



House Passes Education Reform Bill

HB 349 Creates Missouri Empowerment Scholarship Accounts

The House narrowly passed legislation on Thursday to establish the Missouri Empowerment Scholarship Accounts program. Under this bill, donors would receive a tax credit for contributions to educational assistance organizations. The funds would then be used as scholarships for K-12 students to pay for educational expenses at public or private schools.

HB 349, sponsored by Representative Phil Christofanelli (R-St. Charles), caps the tax credits at \$50 million annually. The money distributed by educational assistance organizations would prioritize students with an individualized education plan or from low-income families. The funds could be used for private school tuition, summer education programs, textbooks, educational therapies, and other qualified expenses.

These Empowerment Scholarship Accounts could only be used by students in charter counties or cities with at least 30,000 people, and the provisions would only take effect in years where public school transportation funding meets a certain metric. In committee, supporters said HB 349 would provide choice for parents to pursue the best educational opportunities for their children, regardless of their financial status. Opponents argued the tax credit program would siphon money from public education and weaken school districts.

Education reform has been an elusive goal for Republican leadership for a number of years. This is an issue that divides the Republican caucus, with many rural Republicans voting against measures they see as weakening public schools. However, it is a top priority for Speaker Rob Vescovo (R-Arnold), and he closed debate with a passionate speech that included his story of dropping out of high school. The bill passed the House 82 to 71, exactly the number of votes needed for passage. HB 349 now moves to the Senate for consideration.

In the Senate, a sweeping education reform package was debated for hours. SB 55, sponsored by Senator Cindy O'Laughlin (R-Shelbina), includes Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, charter school expansion, literacy education, requirements for gifted programs, and more. Majority Floor Leader Caleb Rowden (R-Columbia)

handled the bill throughout the debate, which ended close to 2:00 am on Wednesday morning. The bill was eventually laid over without receiving initial approval from the body.

Dates of Interest

January

- **6** - First Day of Session
- **18** - No Session, Martin Luther King Jr. Day
- **27** - State of the State Address

March

- **1** - Bill Filing Deadline
- **12** - Legislative Spring Break Begins
- **22** - Legislature Reconvenes

April

- **5** - No Session, Easter Break

May

- **7** - Budget Bills Must be Passed
- **14** - Last Day of Session

Senate Approves Public Safety Package

The Senate passed public safety legislation that originally started as a bill designed to protect law enforcement. SB 26, sponsored by Senator Bill Eigel (R-St. Charles), passed by a vote of 24 to 9.

The language creates protections for law enforcement officers under investigation that could lead to dismissal or demotion. There are limits on how and when officers are to be questioned, and the investigation must be completed within 90 days unless extensions are granted.

One of the most controversial sections creates the offense of unlawful traffic interference. A person would commit this offense for walking, standing, or kneeling with the intent to impede vehicle traffic. This provision is aimed at recent protests that have blocked highways or other streets. The first violation of this offense would be an infraction.

SB 26 also provides that a taxpayer can initiate an action for injunctive relief if the governing body of their political subdivision decreases the police budget by more than 12% compared to other departments.

SB 26 is now awaiting committee referral in the House.

News in Brief

- Governor Mike Parson announced the next tier of vaccine eligibility (Phase 1B - Tier 3) will open on Monday, March 15. This includes individuals in professions considered "essential," including K-12 teachers and school employees, childcare providers, and grocery store employees. There are

approximately 550,000 Missourians in this tier.

- The House Emerging Issues Committee will hear HJR 53, sponsored by Representative Chuck Basye (R-Rocheport). This would place a ballot measure before voters that, if approved, would require students to participate in sports leagues based on the biological sex they were assigned at birth.
- On Monday, the House General Laws Committee will consider three bills to add discharging a gun in a municipality with criminal negligence to the offense of unlawfully using a weapon. The bills are HB 99, sponsored by Representative Mark Sharp (D-Kansas City); HB 722, sponsored by Representative Rory Rowland (D-Kansas City); and HB 795, sponsored by Representative Nick Schroer (R-St. Charles).
- SB 180, sponsored by Senator Tony Luetkemeyer (R-Parkville), requires that any state agency adopting or amending a rule must also rescind a rule that is unnecessary or obsolete. This is an effort to limit the number of rules in the Code of State Regulations. All rules would expire no more than five years after their effective date and would then have to be renewed. This legislation will be heard in the Senate General Laws Committee on Tuesday.
- The Senate Education Committee will consider legislation requiring the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to annually publish online a list of the schools that have performed in the bottom 5% for more than three years. These schools would be designated as "persistently failing." SB 133 is sponsored by the committee Chair, Senator Cindy O'Laughlin (R-Shelbina).



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