



# One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

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*By: Brenda TalentSusan Pendergrass*

On November 19, the Missouri State Board of Education met in a closed session to determine who would be selected as the state's next commissioner of education. It was high time to do so. In a tumultuous session almost a year ago, the board removed the last commissioner, Dr. Margie Vandeven, and struggled to agree on the process for finding a new one. Lack of Senate confirmation led to the withdrawal of five members appointed by the former Governor, and it wasn't until last summer that the Board even had enough members for a quorum. An interim commissioner has been filling the office.

In September, the reconstituted board announced that it was conducting a search to find a new commissioner. Like many, we hoped that the state would hire someone with a fresh vision and a vigorous approach to reform who would be determined to improve the performance of schools in Missouri.

The need for new leadership is undeniable.

When Dr. Vandeven was named commissioner of education back in 2014, the state's education system had an ambitious goal: to have Missouri's students performing among the best in the nation— "Top 10 by 2020." Needless to say, that goal was never achieved. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as "The Nation's Report Card," Missouri ranked 31st in 8th grade math in 2007 among the 50 states. Fast forward to 2017, and

our ranking in the same subject and grade was 32nd.

During this same time, Missouri has had a revolving door of state standardized tests for students. According to a study published in *Education Next*, Missouri was the *only state in the nation* to actually lower proficiency standards between 2009 and 2017. Every other state is demanding more from their schools, while we're asking for less. Why are we okay with that?

Not surprisingly, the Top 10 by 2020 goal has been quietly dropped. We have lost (at least) a decade in improving student outcomes, and we have no North Star.

During Dr. Vandeven's tenure, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) began the process of revising the Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP), the system used to accredit school districts. Today, out of 527 public school districts, not a single one is unaccredited and just six are provisionally accredited. DESE technically only accredits districts, not individual schools. Yet when the St. Louis Public School District became fully accredited, every school was given an enormous banner to hang outside with the school name and "Fully Accredited!" on it. What's a parent to think?

There are far too many schools in Missouri with rates of proficiency in the single digits. DESE touts a high school graduation rate of nearly 90 percent, and then reports that fewer than 43 percent of graduates are college- or career-ready. Doesn't every student deserve to have at least one high-quality option for their education?

It would be churlish to place the entire blame for this state of affairs on Dr. Vandeven, or any single official. Education is a complex process, educational bureaucracies are notoriously hard to change, and education in Missouri has been troubled for a long time.

But for precisely those reasons, we need to face the truth: Doing the same thing but expecting different results won't work. During Dr. Vandeven's tenure as commissioner, DESE made no real effort to provide parents useful information about how well our schools and districts were serving students. And DESE has stood firmly against any form of school choice for parents outside of Kansas City or St. Louis, regardless of how well (or poorly) students are being served by their assigned public school.

It is clearly time for a fresh look and a new approach at DESE. And yet last Wednesday, the board announced that the search for a commissioner was over, and that the new commissioner of education would be . . . the former commissioner of education, Dr. Vandeven.

We'll have more to say about education in Missouri—a lot more—as state government prepares for the Legislature to reconvene in January. But for now, this much is clear:

If the members of the board, and the Governor who appointed them, had been trying to send the signal that they were satisfied with the status quo in Missouri; that they were throwing in the towel on real reform in the public schools and real options for Missouri families; that they were more interested in not making waves with the educational establishment than in making the lives of our children brighter—they made exactly the right choice.

## About the Author



*Brenda Talent  
CEO*

*Before joining the Show-Me Institute, Brenda Talent served as counsel*



*Susan Pendergrass  
Director of Research and Education Policy*

*Susan Pendergrass was Vice President of Research and Evaluation for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools before joining the Show-Me Institute. Prior to coming to the National Alliance, Susan was a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of Education during the Bush administration and a senior research scientist at the National Center for Education Statistics during the Obama administration. She earned a Ph.D. in Public Policy from George Mason University.*

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5297 Washington Place      3645 Troost Avenue  
Saint Louis, MO 63108      Kansas City, MO 64109  
Phone: (314) 454-0647      Phone: (816) 287-0370  
Fax: (314) 454-0667

Email: [info@showmeinstitute.org](mailto:info@showmeinstitute.org)

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