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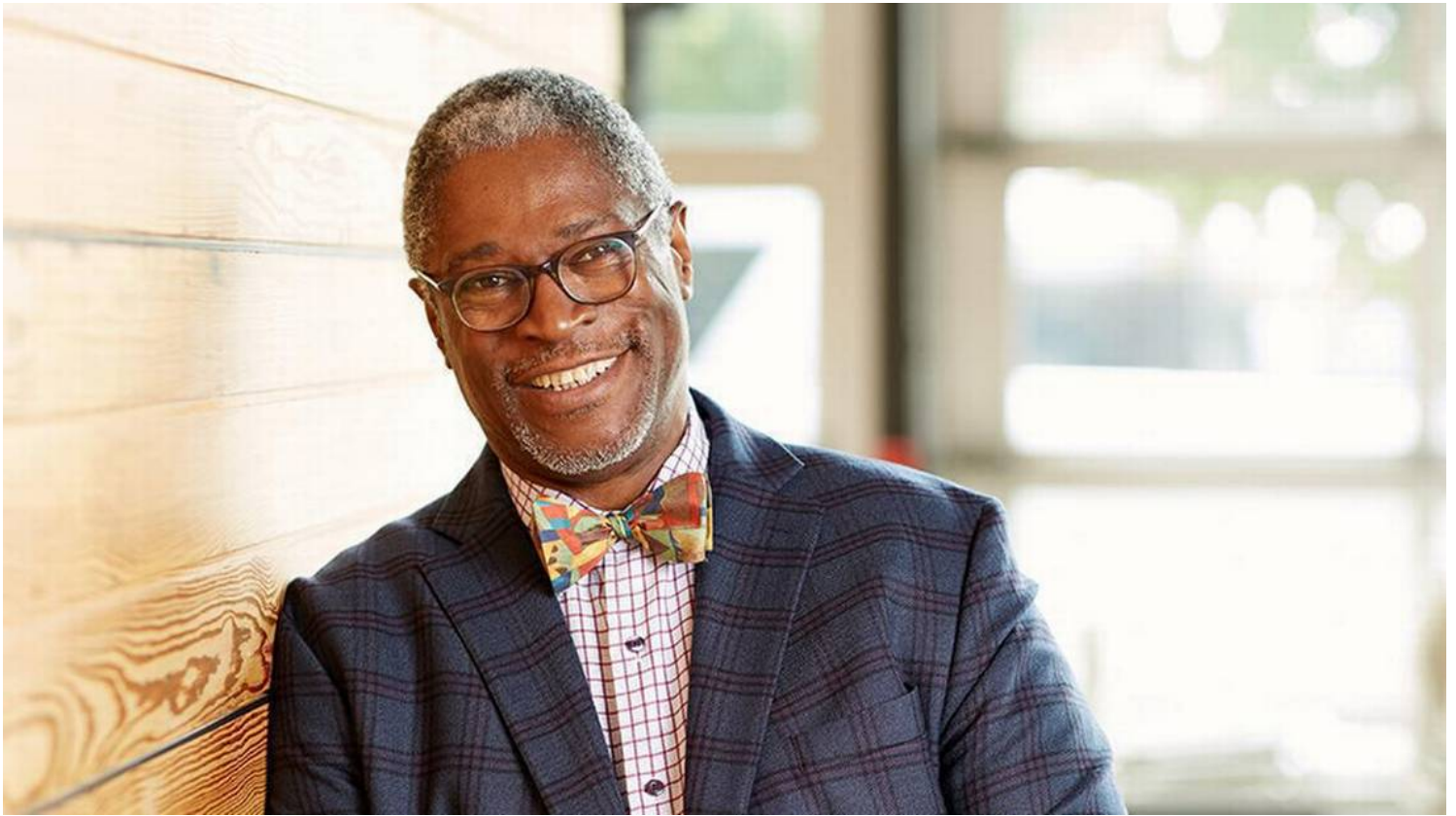
GUEST COMMENTARY

Sly James: Student growth, not paperwork, is what Missouri schools need to flourish / Opinion

BY SLY JAMES *SPECIAL TO THE STAR*

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The former Kansas City mayor supports the Quality Education Act in Jefferson City. Here's why you should, too. PAUL ANDREWS



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Envision being a fifth-grade teacher at Wendell Phillips Elementary in Kansas City and helping a student who started the school year reading and doing math at a second-grade level grow to a fourth-grade level by the end of the year. In my book, that teacher deserves a medal, a parade — or at the very least, our sincere thanks.

But under Missouri's current education accountability system, student growth accounts for just 20% of a school district's performance rating. There is no better time than now, as students and teachers across the state continue their efforts to rebound from COVID-19, to make student growth the main focus of Missouri education policy. Our state's laser focus must be reversing learning loss and achieving real academic growth when it comes to K-12 education this next decade.

When Missouri's Annual Performance Report was released this month, it revealed some very interesting contradictions. The Kansas City Public School District and several Kansas City charter schools posted very impressive student growth data. The Ewing Marion Kauffman School earned 99% of its student growth points. Kansas City Girls Preparatory Academy, where I serve on the board of directors, earned 98% of its growth points, and KCPS earned 83% of its growth points. In fact, of the 555 school districts and charter school organizations in Missouri, the six with the highest growth scores were all here in Kansas City.

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And yet, none of these schools earned a total APR score above 85%. So how can this be, when we know that positively impacting student growth is the truest measure of an excellent teacher and strong school? The reason is that 80% of a school's APR score is based on data less important than student academic growth.

Teachers and students in Missouri will never reach their full potential until policymakers change our education accountability system to actually measure what matters: student growth, instead of measuring how well schools do administrative paperwork. Yes, districts should file paperwork for compliance purposes, but that's not how we should measure how well they are educating our students, especially now.

Our current system is outdated and ends up penalizing schools that serve a student population facing more barriers — such as poverty — in attaining a great education, regardless of how much growth is occurring. With that in mind, it's not surprising that many of our best teachers in high-poverty schools either quit or leave for more affluent schools, where they are less likely to be labeled as failing. We need our best teachers serving our students with the highest needs, but our current policy from Jefferson City incentivizes the opposite.



In 2022, Missouri students who were eligible to receive free and reduced lunch had an average score in fourth-grade reading and math that was 29 points lower than for students not eligible. This gap has increased significantly over the past two decades.

Thankfully, a bipartisan group of legislators in Jefferson City recognizes what is at stake and is supporting the Quality Education Act. The Missouri House education committee will soon hear House Bill 558. Along with its Senate companion, S.B. 341, this legislation would bring about a sea change in how we define and measure school quality.

Under the Quality Education Act, 50% of a school's performance rating would be based on student growth, up from just 20%, and an additional 40% would be based on student achievement. At the same time, it would also make it easier for families and communities to know how well local schools are serving students by assigning districts and schools report cards, focused entirely on student outcomes.

This change in education policy reaches far beyond education. Missouri will simply never make meaningful progress in combating poverty, life expectancy, and health and economic disparities without improving the quality of our public schools.

Missouri ranks 42 out of 50 states in health outcomes, at the exact same time we trail six of our eight border states in fourth-grade reading and math. Yet, because our system focuses too much on administrative paperwork, and not enough on how well

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our hardworking teachers are growing students academically, we continue to fall behind other states.

A decade ago, the Missouri Department of Elementary of Secondary Education launched a campaign with much fanfare to help make Missouri a Top 10 state in education by 2020. You probably haven't heard much about this lately, because not only did we not become a Top 10 state for education, but we are further behind than when we created this lofty goal.

Let's actually support our teachers, parents and students by creating the conditions that allow our public schools to flourish. We start doing that by focusing on student growth, measuring what matters, and by providing clear and accessible information on school performance to parents to spur more involvement.



Passing the Quality Education Act would be an enormous win for educators, because it actually aligns our state's school accountability system with what good teachers do each and every day: Grow students academically. Please ask your legislator to support this measure to get our public schools back on track.

Sly James is former mayor of Kansas City and co-founder of communications firm Wickham James Strategies and Solutions.

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