

Great Schools Are Not An Entitlement – They Must Be Earned

When I was growing up in Columbia in the 1980s and early 1990s, the excellence of our public schools was so well-established that it had long become part of our basic community identity. If an out-of-towner asked what Columbia was like, a typical response was: “We’re the proud home of the University of Missouri, and we have great public schools” (or, occasionally, in those days: “We’re the proud home of the University of Missouri, our football team is lousy, but we have great public schools”).



When President Reagan came to visit Hickman High School in 1987, even my friends and I, as elementary school students, appreciated that his choice of Columbia was in special recognition of the excellence of our school system, and we were proud of that. Years later, when I showed up at Yale after graduating from Hickman, I found, to my surprise, that the Columbia Public Schools had prepared me so well that I was entering college ahead of almost all of my classmates in math, literature, and science—including those classmates who had attended storied Eastern prep schools like Exeter and Andover. The very best teachers I ever had in my life—the most passionate, the most dedicated, the most inspiring—were those teachers I had growing up at Russell Boulevard, Jeff Junior, and Hickman High School. And most of my fellow CPS alumni feel the same way.

But, as any accomplished athlete, artist, or businessperson will tell you, greatness is not an entitlement. Rather, it is something that must be earned and re-earned—over, and over, and over again. Great public schools become more difficult to sustain over time, not less. For one thing, the problems evolve: our population grows, poverty rates increase, our infrastructure ages, budgets shrink. For another thing, success always tempts us with complacency. We begin to forget how hard we had to work to earn our success in the first place, and we can become lulled into relaxing the intensity of our commitment.

We find ourselves, today, at an important inflection point in the history of our Columbia Public Schools. The challenges have never been greater, and the resources at our disposal have never been more stretched. Missouri ranks 48th out of the 50 states in state funding to education, which means that local districts must depend heavily upon themselves to raise the funds needed to support their schools. Missouri also ranks 48th out of the 50 states in average public teacher salaries, and our own district has already been forced to cut numerous staff positions over the past few years in response to budgetary pressures.

This is the time to sharpen our focus, redouble our efforts, and renew our commitment to maintaining great public schools in Columbia. When I was growing up, “Columbia” meant “Great Schools,” and we owe it to our children and our community to keep it that way. I urge you to join me in supporting the school bond issue and levy in Tuesday’s Special Election.

--John A. Wright