted unanimously to classify Kansas City as provisionally accredited even though the former Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Commissioner said the district had not established a “consistent trend of improvement.”

Two other once-unaccredited districts—Riverview Gardens and Normandy—failed to meet most performance targets set by the state before the SBE granted them provisional accreditation. In the case of the St. Louis City School District, its scores in *all* performance areas had not improved significantly . . . but it was unanimously approved for full accreditation.

These examples call into question the commonly held assumption that the state holds traditional public schools accountable. One could argue that the 1993 transfer law—although separate from DESE’s Missouri School Improvement Program—is the best form of accountability for districts. When students have the right to leave for a better school, unaccredited districts must improve to avoid having to pay other districts to educate their students.

Now that there are no unaccredited districts in Missouri, however, students in districts like Riverview Gardens and Normandy no longer have the right to transfer. Before thinking of this as a cause for celebration, we should recognize that this creates a trap for students whose districts are performing just well enough to prevent triggering the transfer law, but not well enough to provide a genuinely good education.

Families should not be waiting years or even decades for schools to make small gains or else become unaccredited so that students can transfer out. Under the current accountability system, the kids are the ones who face the consequences—whether they have to take remedial classes in college or cannot get a well-paying job—not the district or school leaders. Our accountability system is failing, and students deserve better than being forced to stay put in poorly performing schools.

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