Utah’s Education Funding: How Do We Get Dollars Into Classrooms?

By Utah State Senator Patricia Jones

It is an east-side Salt Lake school in an affluent neighborhood. Only five, count them, five students out of the 29 third-graders in her class currently read at or above grade level. Teacher Mrs. McCullough says teaching today is very different than in the past, as she shows me a list of her students, many of whom are ESL students or require extra education support. One new student scheduled to enter her classroom the next day has Down syndrome. The class has no teacher's aides. I learned this as I stood on her front doorstep giving my campaign sales pitch last October. Mrs. McCullough's story is but one example of the challenges in Utah's public schools. Unless you have been living in a cave, you are aware that Utah has the dubious distinction of having the lowest per-pupil funding in its public education system in the nation. We are reminded nearly every day of our cash-starved schools and large class sizes.

Of course, excellence is not solely dependent on generous funding. Historically, Utah schools have churned out relatively high-performing students despite chronic funding challenges. Simply put, we have been getting a huge bang for the buck in Utah. Much of the credit can be given to dedicated teachers and many parents who volunteer their time and talents. But that is changing. Student scores are beginning to level off or decline. Additionally, recent reports show that Utah is behind other states with similar demographics.

When I first ran for the Utah House of Representatives in 1999, and since serving in the Utah Senate for the past several years, it was my stated goal that I would try to find a long-term plan for education and the appropriate funding for the plan. It hit me when I was conducting focus groups for the Department of Transportation and one of the questions posed to respondents referred to Utah's "transportation plan." Our state did not have a long-term plan for public education. We did for roads. We did for growth through Envision Utah. But we did not have a comprehensive plan for our public schools. It also struck me that Utah legislators draft a frenzy of bills each year in an effort to "fix" public education because there are no comprehensive, developed goals for our schools.

As I campaigned door-to-door this past election cycle, I heard over and over from parents that education is the number one issue, and they tied it directly to our economic prosperity. Parents and grandparents are concerned that our school children may not be prepared to meet the demands of a global economy. They ask, will my child be able to afford college? Buy a house? Sustain a family? No doubt, my own grandparents worried about these things too. However, concerns about our children's futures seem more dire today. It is sobering to hear that, for the first time in history, our children's life span will be shorter than our own. Just as sobering is the possibility that our kids may not be receiving an education that will enable them to prosper.

Governor Herbert convened the Governor's Education Excellence Commission this past year, with experts from a wide variety of education-related fields. As a member of that commission, it has been refreshing to hear the various perspectives. The commission recommended a number of specific goals in an effort to reform and improve Utah's public education system. At the top of the list: extend optional all-day kindergarten, ensure that two-thirds of our population achieves 90% reading proficiency for our 3rd graders and the same proficiency for 6th grade math. These goals alone are tremendous achievements, but improving public education in Utah requires changing the way we deliver education and funding those changes appropriately.

Utah has gained distinction as the number one state for business. Buy why not set the same goal for educating students? For years, it has been a mystery to me why we subsidize individuals who qualify for income tax exemptions on dependents. By law, all income taxes paid by Utahns go directly to public and higher education. When people receive tax subsidies in the form of exemptions, that exemption money comes directly out of our educational fund. Eliminating exemptions on dependents for state income taxes (while still allowing federal exemptions) would generate more than $350 million per year ongoing money for student achievement. This is not a tax increase, but elimination of an unfair and irresponsible tax giveaway to some families. Families who earn higher incomes do not currently receive the credit, so the existing system is both selective and unfair. The plan would include a non-refundable earned income tax credit for low-income working families.

It should also be reiterated that the Utah Legislature cut the income tax rate from 7% to 5% a few years ago.
Lawmakers broke their arms patting themselves on the back, while only a measly 7% of the population is even aware of the tax reduction. In fact, more than one-third of our citizens believe, wrongly, that their income tax rates have increased rather than decreased. Few income tax filers are even aware that the dependent exemption exists. According to a number of tax preparers, filers just want to know how much they have to pay or how much they will get back on their income tax forms.

Although each one of us benefits from an educated society, we are allowing those with many dependents to fill the classrooms while receiving a subsidy. If we eliminated the state portion of the income tax exemptions (while still allowing all the federal exemptions), we could target those monies to student achievement, infusing the funds directly to public school classrooms. Doing so would also free up scarce resources for our colleges and universities which have been the target of unfortunate budget cuts over the past several years. University students have been paying an increasingly larger share for tuition in an effort to balance the budget.

I believe in greater input and decision making for any new funds that come at the local level, with oversight by elected school boards. By law, each school in Utah has a community council comprised of the principal, some teachers, and parents who have been elected by local patrons. Community councils know what their own school needs most, just as they do when divvying out school trust lands money. Some schools like Mrs. McCullough's may choose to hire more reading specialists to help struggling readers. Pulling struggling students out for remediation would effectively lower class sizes and allow more advanced students the challenges they deserve. Others may choose funding the arts, hiring a school nurse, guidance counselor, or giving cash incentives to exceptional teachers. Funneling new, ongoing money at the school level would strengthen community councils and neighborhoods because parents and patrons would have a significant incentive to get involved and run for community council positions. The community council would solicit input from the community and draw up an allocation plan for the new, site-based funding for their neighborhood school. Individual school funding allocation plans would then require approval by the local elected school boards. This procedure would allow for necessary accountability and oversight and would accommodate creative thinking shared between various schools.

Site-based funding and allocation involvement builds communities. While it may not be realistic to return to Mayberry, our sense of community has eroded. Local schools used to be the center of our communities, the place where citizens with a common purpose would meet and mingle. Currently, one elementary student attending the neighborhood school lives next door to his playmate who is bused to a school across town. Another neighbor boy across the street attends a charter school several blocks away. Open enroll-