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School suit focuses on tax values

Report casts doubt on local assessments.

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JEFFERSON CITY (AP) - A trial on how the state funds public schools focused yesterday on suburban districts' concerns that some areas are undervaluing property, a key factor in the state method of doling out education dollars.

Early witnesses and evidence narrowed in on property assessment practices around the state, a particular concern to 26 largely suburban plaintiff school districts in the Coalition to Fund Excellent Schools.

The lawsuit, which includes Columbia Public Schools as a plaintiff, argues the state doesn't put enough money in public education and doesn't fairly distribute the money. Missouri's budget includes about \$2.7 billion in basic state aid for 524 public school districts.

Lawmakers overhauled the school funding formula in 2005, setting a target of what it takes to provide a sound education to each student, derived from spending by districts that score highest on a state report. The formula determines what each district should receive and provides state money for what is not raised locally through property taxes.

The suburban group believes property is being undervalued in parts of the state, meaning local districts aren't receiving as much money as they should, forcing the state to spend more to help some schools.

Yesterday's testimony focused on a report on property assessments that the coalition commissioned from the University of Missouri-St. Louis Public Policy Research Center. The report by Steven Gardner concluded that just four of 27 counties studied met the state requirement to capture 95 percent of property value in 2003-04. It found an average assessment level of 79 percent of value. Assessment levels in the sample of counties ranged from 98 percent of value in Audrain County to 57 percent in Washington County.

The coalition said it is particularly concerned about inaccurate property assessments because the formula locks in districts' local tax money calculation at 2004 assessed value levels. But the group would like state officials or the courts to order the 2004 numbers to be refigured.

"The whole foundation formula is built around a concept that says we've got to determine which districts are relatively poor," Gardner said. "If we're measuring that wrong, then we're classifying some districts as poor that aren't and some districts as rich that aren't."

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His report also found that a State Tax Commission study of property assessments wasn't reliable, as it found nearly the opposite, that 23 of those 27 counties meet the standard and an average assessment level of nearly 99 percent. Members of the tax commission also are testifying during the trial.

While testifying, Gardner, a former state legislator, acknowledged federal convictions of mail and wire fraud stemming from work for a savings and loan in 1987, but he said he has had no further problems and the convictions did not affect his property assessment research.

Assistant Attorney General Karen Winn questioned Gardner, attempting to show that he had a profit motive in conducting such research and questioning its objectivity.

David Glaser of Rockwood School District in suburban St. Louis, who helps lead the coalition, has recommended adjusting 2004 assessed values to reflect 95 percent of value statewide, which could raise local property tax bills in many areas and alter - or potentially decrease - the state money flow.

Glaser said the state could then decrease the assumed tax rate of local districts from \$3.43 per \$100 of assessed valuation to \$3.13 and redistribute the same amount of money through the formula.

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