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Where should state spend education money?

Foundation forum brings diverse views

By [Jennifer Toomer-Cook](#)

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Give more money to schools, give education money to parents — Thursday's Utah Foundation forum on improving school funding brought some diverse views.

Perhaps some of those could form into recommendations to the Legislature.

"We wanted to make sure this issue is paid attention to ... and some ideas had an important public forum," said Steve Kroes, Utah Foundation executive director.

Foundation trustees could decide to make recommendations to the Legislature, but that is yet undetermined. Still, Kroes says public school funding will remain on the foundation's radar.

Earlier this year, the foundation released the study, "Paradox Lost," about Utah's efforts to pay for schools.

Utah spends the least per student in the country, and has the nation's biggest classes. While past studies showed the state's multitude of children — Utah has the nation's highest birthrate — made boosting school funding tough. Utah in 1995 was fifth in the country in terms of funding effort, according to the foundation's "Paradox Lost" report.

But by 2004, Utah's effort had waned to 27th in the country for public education revenues per \$1,000 of personal income, and 36th for public school spending per \$1,000 of personal income, the report states.

Following the report, the foundation asked groups involved in education policy to weigh in on school funding policies. The State Board of Education, Utah School Boards Association and Utah Association of School Business Officers, Utah Education Association, Utah Taxpayers Association, Parents for Choice in Education, the State Charter School Board and the Utah System of Higher Education presented their opinions (papers can be found at www.utahfoundation.org/forum2006/papers.html) at the forum, "Are Utah Schools Adequately Funded?"

Some said money isn't the solution — more school choice is.

The Utah Taxpayers Association reported national per-student spending has risen 65 percent since 1980, but with little difference in 12th-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress. Vice president Mike Jerman therefore supports offering more educational choices to foster competition, improve schools and open a market for meeting students' needs.

Parents for Choice in Education wants simpler school funding — Utah's current financing is "unnecessarily complex," chairman Doug Holmes said. Vouchers for private school tuition would put parents back where they belong, in charge of education, and offer better, more competitive options for students. He said that's needed as students are dropping out of school and the United States has lost its footing on international tests.

"We do have a problem with our current education system," Holmes said. "Only an ostrich ... burying its head in the sand can deny it."

On the other side are cries for more school money, especially in a time of proposed tax cuts. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Patti Harrington called additional state revenues "not a surplus, but an opportunity."

She, the UEA and school boards and business groups asked for more money for teachers and educational programs.

Harrington said some ongoing money could be dedicated to one-time needs like buses or computers, creating a buffer against economic downturns. She also called for lifting the cap on trust land money available to schools, and suggested a referendum proposing mandatory per-student increases, as other states have put before voters.

Harrington and the school boards and business associations also suggested letting the basic property tax rate grow with real estate inflation — the latter groups, by revisiting the tax rate every four years, instead of annually, to allow some revenue growth. Davis District business administrator Bruce Williams also pitched capping higher education's share of income tax revenues at 10 percent.

But Utah System of Higher Education Commissioner Rich Kendell said sharing income tax with higher education has been no windfall for colleges. He also wondered if suggestions to earmark income taxes and freeze the basic levy would be "ill-fated." Past legislatures have not looked fondly on those proposals.

"We just need to make a more compelling case for K-16 (education)," Kendell said.

E-mail: jtcook@desnews.com

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