

Wright's passion for education runs in the family

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John Wright, Democratic candidate for the 47th District Missouri House of Representatives seat, walks down the street while door knocking Sept. 27 in northwest Columbia. This trip was the third time going door to door in the Stonecrest neighborhood in northwest Columbia. Wright played Little League baseball down the street from the neighborhood when he was growing up in Columbia.

| [Bridget Murphy](#)

Democrat John Wright is seeking to represent the 47th District in the Missouri House of Representatives.

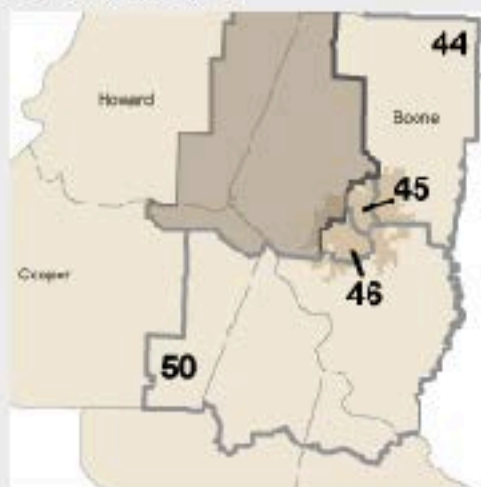
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COLUMBIA — John Wright isn't shy about discussing education.

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Missouri's new 47th House District includes parts of northern and western Columbia and parts of Howard, Boone and Cooper counties. It includes the communities of Harrisburg, Rocheport, Wooldridge and Higbee. Democrat John Wright and Republican Mitch Richards are seeking to represent the district.

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His answer: Education.

Wright grew up in a family heavily involved in education. Wright's mother, Sarah Riddick, used to teach English at Hickman High School, and his grandfather, Jack Wright, served as the UM system's general counsel for 20 years.

In fourth grade, Wright was rarely without a book. He recalls that his teacher, Joanne Baier, would give her students "Baier Bucks" for completing books and would buy them lunch when they collected enough.

"The longer the book we read, the more Baier Bucks we'd get," Wright said. "So I went to the library and picked one of the biggest books I could find. It turned out to be the Norton Anthology of American Poetry."

So it's no surprise that Wright, a Democrat and a newcomer to the local political scene, is placing education at the forefront of his bid to become

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state representative for Missouri's new 47th House District.

Impact on education

Wright, now 36, grew up in and around Columbia attending Russell Boulevard Elementary School, Jefferson Junior High and Hickman.

When he was a child, Wright would go to the public library with his mother once a week.

Wright particularly loved to read books such as "Where the Sidewalk Ends" and Beverly Cleary's Ramona Quimby series. He recalls that "Where the Wild Things Are" scared him a bit.

"We wouldn't leave until we couldn't carry another book," Wright said of his visits to the library. His passion for reading at a young age has pushed Wright to look for ways to help young students achieve more in school.

Wright has rotated between living in New York and Columbia since 2008 and finally bought a home in Rocheport in 2010. Since 2008, he has had a heavy involvement in Columbia's education community. In 2009, Wright founded Rollins Reading, a program that works closely with kindergarteners through third-graders at Grant Elementary School to help kids improve their reading levels. He named the program after Rollins Street, where he grew up.

Wright has also worked closely with Grant's former principal, Beverly Borduin, to

create a public-private Montessori preschool within Grant.

Borduin said she quickly recognized at the first preschool planning meeting more than four years ago that Wright possessed a serious commitment to providing opportunities for children to succeed.

"I could tell he was bright and passionate and would listen to other ideas," Borduin said. "It's a matter of how do you bring everyone together, and John does that."

Borduin said Wright was able to bring a strong business-type knowledge to the table. "John could look at proposals and help decide whether they were effective or not."

Wright said it was the ability of teachers such as Baier to get kids excited about reading that stood out to him. When hiring teachers at Rollins Reading, Wright said he looks for people who bring their own passion to teaching like Baier did for his fourth-grade class.

"I had the opportunity to study economics at Yale, and while I was there I had several professors who were Nobel Prize winners," Wright said. "But by far the best teachers I had were those in the Columbia Public Schools. They just opened one door after another for me."

Seizing opportunities

Wright played little league baseball as a child. Once he moved into a league old enough to have the kids pitch, his coach decided to put him on the mound. Tall and lanky, he seemed a good fit for the position.

His first outing was a rough one. Wright walked the first batter. Then the second.

And the third. Before he knew what had happened, he had walked in a run, and the bases were still loaded. The manager pulled Wright from the game.

"I was just devastated that night," Wright said. "I thought I'd never be able to pitch again. The coach didn't even say anything about it to me."

But the coach wasn't ready to give up. He put Wright back on the mound for the next game. When it was over, Wright had pitched a shutout.

Wright said he'll never forget the second chance he got and how the manager's belief in him helped him pitch so much better.

Fast forward 10 years to 1998. Wright had completed his economics degree at Yale and, having been granted the opportunity to defer his enrollment in law school, worked 18 months for Goldman Sachs in New York.

At that point, he faced the choice of heading to law school or pursuing new investment opportunities with Silver Lake, a new private technology investment firm. He decided to stay in New York and work with the new company.

"My role was analytical," Wright said. "I helped analyze companies and their business models to help us determine which partner to invest with."

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Wright worked for Silver Lake for 2 1/2 years before returning to Yale to earn his law degree. He spent another three years with Silver Lake before starting his own investment firm, Rollins Capital, with offices in New York City and Rocheport. The New York office has since closed.

Wright said Silver Lake taught him the ins and outs of the technology industry, insight that he brought to his own firm. Wright said Rollins Capital is no longer actively seeking new investment opportunities and is focused on completing the projects already on its plate.

Public service roots

Wright said he thought he could best have an impact on education in mid-Missouri by influencing it on a state level. He felt he could put his business and education experiences to use as a state representative.

"At a most basic level, I've learned from watching my grandparents and parents that we're not defined by how much we take from the world but by how much we're able to give back," he said.

Wright said it was his parent's community involvement that eventually drew him toward a career in public service. His father, John Riddick, owned John Riddick Motors and has served on the Columbia Chamber of Commerce, the Airport Advisory Board and PedNet Coalition here in Columbia.

The Wright family's public service experience dates back to the 1830s when his great-great-great-great uncle, David Atchison, served in the Missouri General Assembly and later went on to become a U.S. senator. Mount Etna Morris, better known as M.E. Morris, was Wright's great-grandfather. He served three

nonconsecutive terms as state treasurer of Missouri along with two terms as a Missouri state representative.

Wright's natural father, who died of Hodgkin lymphoma when Wright was 2, also attended law school at Yale.

Peggy Poe, Wright's fifth-grade teacher, said she wasn't surprised Wright is now running for public office. Poe said Wright was a "conciliator and arbitrator" in the classroom and often came up with unique ideas.

"He had the respect of all the groups (of kids) in the class," Poe said. "I remember him being part of every group and not specifically one group. That doesn't always happen in fifth grade."

Wright's first attempt at public office hasn't been without controversy. Over the past weeks, Wright and state Rep. Mary Still have been accused of offering money to primary opponent Nancy Copenhaver if she would run in another district. Wright said people warned him that political campaigns can be stressful because they place candidates under the microscope. Thus far, he believes the effort has been worthwhile.

Wright's opponent, Republican Mitch Richards, also has run advertisements saying that Wright is trying to buy votes. Wright has a campaign account of more than \$300,000, and he has contributed more than \$180,000 of that himself.

Wright said that he's been disappointed by the negative tone and that he plans to continue trying to convey a positive message rather than "answer negativity with negativity."

"No one looks forward to that aspect of the political process," Wright said. "But I'm

"No one looks forward to that aspect of the political process," Wright said. "But I'm willing to participate in the political process because I believe public service is important and affects many peoples' lives."

Supervising editor is [Scott Swafford](#).

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