



Addressing the Issues in Utah Education

By Randy M Favero –

Partner and Co-Founder of Silver Park Group, LLC, and former executive with IBM, Netscape and Novell

Part 1

Rethinking the Real Problem

The scores are in. Once again, the U.S. has a poor showing in student performance ranking 38th in math, and 24th in science according to the most recent PISA scores (Programme for International Student Assessment.) 2018 ACT scores in math and reading took a dip with math scores hitting a 20-year low. More concerning is that the performance of Utah students remains essentially flat for the past 25 years with only 39% of 8th grade students at grade level in reading and math.

Every year, as preparations are made for the legislative session, the voice of education advocates is heard that more funding is needed to support the Utah education system. Major news networks begin their coverage of the lack of funding for supplies, the increased impact on families with new or rising participation fees, and of course, the inability to attract and retain teachers because of inadequate salaries.

The reality is that every year funding does increase as more money is allocated by the legislature, yet outcomes and student achievement remain flat. It raises the question of what must change to get improvement in outcomes that is commensurate with increased funding as would be expected?

Einstein once said that “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” While there are many innovative things happening in Utah schools, broadly speaking, education continues to be delivered the same way it has been for many years. The fact is that outcomes remain flat.

If asked ‘what is the biggest problem with education in Utah?’ the average person on the street will say it is insufficient funding. Part of that is conditioning by unions and the media, but it is also the notion that the problem can be solved by spending . . . more devices, more facilities, higher salaries means better teachers. The real problem is inadequate student achievement. Recently, Christine Cooke, J.D., a former public school teacher and education policy director at Sutherland Institute, wrote **“Will the anticipated increases impact educational outcomes for Utah students?”** The short answer? We don’t know. The difficult reality of this topic is that there is no consistent relationship between inputs (like increases to per-pupil spending) and student achievement. So, though it sounds intuitive that more money leads to better outcomes, that does not often play out in research or reality.”

There are certainly several root causes of the problem, of which funding may be one, but the real problem is that the performance of Utah students is sub-par. The focus must be zeroed in on what can be done to improve student outcomes so the products of the Utah public education system (the students) have the essential skills to be productive, contributing members of society, and skills that ready them for more education or to enter the workforce into jobs that are in demand by those who hire.

While insufficient funding is the perceived problem in Utah education, inadequate outcomes is the real problem, and the root cause is largely an ineffective education system and inconsistent execution. Culpability for this problem is widespread across administrators, educators, students and parents. There is also a problem with an unlevel playing field for all districts with unequal access to tools and support systems resulting from no common technology infrastructure. This results in duplicate spending and unequal access to the best environments and tools for all students within the State. Finally, there is a failing in leadership with no common vision for education in Utah and clearly no one in charge to provide that leadership.

We may or may not spend enough on education. The real questions are, however, are we effectively spending currently allocated budgets and are we getting the expected return on that spending. Flat, or in some cases declining student performance, indicates we indeed are not getting what we are paying for. It is time for the process of education management in the State to be examined with a critical eye, applying criteria for performance common to any commercial enterprise that must answer to boards or shareholders. The Utah education system needs a focus on efficiencies, best practices, and leadership that ensure effective spending of taxpayer dollars and accountability for results.

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Part 2

Who's in Charge?

Responsibility for student outcomes is a shared responsibility. Government, the Board of Education, districts and charter school leadership, teachers, students and parents all bear responsibility for student performance. When all are collaborating effectively, results are evident. Those collaborations, however, usually happen on individual targeted activities rather than moving the 'system' forward in a coordinated way.

While there are many who have interest in education, including teachers, students, parents, and unions, there are only five constituencies who directly impact the Utah State Education System. Parents and other community members have indirect influence by raising their voices and ultimately at the voting box by electing those with whom they trust their children's education. Those who have direct influence include the Governor, the State Board of Education, individual districts, the legislature and the business community.

The Governor bears the expectations for good education of the citizens of Utah as well as a responsibility for sustainable economic development for the State. Education is one of three pillars that ensure a stable economy along with innovation and accessible capital. With that the Governor must be an advocate for education and provide leadership. The Governor relies on an education advisor, but truth be told, he has no direct control over education in Utah. Utah has a unique approach to managing the State education system. By Constitution, the Utah State Board of Education operates as an independent agency and does not report to the Governor. Thus, the Governor has no direct control. While the current Governor chartered an Education Commission that after several years of study produced a Roadmap for Education, nothing has martially changed as a result. Though directionally correct, the Roadmap lacks any call to action and has no accountability for implementation. While visible support for improved education is essential for a variety of reasons, the Governor's Office is currently rendered impotent relative to education by the State Constitution and maintains a position of relegating responsibility to 'local control' by the school districts.

The State Board of Education bears the primary responsibility for education in the State. As an elected body, however, there are a variety of opinions and self-interests (and interests of constituents) that are represented in the group and there is a growing concern that the Board as currently operating is dysfunctional. The established process of oversight is cumbersome and glacially slow-moving and in that environment innovation struggles. The State Superintendent, who reports to the Board, has effectively 15 bosses who are the members of the Board of Education and spends more time trying to get agreement and support than advancing change and innovation in a system that is clearly not performing to expectations. A movement in the 2018 legislative session to disband the State Board of Education as currently constituted is evidence of the belief that something isn't working.

The individual districts are for the most part creative and dedicated to the students. There is a very broad discrepancy, however, in the tools, techniques, infrastructure and funding from district to district, thus spawning great debate about normalization of funding on a 'weighted pupil unit' basis. The fact is the districts want local control of funding provided by the State, but no one has bothered to define what local control really is, other than 'give us our funding and we will do what we want.' The net result is no standard or ubiquity of service provided to every student equally across the State whether they live in Park City, Alpine or Daggett districts.

The fourth constituency that impacts Utah's education is the State Legislature which ultimately provides the funding and makes the decisions of how much is allocated, but not necessarily how it is spent. Bills are passed to rectify inequities or to stimulate new educational approaches, but the bills are largely responses to active constituencies who see specific needs. The bills rarely support a grand plan and often run the risk of being conflictive. Furthermore, once a bill is passed and funding makes it through the appropriations committee, there is very little follow-up to ensure that allocated funding was actually applied as intended. The result is the districts often apply funding to what they want or need instead of for what or how it was originally provisioned. Audits may ensue, but usually after the funding is already spent.

Finally, an often-overlooked constituency that is ultimately one of the most important, is the business community (including foundations) that provide supplemental funding to education and ultimately hire the product of Utah's education system. There is much conversation about linking the business community and education, yet again, there is no coordinated effort to weave ideas and even initiatives into a tapestry that pictures a clear path forward to develop the skills needed in the Utah workforce.

All these constituencies are well-intended in their efforts and interests; however, their efforts are simply uncoordinated and there is no sense of urgency by anyone. The result is ineffective execution and a continued propagation of the real problem in Utah's education system; inadequate outcomes in student performance.

The primary 'root causes' of the problem boils down to two things: first, there is no common vision subscribed to and supported by all the constituencies that guides all efforts in the mission to improve outcomes; and second, no one is in charge. Absent a clear leader responsible for creation of and implementation of the vision at an accelerated pace, Utah will continue flatline performance that deprives our children of the education they deserve and the preparation for them to make the contributions to the sustainability and viability of the State.

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Part 3

The Need for Vision, Efficiencies and Urgency

The Utah State Legislature is more likely to help with funding if there is evidence of efforts by the education system to find efficiencies in education delivery and demonstrated improvement in student outcomes.

Currently every LEA (Local Education Agency, which includes districts and charter schools) has the responsibility for providing their own information technology infrastructure. Some smaller districts and most charter schools look to established service centers or outside providers to provide some systems, but each LEA makes their own decisions about which systems they run. The exception is broadband connectivity which is provided by Utah Education and Telehealth Network to all education entities in the State and is the model for effective service delivery and effective spending.

This distributed approach results in three major problems. First, there is duplicate effort and spending to identify, evaluate, implement, train and maintain the infrastructure, and often LEAs are short on resources and experience to deliver the best solutions. The second issue results from disparate systems in LEA's that make it difficult, if not impossible, for the State Office to effectively gather data required for effective decision making and compliance to receive funding from the federal government. Third, and likely the most concerning issue is the inequity caused when advanced, well-funded, and often the largest districts provide more robust education delivery environments than smaller, often rural districts.

It is clear that factors like family structures and support systems have an impact on student achievement. As Christine Cooke referenced in her recent article, "the results of the well-known Coleman report from the 1960s, which indicates that other factors such as a parent's marital status and level of education are far stronger indicators of a student's performance in school than resources like school spending." While the education system can't address enormous social issues like family structure, it can adapt its approach to teaching so individual students can be presented personalized learning opportunities that begin to adapt to individual skill and performance levels and even situations which impact learning at moments in time.

Utah could fundamentally alter its education environment and subsequently student outcomes if there was a move toward personalized learning and a focus on three layers of education delivery. First, a State-operated Education Shared Services Infrastructure Layer that delivers learning management, content management, student information, all 'back office' functions like finance, personnel management, teacher certifications, transportation, food services, and the centralized management of contracts consistently across all LEA's. If hosted, managed and delivered from a common platform as a service to all LEAs in the State, every student, teacher and administrator would have the benefit of common and equal systems to support instruction. Not long ago the

State information technology of all agencies was consolidated into a shared services environment operated under the direction of the State CIO which resulted in hundreds of millions of dollars of savings. The education system in Utah needs the same approach and every dollar of infrastructure savings can be redirected back to the classroom.

Certainly, there is a cost associated with such a consolidation and there will surely be resistance from well-established districts with a robust infrastructure, but the long-term benefits, including financial, outweigh the near-term disruption, especially when money will continue to be spent to upgrade systems in established LEAs. The approach could roll out over 5-7 years, with rural and underserved LEAs being the first to be addressed, with the more established LEAs being given latitude to migrate within the established window.

The second layer is the Instructional Layer. This is where 'local control' really has meaning. Reducing the burden of overhead to manage the infrastructure will free up more time and resources for the LEAs to focus directly on the classroom, instruction delivery and personalized learning. The Instruction Layer allows LEAs to select content, create curriculum, design their approach to education delivery and manage assessment consistent with the State-established standards. Increased use of digital tools and the professional development to effectively use them will allow teachers to better assess individual student capabilities and enable personalized learning for each student. The Instruction Layer can be tailored to the individual characteristics and strengths of each individual LEA and the primary metric is improvement in student achievement and outcomes.

The third layer is the College and Career Influence Layer, which links the entire education delivery chain together and actively incorporates the business community. This layer is delivered by a coalition of invested constituents to ensure market needs are identified and communicated with the education system and that skills and credentials are recognized to the benefit of the students.

This influence layer must be extended on both ends from where we currently are today and must start much earlier than currently. The focus must be to Expose (PreK & K), Discover (Elementary), Direct (Middle School), Experience (High School) and Credential (Higher Ed, including certificate programs.) Programs like Talent Ready Utah and Utah Futures are valuable, but to what end do they exist? The programs and initiatives, again, can better serve the students and communities if they are built into a common vision for education.

Utah must rethink education, both the real problems and the focus for education delivery, and create a sense of urgency for change. Absent a common vision, accountability for execution, and someone in charge, funding will continue to increase, and outcomes will continue the same trajectory as the past. The losers will be the taxpayers, Utah's economic sustainability, and most importantly, the students.