



August 15, 2018

FROM: Bruce A. Ring, Jr.
Director of Investments

RE: 2017 Annual Program Review

Section 166.450 of the Revised Statutes of Missouri requires the Director of Investments of the State Treasurer’s office to annually review the Missouri Higher Education Savings Program (“MOST”) and report those findings to the MOST Board (“Board”). The director must review five areas:

- Board administration
- Financial status
- Investment policy
- Participation rate
- Continued viability

Accordingly, I am pleased to report the following from my review for calendar year 2017.

I. Board Administration

Ascensus Government Savings Recordkeeping Services, LLC serves as MOST’s program manager, record-keeper, and servicing agent. Together with its affiliates, Ascensus Government Savings has overall responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the plan. Formerly known as Upromise Investments, Ascensus Government Savings assumed responsibility as recordkeeping and servicing agent, for both the Direct and Advisor Plans on June 3, 2006. On February 7, 2011, the Board entered into another contract with Ascensus Government Savings extending through June of 2016. Another RFP for program management services was issued in 2015. On February 8, 2016, a new contract was entered into with Ascensus Government Savings extending the contract service period to June of 2021, under the terms of this contract the Advisor Plan was eliminated and the participants were migrated into the Direct Plan in 2016. In addition, the Board met quarterly during 2017, as required by law.

II. Financial Status

Following is a review of the financial status of our major partners and a summary of the investment performance of the investment options within the MOST plan.

A. Financial Status of MOST Partners

Ascensus Government Savings is part of Ascensus, Inc., the largest independent retirement and college savings services provider in the United States, helping over six million Americans save for the future. With more than 30 years of experience, the firm partners with financial

institutions to offer tailored solutions that meet the needs of financial professionals, employers, and individuals. Ascensus specializes in recordkeeping, administrative, and program management services, supporting over 54,000 retirement plans and 4 million 529 savings accounts. It also administers more than 1.5 million IRAs and health savings accounts.

The investment manager for the Direct Plan, The Vanguard Group, Inc., remains a strong franchise. Vanguard is one of the world's largest investment companies, offering about 397 low-cost traditional funds and ETFs. As of June 30, 2018, more than 20 million investors in about 170 countries have entrusted Vanguard with more than \$5.1 trillion in global assets under management. Vanguard continues to be a leader in the 529 plan industry, evidenced by over \$92 billion in 529 savings and pre-paid tuition plan assets under management. Headquartered in Malvern, Pennsylvania, Vanguard has about 16,600 employees spread across 19 locations worldwide.

B. Performance of MOST Underlying Funds

Overall, 2017 had a positive performance from equity, with a less impressive positive performance from fixed income, although the overall performance of all portfolios would best be described as positive given the current economic conditions. All of the equity and fixed income portfolios showed positive results for the year. Equity portfolios showed results ranging from +11.31% to +27.76%, while the fixed income results ranged from +1.47% to +2.16%. Overall, the results show improvement in the equity returns and a slight decrease in the fixed income returns from the previous year.

In 2017, the returns on the underlying funds in the Direct Plan were very similar to the returns we saw in 2016, with all funds showing positive returns. The annual returns ranged from +.83% in the Vanguard ST Inflation Protected Securities to a high of +28.05 in the DFA International Core Equity Portfolio.

Treasurer Schmitt's office is responsible for monitoring the relative performance of each of the underlying investment alternatives versus an established benchmark. This effectively measures the contribution that the investment manager's expertise has on participants' returns. During calendar year 2017, both absolute returns and relative performance were positive. All of the underlying portfolios performed as expected or slightly above benchmark, with the exception of DFA Small Cap which underperformed the benchmark. While index funds are expected to be at or below benchmark, depending on the extent to which they stray from exact matching of the index, actively-managed funds are expected to exceed those benchmarks. But, with two exceptions, the actively-managed funds generally exceeded those benchmarks this year.

To summarize, the investment managers' overall contribution to participants' returns was positive. All passive (index tracking) funds performed satisfactorily, and experienced low-tracking error of returns versus their relevant indices.

III. Investment Policy

In mid-2007, the Board adopted a formal investment policy governing program investment. The policy establishes objectives for structuring the investment options; formulates policies for selecting appropriate investment managers and the use of specific investment vehicles; and

establishes an investment-performance process for underlying funds in the Plan. The policy is an important statement by the Board in terms of defining its fiduciary responsibilities and standards for Treasurer Schmitt's office staff and MOST partners.

Since its adoption, the policy has been amended twice. In 2008, the Board modified the policy to allow the Director of Investments, rather than the Board, to place a fund on, or release it from, the "WATCH" status.

In August 2011, the Board made several modifications to the policy. The Board lengthened a fund's formal review period—specifically, up three consecutive quarters from two—when looking at benchmark performance evaluation for the Watch List. When determining a fund's Watch List eligibility and quarterly performance, the Board also added "Beta" and "Alpha" measures to a review process. Finally, the Board eliminated the "value of active management" measurement criteria.

In 2015, the Board reviewed the investment policy.

IV. Participation Rate

The following is an examination of the participation rate of the MOST programs. By examining the participation rate for the program, we can attempt to gauge the relative success the program has had in reaching the state's residents and encouraging them to increase 529 savings—the original goal of the IRS section authorizing these programs. The relative success or failure of states' various 529 programs rests on many different factors including the effectiveness of marketing efforts, availability of a state tax deduction, demographic and economic conditions, cost structure and the abilities, and resources of states' partners to attract and retain assets. However, one facet that has remained a constant is the competition for assets among states' program managers, which remains fierce.

A. Growth of Plan in 2017

The MOST Plans experienced growth in both assets and accounts during the year. The asset growth in 2017 is due to both investment returns and increased contributions. The positive change in number of accounts is primarily the result of plan marketing, increased awareness, and popularity of the program.

Plan assets grew by a rate of 14% as compared to a 1.5% growth rate last year, ending the year at approximately \$3.006 billion as compared to year-end 2016 at \$2.617 billion. Contributions outpaced withdrawals in the plan. Total contributions for 2017 were slightly over \$287 million, while withdrawals were \$256 million. Both contributions and withdrawals were up in 2017 from 2016. Much of that change can be attributed to the migration of Advisor Plan participants into the Direct Plan. While the rate of growth in contributions has slowed, the plan as a whole is continuing to grow.

The number of accounts increased 3% to 157,634 as compared to 152,867 in 2016. The vast majority of accounts are Missouri residents which account for almost 88% of account ownership.

B. Comparison of MOST Participation to National Trends

Nationally, assets in 529 Plans on average have grown significantly over the past decade, but at a decreasing rate. Similar to Missouri, levels plummeted in 2008 due primarily to the financial market performance, but accounts have continued to grow signaling that popularity and awareness across the country is on the rise. Overall, the growth trends for Missouri's MOST Plan, both in respect to assets and accounts, have consistently mirrored the national rates over the past several years.

For 2017, MOST assets grew by 14.8% compared to a national growth in assets for all 529 plans of about 16.9%. Growth was attributable to the markets and to a lesser extent, plan net cash flow. When compared to our peer plan group, MOST outperformed 4 out of 6 members of the peer group. The peer-group composite growth rate was 15.2%. Overall asset growth is a positive sign.

V. Continued Viability

The MOST 529 Plan remains a viable 529 savings program. In Ascensus Government Savings' 10½-years of program management, we have experienced strong trends in asset and account growth despite the market turmoil that plagued much of this period. We also saw an upswing in the number of new beneficiaries enrolled in the plan, which shows growth of new customers.

Throughout the economic downturn and subsequent recovery, the Plan's performance has been resilient. The fact that participants weren't required to make non-qualified withdrawals on a large scale during this period is promising. As a result, the majority of participants should have experienced full recovery of their 529 savings account balances and some asset growth. The economic environment remains challenging, but it appears the economy is on the road to a slow and steady recovery.

In an effort to further strengthen our future performance, the Board decided to restructure the glidepaths in the plan to provide a smoother transition through the years and lessen some of the risks associated with transitioning from 1 age group to the next. The addition of DFA funds has enhanced our program offerings and should improve our overall plan.

Missouri's MOST 529 Plan remains not only viable, but well positioned for growth as one of the premiere plans in the country.