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Charter funds disparity found

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The Utah Taxpayers Association released a study that association leaders say calls for charter school funding disparity to be addressed.

According to the association's annual analysis of public education spending in Utah, charter schools spent \$1,312 less in ongoing funds per student in 2005 compared to non-charter public schools.

"Basically in the long run, charter school funding needs to be addressed because currently they are being funded at a lower amount than district schools," said Mike Jerman, vice president of the Utah Taxpayers Association.

The study, released Thursday, shows charter schools spent 21.8 percent less per student than traditional schools. But Jerman said comparing district schools to charter schools requires several adjustments.

The comparison excludes non-K-12 programs and food service since most charters do not have those services. The comparison also excludes the three-year federal start-up grants charters can get in their first years of operation since that money is not ongoing — that money totaled around \$5.8 million in 2005.

"The structural imbalance is being masked by that one-time federal startup money that in the long run will eventually disappear," Jerman said.

Charter leaders say the big difference between charter schools and traditional schools lies in money for capital facilities.

Traditional district schools rely on local property taxes to cover the costs associated with buildings and maintaining schools.

Jerman said charters do not have property tax authority, so they rely on state funding to cover those expenses, while traditional schools typically use state funding for instruction and other operating costs.

He said the study is a response to proponents of school choice, who have been concerned whether or not charter schools are adequately funded or equitably funded.

"We are supporters of choice in education," Jerman said. "Hopefully next year or the year after vouchers will be a second viable choice, but right now charter schools are the primary alternative to district schools."

Last session the Legislature put a five-school cap on the number of charters that can be approved for the 2007-08 school year while they conduct a six-month study that will include researching the funding equity between charter schools and district schools.

Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper and president of the Utah Taxpayers Association, said during the legislative session this spring lawmakers voted to change the charter funding formula to narrow the equity gap between charters and traditional schools to a difference of \$400.

State researchers will be looking at what else needs to be done and how to go about it.

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