Wheatley Papers on Education

Utah in Search of an Education Future

Richard Kendell and David J. Sperry
David J. Sperry
Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy; University of Utah

David J. Sperry is a professor of educational leadership and policy and Dean of the College of Education at the University of Utah. He earned his BA, Master’s, and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Utah, emphasizing in comparative education and policy. Dr. Sperry is a former Commissioner of the Utah System of Higher Education. He has previously also been executive director of the Utah Partnership for Education, deputy to the governor for education and economic development, superintendent of Davis School District, and Assistant State Superintendent of Schools. He is currently a Regents Professor in the Utah Education Policy Center at the University of Utah. Dr. Sperry was also formerly associate dean of the graduate school, associate dean of the school of education, and acting chair in the department of leadership and policy at the University of Utah.

Dr. Sperry has received numerous awards including Utah Superintendent of the Year, a four-time National Superintendent of the Year Finalist, Utah Education Association Administrator of the Year, and the Lewis Shurtleff Award from Weber State University for his contributions to education.

Richard E. Kendell
Regents Professor, Utah Education Policy Center; University of Utah

Richard E. Kendell received his Bachelor’s degree from the Weber State University, and his Master’s and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Utah, emphasizing in leadership and policy. Dr. Kendell is a former Commissioner of the Utah System of Higher Education. He has previously also been executive director of the Utah Partnership for Education, deputy to the governor for education and economic development, superintendent of Davis School District, and Assistant State Superintendent of Schools. He is currently a Regents Professor in the Utah Education Policy Center at the University of Utah. Dr. Kendell was also formerly associate dean of the graduate school, associate dean of the school of education, and acting chair in the department of leadership and policy at the University of Utah.

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UTAH IN SEARCH OF AN EDUCATION FUTURE

Richard Kendell and David J. Sperry

Fellows of the Wheatley Institution at Brigham Young University

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PREFACE

The education initiative for the Wheatley Institution has been evolving since early 2009. The initiative is based on several key propositions. One is that education is intrinsically good and that gaining knowledge is one of the more important and ennobling purposes of life. A second is that public education is essential to the maintenance of our nation’s democratic institutions. A third is that other core institutions such as the family are strengthened by education systems that extend opportunities and advantages to all people. In this way education strengthens individual lives, families, and societies. Thus, the education initiative fits logically within the framework of the Wheatley Institution’s charter to strengthen and preserve the core institutions of our society. (Williams, 2009)

From these propositions came several questions or themes that would constitute an agenda for future study. Each, however, required further development to guide the institution’s activities. It was proposed that the institution sponsor a day-long retreat for institution leaders, fellows, and associates to discuss the themes, explore issues facing public education, and encourage analysis of topics that might provoke the interest of scholars and state policymakers. Such a retreat was held in the fall of 2009 and six themes which are noted below emerged from the discussions. These themes might be considered significant challenges that will influence the future of public education for many years to come.

• Preparing students for a changing economy and workplace.
• Addressing the achievement gap between white students and students of color as well as the gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students.
• Attracting and retaining excellent teachers as the most important human resource in the educational enterprise.
• Assessing and monitoring student learning as the primary strategy for improving the effectiveness of an instructional program.
• Introducing and supporting early childhood education as an important development/intervention in public education.
• Maintaining or re-thinking the basic purposes and functions of public education.

It may be the case that these themes are less a formal consensus among participants than a broad interpretation of the retreat’s deliberations. Many topics were introduced and discussed, but no themes emerged that would eclipse those listed above.

The point was made, however, that the retreat participants did not represent a broad cross-cut of the general population nor of the public school community. The question was raised: Were the six themes the big issues and questions facing public education, or were they simply the musings of the retreat membership who leaned toward academic topics that may be outside the concerns of those who direct and operate public schools on a day-to-day basis? It was proposed that the themes be introduced in focus groups conducted in various locations across the State and to engage a broader audience of business people, school board members, superintendents, teachers, and others to discuss the themes as outlined and to determine if they could be confirmed or, perhaps, revised in the process. Two Wheatley Institution Fellows, Dr. David J. Sperry and Dr. Richard E. Kendell, were appointed to conduct the focus groups and to report on the proceedings. Focus groups were conducted to represent regions of the state, but no attempt was made to have true representation of all regions and school districts. Six focus groups and related conversations were held over a period of eight months. During that same period, additional discussions were held with five college and university presidents and numerous professional colleagues who had had many years of experience in both public and higher education.

The proceedings, including specific recommendations for future Wheatley Institution activities, were prepared in a report entitled A Proposed Education Initiative for the Wheatley Institution (Kendell and Sperry 2010).

This essay is based in large part on the above report, but it should be said that neither the report nor this essay is social science research in the usual sense of those terms. Strict definitions and procedures did not direct the work. Focus group membership varied from one group to the next. Some groups were rich in school principals and other administrators. Other groups had business and media representatives while others did not. No recorded version of the meetings was made; however, general notes were kept without giving attribution to specific individuals. This essay is best seen as a broad interpretation of conversations with
more than fifty educators, business leaders, school board members, teachers, and others involved in public and higher education. Observations, interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations are the authors’ alone and not those of any particular institution, school district, or individual participating in this project. References to specific data sources and reports are included in the bibliography.

The purpose of this essay is not simply to recount the most important issues facing education as they were reported nor to propose specific projects but rather, to interpret and comment on what was heard and observed. In doing so, the authors have drawn upon their own combined experiences in Utah public and higher education which span more than forty years.

Four questions organize this essay as follows:

- Where is the voice?
- Where is the plan?
- Who is in charge?
- What is the future?

WHERE IS THE VOICE?

One of the most striking observations resulting from the focus groups was the question of advocacy and leadership. Where are the strong voices, outside of the educational community per se, supporting public education and/or higher education? Several references were made to earlier times when the desire to educate, to form schools for the common good, and to establish academies, even universities was an important priority. Utah has a long history of advancing education in many communities. The University of Utah was founded in 1850 when the early Salt Lake Colony consisted of cabins and a few hundred acres of arable land. In fact, the early effort to found the University was delayed; but the early impulse was strong, and the effort was not forgotten. Similar stories are told about other communities where considerable sacrifices were made to initiate and sustain schools. Community members sold produce and bartered goods in Sanpete County to keep their academy going. The same is true of Cedar City where heroic efforts were made to keep an early teacher training institution alive. The following abridged account is taken from a memorial on the Southern Utah University campus:

The first Utah Legislature authorized a branch of the State teaching academy to be located in Southern Utah. Cedar City was selected as the site. The community had to deed fifteen acres of ground to the State and agree to construct an appropriate building. At the time Cedar City numbered 1500 citizens. The ground was donated, but the building was beyond the town’s capacity to fund; therefore, the early academy was conducted in an alternate existing building. When the town applied to the State for the payment of teachers, the attorney general ruled that the town was out of compliance with the earlier agreement and refused payment. Moreover, he warned, the school must be built by September of the following year, 1898, or State authorization would be cancelled. Town citizens acted immediately. A bank loan provided funding for teachers’ salaries, secured by three citizens who mortgaged their homes. An emergency plan was launched to cut and deliver timbers from nearby Brian Head. Two hundred and fifty thousand bricks were made mostly by volunteers. To secure cash, more than sixty families donated stock in the Cedar City Coop and a local cattle cooperative. Lumber was donated, including the siding of a newly constructed barn. The effort was heroic, but the school was built and the teaching academy saved. Most donors never attended the school they worked so hard to build.

It is tempting to write off this and similar stories as mere nostalgia, remembrances of a better time uncluttered by current conflicts and details. But the memories do linger in many places, made more poignant by current controversies that seem to diminish the role and importance of public education. Moreover, focus group participants voiced a genuine weariness with the current political climate and the lack of adequate financial support, worrying that the value of schooling and the importance of common purposes, in fact, may be waning.

There is evidence to suggest that such worries may be warranted. Many participants pointed to the declining financial support for schools over the last ten to fifteen years. This loss of support is confirmed by a recent study by the Utah Foundation which reported that Utah has a history of being a “high effort–low yield state,” meaning that despite rather significant efforts to levy taxes the actual yield of revenue has been rather modest. This was described by the Utah Foundation as “Utah’s paradox.” But the paradox is no more. Over the last fifteen years in particular, Utah has become a “low effort–low yield state.” Important tax changes enacted over the last fifteen years have reduced support for public and higher education in significant ways. Utah now has the lowest expenditure per pupil of any state in the Nation and not by a small margin. Utah’s expenditure per pupil is 56 percent of the national average and 83 percent of the state that is the next lowest (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010). This has occurred because several of the methods that can be used for school funding have been revised thus reducing the level of potential revenue that could have come to schools. For example, property tax levies were curtailed in the mid 1990’s and such rates have declined ever since. Income tax rates were reduced during the 2000–2010 decade. The personal income tax which had been set aside exclusively for public education was changed by a constitutional amendment in 1997 to allow funding for both public and higher education. This freed up the general fund for other State purposes. The net effect is that potential sources of funding public schools have diminished over time (Kroes, 2010).
In truth, participants in the focus groups were less concerned with the statistic of being last in per pupil funding than with the practical, day-to-day implications for their own work. The lack of funding is evident in a variety of ways that impact students, parents, and teachers.

Example 1: Class sizes are too large in many instances. This has less to do with comparative statistics and national rankings than with meeting the needs of individual learners. Some classes especially at the elementary level are simply too large for the kind of individual attention that many students need. Funding is not available to address this problem and provide effective remedies targeted to specific circumstances.

Example 2: Educational technology has made important advances to support both instruction and assessment; but many schools have rationed access to such technology, and the demand far exceeds capacity in many schools. The availability of funding for instructional technology has been inconsistent over time, stopping and starting and then stopping again. There appears to be no vision or plan to remedy this situation, thus frustrating students, parents, and teachers.

Example 3: Many schools consist of a diversity of students who bring different languages, values, and attitudes to the classroom. Some students have disabilities that require specific interventions. Teachers need ongoing training and assistance to be truly effective in their classrooms, but training programs have been cut back. In other instances, specialists who have the knowledge to provide interventions are in short supply or are not available at all. These are only examples, but the point was made that the lack of support for public education has consequences, particularly for students.

A recent study by the Utah Foundation illustrates the point that Utah students have not performed well when compared to students in states with similar economic and demographic characteristics. This “apple to apple” comparison concluded that in key areas such as math, reading, and science, Utah students have performed at the low end of its peer group for nearly two decades (Utah Foundation, 2010). The common perception that Utah schools are high performing schools despite low funding is not borne out by peer comparisons. Low funding has consequences; and according to this study, it has not produced high performance.

It must be said that Utah, like the rest of the nation, is in the middle of a serious recession and that all public institutions have been faced with funding cutbacks. Virtually all participants acknowledged that some of the current difficulties result from problems with the larger economy. Utah policymakers have, in fact, made good efforts to give public schools priority over competing state functions; but schools have not been left as unscathed as some have claimed. One participating district reported expenditure reductions of over $61.0 million over a two-year period. The consequences on the quality of the instruction program in this district have been significant. Other districts reported similar funding reductions and consequences.

There was also acknowledgment in the focus groups that the economy will probably improve and that budgets for public education will get better, but this optimism was guarded. Will better budgets be directed to improving public education in significant ways, or will the improved revenues of a better time simply lead to further tax revisions that reduce available revenue for public and higher education? Certainly such tax reductions have been accomplished during “good” times in the past.

The Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget has reported that approximately $400 million of annual tax revenue has been reduced due to tax reforms enacted during the 2006–2007 legislative sessions (GOPB, 2007). Of equal or greater concern are the statements from some policymakers that Utah is unique and that current circumstances such as funding per pupil, large class sizes, relatively low teacher salaries, and modest services to support and improve instruction are beyond Utah’s capacity to fund. The point is made that “…this is simply the way things are and will be in the future.” Again the question was raised by many individuals in focus groups: Where is the bold, even audacious “voice” that created a thriving state and advocated for the importance of education as central to the progress of individuals and the state?

Will political, business, church, and civic leaders step forward to improve an education system that will produce a better future for all Utahans? Can we find the will to do so and can the idea of commonweal take a renewed place in the conversation about the future? Most participants agreed that these questions can be answered in the affirmative, but a better future for education will require a collaborative effort of all parties, not simply an effort internal to the educational community.

WHERE IS THE PLAN?

Utah is the “beehive state,” having adopted the beehive as a symbol of industry and resourcefulness. The symbolism is well earned. Utah citizens can claim many important accomplishments, often through the cooperation of state, local, and federal efforts. The Central Utah Project has brought water to millions of Utah citizens. An international airport has been created. Roads, highways, and railroads provide a transportation network that fosters economic development and growth. Billions of dollars have been directed to these efforts. Utah has a capacity to plan important projects and to complete them. Sponsoring the 2002 Winter Olympics is another recent example.

In light of these achievements, it is remarkable that Utah has no generally agreed-to plan for developing its public school systems for both public and higher education. This is not to say that planning is not underway and that governing boards for public and higher education have not developed
plans to govern their actions and steer future development. However, often such activities are not acknowledged nor acted upon in any significant way by either the governor or the state legislature. There are no commonly agreed to goals, strategies, or funding plans that would make a strategic plan something more that a document that occupies shelf space. Indeed, efforts to develop a coherent plan have been attempted. Witness, for example, the Utah Commission on Educational Excellence, 1983; Education, A Call to Action, 1985; A Shift in Focus, 1988; Employers Educational Coalition Report, 2002; and The Twenty-First Century Workforce Initiative, 2007 among other efforts. When these reports were discussed with focus groups, participants had difficulty in remembering such efforts and in identifying a single initiative that had had a lasting impact on public education. This is a striking record of planning and reporting with little or no progress.

Focus group participants acknowledged a swirl of activities in their respective schools, school districts, colleges, and universities but at the same time pointed to the fact that new initiatives and consequential funding were neither predictable nor reliable over time. The focus groups also acknowledged that the education “systems” have a kind of momentum that guides activities from year to year, but there is no generally agreed-to plan that propels institutions toward improvements even though there is compelling evidence to do so. The most common reaction to ideas about the future is a mixed expression of apprehension and doubt, while in other instances there is an audible sigh of relief.

It may be that the idea of a state-wide plan flies in the face of the idea of local control. There are many reasons to support the general pattern of leaving education to local communities and districts; local control is a deeply held value and practice. At the same time, there are some issues that are not easily or efficiently handled by local districts and schools that could be accommodated in a statewide plan. The point here is not to argue for micromanaging schools, districts, colleges and universities, but rather to suggest that the development and implementation of key policy and funding initiatives would give the state a basis for better supporting institutions and managing scarce resources. Some of the most important and compelling issues facing the state were identified by focus groups as outlined below. Such topics could be the basis for a statewide effort.

**Growth**

Utah is a growing state, and generally this is seen as an asset. According to data published by the Utah State Office of Education, the Utah school population has grown from 495,682 students during the 2004–2005 school year to 574,317 students during the 2010–2011 school year, an increase of 78,635 students. Similar growth is expected through 2020 with enrollments exceeding 700,000 students (USOE, 2009). Higher education has also had a recent resurgence of growth during the last several years which has been brought on in part by a slumping economy and relatively high unemployment levels.

Enrollment growth for public education was partially funded for the 2009–2010 year and was not funded at all during the 2010–2011 school year. Higher education has not had new funding for enrollment in more than a decade. Given the predictability of enrollment growth, especially in public education, it would seem prudent for the state to have a short and long term plan for managing growth. Unfortunately, none is on the horizon.

The circumstances of growth are made more difficult because growth is not spread evenly across the state and is concentrated in several regions or counties, such as Washington County, Utah County, and Davis County. Several other regions are affected as well. Many of these school districts will have difficulty with burgeoning enrollments because they lack an adequate tax base to support new school buildings. The operating budgets for schools are “equalized;” but the capital budgets are not, leaving some school districts with high enrollments, high tax levies, and relatively low revenue yields.

Moreover, dealing with growth is more than anticipating the aggregate number of new students. It also includes anticipating the specific circumstances of where enrollment increases will occur and how state and local officials can work together to make appropriate policy and funding changes. Equalizing capital outlay budgets is a difficult political process, but it is less difficult in the long run than ignoring the issue altogether. On a related matter, class sizes are too large in many growing districts. This cannot be dealt with by attempting to lower average class sizes in the aggregate but necessitates targeting funds to specific instances where relief is required. A good plan would provide funding for districts to target class size problems, especially in the early grades, as part of a general plan for managing growth. This is less expensive and more effective than trying to lower the aggregate class size per se. There are other collateral issues related to growth that could also be mitigated by better planning and funding.

Problems with growth in higher education are manifest in different ways. Participants noted the difficulty of scheduling classes for many students, the denial of access to others, and the problem of staffing courses with part-time adjunct faculty, etc. Few would argue against the value of adjunct faculty, but adjunct faculty should complement a core of full-time faculty who provide consistency to the instructional program over time. Quality is important, and it cannot be purchased with tuition increments alone. The failure to fund growth has several negative consequences: higher tuition and fee charges for students, higher debt loads, delays in securing proper courses in sequence, and far too many students who fail to graduate on time, or graduate at all.
The state also has a vital interest in providing opportunities in higher education for as many students as possible. A current report prepared by Anthony Carnevale from the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University argues that the major challenge facing Utah and the nation is the development of human capital. A growing economy simply must have more educated people and skilled workers. Fortunately, Utah has a good supply of students and “raw talent.” However, Carnevale (2011) projects that by 2020 two-thirds of Utah’s workforce will require a post-secondary degree or credential that has value in the marketplace. Clearly this economic and workforce requirement will demand careful planning and budgeting if a more robust and thriving economy is to be achieved.

Admittedly, all of these maladies cannot be laid at the doorstep of growth alone. Indeed, these problems are complex, but adequately accommodating growth is a significant part of the solution. Enrollment growth cannot continue without attention and better funding. The stakes are too high, and the consequences both good and bad are too important for individuals and the state. Even a modicum of funding for student growth within the context of a statewide plan would go far in alleviating some of the most vexing current problems.

Achievement Gap

Utah is experiencing extraordinary demographic changes, which University of Utah economist Pam Perlich has referred to as “Utah’s Demographic Transformation” in a recent issue of the Utah Economic and Business Review. She reports that Utah “...will continue to become much more diverse in many ways, including age, culture, language, nativity, race, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic.” She reports that “Utah in 2007, racial and ethnic minorities were 18 percents of the Utah population and 24 percent of the population in Salt Lake County. These percentages will change to 30 percent and 41 percent by 2050 (Perlich, 2006, 2008). Early numbers from the 2010 Census indicate that these estimates may have been too low.

Participants in the focus groups had first-hand experiences with the demographic changes and learning challenges that are affecting their own schools. And, changes were not restricted to Salt Lake County. Teachers and administrators indicated that significant changes were taking place in southern, central, and eastern Utah, including both rural and more urbanized communities. Some school districts in Utah County, Ogden and Salt Lake City, are “minority-majority” districts at the present time.

One middle school principal described the growing diversity of his school’s student population by noting that more than a dozen languages were spoken by his students. He and his school district were scrambling to provide adequate services for these children.

The growing diversity of school districts has brought into sharp focus the achievement levels of various subgroups. There is a significant achievement gap between white students and students of color. Likewise, there is a similar achievement gap between economically advantaged students and those who are relatively disadvantaged. For many minority students and economically disadvantaged students, test scores are lower, dropout rates are higher, and college attendance and completion is significantly lower compared to other students. This is both a national and a state phenomenon and these differences have been well documented.

Focus group responses to the achievement gap ranged from “very important” to “an imperative” for school and state policy makers to address. Most participants agreed that minority children are not given the priority that is required for these children to succeed in school. Important programs and services to help these children are missing or underfunded. For many, this failure to achieve some resolution of the achievement gap runs contrary to some of the most important purposes of public education. Such ideals are summarized well in the Nation at Risk Report (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance, and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself.

This ideal has never been fully realized in practice; but some of the tensions that run across racial, economic, and religious lines are unsettling to many.

The current tensions over immigration status has made discussions about programs and services more strident and complicated. Some focus group respondents reported an increasing concern among parents about diversity in schools. Some parents questioned whether public schools have the capacity and support to forge a common culture and common values in an environment that is also safe for their children. Some parents have found solutions for their own children in charter schools, private schools, and home schools that consist of children that are “...more like my own.”

These attitudes and concerns, while troubling, are not new. America is a nation of immigrants, and the diversity of its people is generally considered to be a strength. But schools must address the needs and capacities of all children if their basic purposes are to be realized.

As Lawrence Cremin summarized in his book The Genius of American Education:

In the last analysis, there is no more humane view of education than as growth in understanding, sensibility, and
character, and no more humane view of democracy than as growth in understanding, sensibility, and character, and no more noble view of democracy than as the dedication of society to the lifelong education of all of its members [emphasis by authors] (Cremin, 1965).

Realizing this ideal will require a renewed emphasis on the social and political conditions that make such ideals a reality. Making an accurate assessment of what those conditions are and determining how schools should change in order to more fully address these issues will be an important challenge for the future. Moreover, this should be a state effort not restricted to local districts alone. The demographic changes are statewide, not local; the trends will intensify over time, and the consequences for not responding adequately on individual lives, and on the state’s quality of life and economic wellbeing are significant.

**Attracting and Retaining Excellent Teachers**

The topic of attracting and retaining excellent teachers was one of the two highest ranked issues on the part of focus group participants. Virtually all participants agreed that quality teaching is at the heart of the educational process. Discussions focused on several topics which can be grouped into three broad categories including salary and compensation; teacher effectiveness/accountability; and the nature and structure of the work environment. Each of these sub-issues is a significant topic in its own right. Each has been studied, and the research literature is rather extensive. An important point was the question of teacher shortages in the state. This issue has disappeared from broader discussion due largely to the current recession which has drawn many inactive teachers back into the mainstream of employment.

Nevertheless, several underlying factors remain pertinent and have not gone away, e.g. growth in student numbers, an aging teaching population, high turnover rates, and the possibility of curriculum requirements which may change the make-up of school faculties. Regarding the last factor, the possibility exists that the demand for engineers, scientists, and other technically trained people will require changes in high school course offerings if not graduation requirements. Adding more math and science requirements either at the State or local district level will drive up the need for teachers with appropriate credentials.

A major report entitled *An Education Initiative for the State of Utah* was published in 2007 by the Special Task Force on Teacher Shortages created by Utah’s K–16 Alliance (Sperry 2007). The report dealt directly with the factors underlying teacher shortages in Utah and made specific recommendations regarding salary and compensation issues. Further, the report discussed factors that contribute to teacher turnover and outlined certain structural and scheduling changes that could provide teachers with greater opportunities for contract options and improved salaries.

The report was praised for being the most comprehensive and accurate study of teacher supply and demand in the state. Many policymakers felt that the issues raised and proposed solutions in the study deserved further exploration, but the combined impacts of the recession (limited revenue) and the return of teachers from the latent teaching pool changed priorities, at least temporarily.

A related topic that received a good bit of attention had to do with the nature and structure of the work environment and with the processes for inducting teachers into the profession. This is a topic that has been addressed by the Wheatley Institution on prior occasions. (See Richard Ingersoll’s (2001) work for an example.) Teachers in the focus groups emphasized that the issues surrounding teacher motivation and performance were far more complicated than is often believed. Both teachers and principals emphasized the importance of collaborative time among teachers and the value of planning time to prepare better lesson plans and materials for students. The support of principals in leading the school’s instructional environment and in working with teachers, students, and parents was considered to be of critical importance.

Moreover, the way teachers are inducted into the profession and the support that is given to them by their principal and other teachers are significant factors in job satisfaction and teacher retention. These and related issues as they pertain to attracting and retaining good teachers should be explored further. The role of the principal, for example, should be a topic for additional inquiry.

The issue of teacher effectiveness received considerable attention from focus groups. Common topics of discussion included: How is effectiveness defined? Are current policies and practices effective? Should excellent teachers be paid on the basis of their overall performance? Should the assessment of teacher effectiveness include student achievement data? Are poor teachers being retained because of weak evaluation practices and/or the sheer difficulty of dismissing ineffective teachers? Can the teaching profession be restructured to provide greater opportunities for advancement and compensation? Despite abundant research and numerous reports on these and related issues these questions continue as important topics and, in many instances, remain unresolved issues.

In search for better resolution, the topics of attracting and retaining good teachers might be looked at in two ways. The first has to do with the structure of the teaching profession, that is to say, how teachers are organized by class levels, calendars, work schedules, and rewarded by single schedule salary plans. In many ways, the teaching profession is remarkably flat with very few options for professional mobility. There are many states, institutions, and foundations that have been experimenting with different ways of organizing teachers’ work to get away from the traditional salary schedule and to provide different compensation options. The Milliken Foundation and the Denver
Public Schools are two examples in a public school context, and Brigham Young University–Idaho is an example in higher education.

The second issue has to do with the evaluation of teacher effectiveness. This is a topic of much contemporary interest, and several organizations like WESTED, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), and the Hoover Institution are developing new research and recommendations for improved practice. One idea is to link teacher compensation with student achievement data. It is interesting to note that the State of Colorado, in 2010, passed legislation requiring teachers to be evaluated annually, with at least half of their rating based on whether their students made progress during the school year. This change in Colorado’s teacher employment law was met with vigorous opposition from the state’s largest teacher union but has been hailed by others as an important step forward in holding teachers more accountable.

With the prompting of Governor Jon M. Huntsman, Jr., the Utah State Legislature (2009) introduced a teacher compensation plan and proposed linking additional compensation to teacher performance evaluations including student test scores. The original plan had a fiscal note of approximately $25.0 million. Local school districts were given a very short deadline to prepare proposals, and the process resulted in the State Office of Education returning many proposals for further development. Eventually the funding disappeared, and the legislative plan was withdrawn. However, five local schools were funded to experiment with teacher evaluation plans and to prepare reports for further study. Reports from these initial pilot projects are pending.

Given the importance of this topic and notwithstanding the potential value of the five pilot projects currently underway, it is surprising that there is not a bold and innovative plan being pursued in Utah. Perhaps this point of relative stasis provides an opportunity for new thinking and new proposals.

The three planning ideas described above are illustrative of important issues facing Utah that could be addressed with a strategic plan. These three issues have important consequences for Utah’s future, and none can be adequately addressed by local school districts alone. A state plan might include one or two additional topics that are considered significant in scope and importance for all districts in the state. For example, reference could be made to the six major themes identified for the Wheatley Institution outlined earlier in this essay. Such a plan would give local districts a framework for developing their own resources and leveraging assets to complement state priorities. Such an approach would preserve an important balance between state and local initiatives and allow districts the opportunity to develop plans suited to the needs of their local communities.

WHO IS IN CHARGE?

To many observers, especially those outside of the education community per se, the governance of public education is a confusion of shared responsibility, multiple layers of authority, and complicated process variables that make responsiveness to changing circumstances nearly impossible. Indeed there is reason to become confused if not exasperated by the multiple points of influence and control over education policy and practice.

To begin with, the federal government plays a much more significant role in public education than often thought, despite the fact that states have the primary responsibility for public education.

Since the United States Constitution does not authorize Congress to provide for Education, the legal control of public education resides with the states as one of its Sovereign powers (Cambron-McCabe, McCarthy, and Thomas, 2009).

But the U.S. Department of Education has gained a much more important role in policy formulation by directing a number of critical education programs that are funded from federal sources. Career and technical education and special education are two programs that receive significant funding from the U.S. Department of Education, funding that could not be easily replaced by state funds even if there were the will and authorization to do so. The recent “No Child Left Behind” initiative was accepted by the states—even though many of the states disagreed with some or all of the program—simply because of the dependence on federal money.

The “Race to the Top” program is still another illustration of a well-funded U.S. Department of Education initiative that has captured the attention of many states and school districts. The emphasis on math and science education and the importance given to evidence-based strategies to reform and restructure schools may have a powerful impact on schools for many years to come.

At the state level the Utah State Board of Education has certain powers granted to it by the Utah Constitution to control and supervise public education in Utah. The state board plays a significant role in the state, but its authority is tempered by the fact that the Utah State Legislature has the authority and responsibility to fund public education and to hold schools accountable for the performance of their duties. The state board has no authority to levy taxes or to generate other revenue for schools. That said, there is not a clear line of authority between board and legislative responsibilities, and the state board often claims that the Legislature intrudes into policies that rightly belong to the state board. Moreover the terms “control” and “supervise” are subject to broad interpretation, hence, there are no clear guidelines for determining the boundaries of authority and responsibility.
Local boards of education are at the firing line of education policy and practice and wield enormous influence over the implementation of programs and the supervision of students. Local districts are also empowered to raise taxes and use them for school building construction, building maintenance, transportation, and instructional programs. Indeed, they must work within the broad framework established by legislative statutes and state board rules, but they individually and collectively exert enormous influence on the direction and control of education in the state.

The governor is the chief executive officer of the state and the highest elected official responsible for directing state government. The governor has the power of the bully pulpit, exposure to the general public, especially through the media, and has access to political leverage with the legislature and other political entities not equaled by any other individual in the state. But the governor's actual powers over the conduct of both public and higher education are very limited. Governors can exert enormous influence, and often do in launching important educational projects and initiatives, but they do so more by persuasion and political leverage than by administrative authority.

Moreover, the state operates under a variety of employment agreements ratified by teachers and school boards at the local level. While these agreements are entered into by professional associations at the local level, the impact is not unlike a state contract that binds the teachers and their respective governing boards into specific agreements about employment; retention; salary schedules and benefits; and methods for evaluation, promotion, and dismissal.

What emerges from this overview of constitutional provisions, statutory enactments, rules, regulations, and court decisions is a complicated pattern of governance that can advance important ideas and initiatives, but equally, can forestall new ideas, innovations, and reforms from ever becoming a reality. Witness several examples:

Example 1: Governor Jon M. Huntsman, Jr. launched the 21st Century Workforce Initiative in the spring of 2008. The effort had an audacious beginning with the appointment of prominent citizens, business leaders, education officials, political leaders, and others to a Steering Committee. Participants worked under the general oversight of the Steering Committee and went through a rather elaborate planning process, many of them working virtually full-time during several months of the planning exercises. The report released in December of 2008 contained many laudable ideas and plans for future work, but the plan did not win favor with the Utah Legislature nor the public school community. Little in the report received attention after its formal presentation in January of 2009. The causes were many: an elaborate but ineffective planning strategy; doubts and suspicions on the part of some participants; too little involvement by Utah legislators; a too ambitious calling for fundamental changes in the way schools, college, and universities were to be governed and funded; etc. At the heart of the problem was a suspicion that the Workforce Initiative was simply a thinly veiled effort to change the governance of public education. Regardless of the reasons, the effort was shelved.

Example 2: The Utah State Legislature, after many years of exploring the possibility of launching a voucher program in Utah, eventually secured enough votes to pass the most expansive voucher law in the nation (2007). The vote margin was very small, and the opposition from many traditional education groups was open and assertive. Nevertheless, the new law was passed, signed by Governor Huntsman, and slated for full implementation. But the new law was never implemented due to a public referendum that defeated the new law by a 68 percent favorable vote. This is, perhaps, the most significant reversal of new legislation in recent memory. Many lawmakers responded by saying that “the people have spoken, and the voucher issue should be put to rest.” But few focus group members took these statements at face value, anticipating that the whole idea of a market driven approach to public education was not dead, certainly not among many Utah legislators who saw education as a broken institution that could only be fixed by a free market approach. While the formal voucher initiative may be set aside for now, other market driven ideas continue such as charter schools, on-line courses and programs, and home-based education.

Example 3: The Utah State Board of Education has had an ambitious agenda for improving the quality of schools for many years. Indeed their funding requests to the Utah Legislature have been very large, guided by the belief that the Board needed to accurately represent the needs of all school children statewide, and not to present a budget that seemed simply “realistic” given certain revenue forecasts.

Prior requests have included plans for all-day kindergarten for all students statewide, and pre-school programs for students most at risk of failing in school. Other priorities have been improved reading programs, better assessments to measure student achievement, math programs for the early grades, more counselors for junior and senior high schools, reduced class sizes, and improved educational technology among many others.

Except for a few pilot programs authorized by the legislature, the state board has not been able to advance an agenda to improve the quality of schooling albeit they have secured funding for enrollment growth and modest increases in the value of the weighted pupil unit.

The examples can be expanded, but the point is made that the key parties for governing education in Utah have had difficulty collaborating on new ideas and practices that can be advanced to implementation. There have been a couple of notable exceptions, both driven by governors. The first is charter school legislation advanced by Governor Michael O. Leavitt which was a compromise position with legislators who were advocating voucher plans. Indeed the creation of charter schools resulted in the development
of many new schools (approaching 80 in 2010) and many additional choices for students and parents. Charter schools remain public schools and fall under the supervision of the Utah State Board of Education; however, the State Charter School Board and local school boards supervise charter school policies and day-to-day operations. There is little debate that charter schools have been a significant change in the way public education is conducted in the State, but the performance of charter schools has been mixed. Some have become very good schools; others have not. The question of whether such schools represent an element of competition that drives all schools to improved levels of performance remains an open question.

A second development is the K–3 literacy program advanced by Governor Olene S. Walker. This program was broadly favored by the public education community but received only lukewarm support from the Utah Legislature. Governor Walker made reading literacy a fundamental policy position during her tenure, and she pushed the legislation through, compromising only on the sources of funding for the new program. The final legislation required a state appropriation matched by property taxes raised by local school boards. Full implementation took some time to complete, but the K–3 literacy program is now part of every school district in the state. The K–3 literacy program is generally regarded as an important contribution to the quality of schooling statewide; however, the lack of a universal and valid assessment protocol has been a conspicuous shortcoming.

In spite of these two examples, there is a general sense that real progress in improving schools has been modest by virtually any standard, especially given the number of important issues that need to be addressed. Many of the problems facing public education are not intractable, but there is, at minimum, a sense of resignation among many educators that public education, as an important social institution, may be at a point of stasis and that progress and improvement will not be achieved, at least in the short term, without significant help and intervention. The parties to the educational enterprise are well established; their respective views have been articulated over time, but a clear plan or direction that might unite the educational community is not in evidence at this time.

These circumstances are made more difficult by the seeming impasse among the parties. Who is in charge? Is it the State School Board, the legislature, local school boards, school superintendents, or the governor? Who can initiate and implement important changes effectively? Is a coalition among the parties possible? In the face of these questions, there is a sense, especially among senior educators, that many of the same issues get cycled and recycled without proper resolution. Forbearance and optimism among career educators may be among the more valuable side effects of the current impasse.

Some have argued that this educational “standoff” can be remedied only with significant structural changes in the way schools are governed. A number of different ideas have been aired, such as the governor appointing members of the Utah State Board of Education and/or the Superintendent of Public Education. Other ideas include the elimination of the State Board of Regents, allowing institutional Boards of Trustees to govern each school. Still others advocate stronger governing boards with powers, and perhaps financial incentives, to better control and manage institutions. There are others. This makes for interesting conversation, but to date no structural change has had enough interest or support to provoke a serious proposal for action.

A more likely possibility is that the governing authorities can be brought together by a leader, most likely the governor, given the state’s recent history, and by a common agenda or plan that will overcome the long-standing structural issues that have made progress difficult. Such a development will require the expense of political capital on the governor’s part and all the skills of political leadership that seem to advance most important new developments: great ideas coupled with advocacy, cajoling, arm twisting, deal-making, compromising, and the myriad of other skills required to make significant progress on education issues, or for that matter, any public policy issue of any consequence. The governor would need to build a formidable coalition both within the educational community and with business and political leaders to make this effort a possibility. Governor Gary Herbert’s Educational Excellence Commission is clearly a step in the right direction, but such plans have experienced resistance in the past. An alternate possibility is that a prominent business leader or coalition of business leaders could lead the way to a clear plan for educational improvement. Such has been the case in other cities and states.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE?

Dr. Roald Campbell, the former Dean of Education at the University of Chicago once remarked that every generation needs to remake or renew the social contract between public education and the larger society that supports it. The public schools, as currently organized, did not evolve until the mid to late part of the 19th Century; however, there were strong sentiments for universal public education from the days of the nation’s founding. Thomas Jefferson pointed out that some degree of education as necessary to prepare citizens to participate effectively and intelligently in our open political system: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” Other important values supporting public education include such things as promoting civility and virtue and preparing individuals to be self-reliant and self-sufficient participants in society.

As the general patterns for governing and funding public education evolved over time, several key characteristics
emerged that received popular support and that persist to the present time. Such characteristics include: individual state systems funded through public taxation with a strong preference for local district control; schools that are free (no cost to children); and schools that are free of religious bias and open to all children. A common curriculum is directed by local elected school boards that control day-to-day operations.

While there is evidence of continuing support for these basic patterns of organizing and funding public education, and indeed the focus groups provided such support, the respondents reported a variety of concerns that question some of the most fundamental practices and values undergirding public education. In fact, one of the more surprising developments during the focus group sessions was the frequency and urgency of the questions surrounding the aims and purpose of education. Many questions were raised, and a few are listed here to illustrate the lively and provocative discussions that ensued.

- Are schools and districts, as presently organized, sufficiently responsive to the important changes that are taking place in society at large?
- How nimble are schools in dealing with dramatic changes in workforce requirements?
- Can schools survive the political polarization that seems to dominate social issues and political discussions at all levels?
- Why has financial support for public education diminished over time, and is this simply an early warning of what lies ahead?
- What are the core values that should be transmitted to future generations, and what is the role of public education in doing so?
- Should schools be a countervailing force in society and push back against the trends of popular culture and the values of non-stop entertainment so pervasive in the media and elsewhere?
- Are schools being pushed away from their core purposes and being asked to do too much—everything from training new drivers, certifying firearm safety, teaching and speaking Chinese, and educating students to be more productive, inventive, and humane than ever before?

There are no easy answers to these questions, and many focus groups ended more with a sense of concern and apprehension than with clear resolutions about the future. What can be said about this uncertain future? Several possibilities follow below:

First, public education may move toward a more market driven system. The current pattern of governing education by state and local school boards has been challenged by the idea of allowing market forces to determine the direction and purposes of education.

The point is made that putting money in the hands of parents and letting them choose an education appropriate for their children's needs will produce a superior system of education. The argument is made that competition will drive excellence. The voucher movement has been strong in Utah, especially among Utah lawmakers; and many of the tensions relative to that issue persist, despite a public referendum that turned back a voucher initiative approved by the legislature and signed by the governor. There are residual, unresolved issues about the control of education that appear to continue just below the surface of public commentary. Advocates argue that public education cannot be nudged or moved into better practices short of this market driven model. Such a system may emerge over time, and several new ideas are being proposed by Utah legislators and others that would advance a more market driven approach to public education.

A second possibility is that public schools as now organized will become part of a much larger network of schools that operate under the banner of public education. Included in this group would be charter schools, on-line schools, private schools that may receive grants and contracts to provide certain services, and public colleges and universities that provide seamless transition programs from K–12 grades into a broad range of post-secondary programs. Teachers may find multiple opportunities in such an environment, working part of the time in a conventional school and working part of the time as an on-line instructor for a school, college, or university. The lock step pattern of employment contracts would be subordinate to many more market driven opportunities across the entire spectrum of public and higher education. Under such a plan students and parents would need to take much more responsibility for learning outcomes by putting together a plan of programs, courses, and extra-curricular activities from a rather broad menu of choices. There would be less reliance on school buildings, reducing somewhat the reliance on physical facilities, transportation systems, etc. There is evidence of these practices both in Utah and other states.

What emerges from this point of view is a network of educational programs and services not locked into the present pattern of schools and school districts. Schools and districts would not be eliminated but would complement, perhaps even orchestrate, a network of educational programs and offerings.

A third possibility may be a reorganized system of public education that provides fewer services and programs but does so in ways that enhance the efficiency of the existing infrastructure of schools. Such a development would be driven by either the lack of revenue to continue to do business as in the past or the lack of public and political will to make further investments in public education. This scenario would call for schools to be scheduled on a year-round basis to increase the productivity of existing schools.
and to make much greater use of technology to drive and deliver instruction.

The call for smaller government and fewer public programs has advocates. And, there is some evidence of these sentiments in the Utah Legislature. Public and higher education are included in the demand for fewer and leaner government programs. The current climate of limited revenue is laced with doubt about further investment, and that doubt may exceed the difficulties of the current recession. It is not uncommon to hear some legislators say that no new funding is justified until the system of education can demonstrate better initiatives and improved performance regardless of the availability of revenue. In the face of revenue shortfalls and/or the reluctance to raise taxes, there are advocates for scaling back the number of school days or trimming whole grades as presently organized.

It is difficult to forecast how scaled back schools would be more effective over the long term given the demands for a better educated citizenry and for a more skilled workforce. High quality school systems are characterized by more time in school, not less, and by longer school days and longer school years. But in the final analysis, the quality and productivity of public education is a matter of public and political will. And there is a legitimate question as to whether Utah has enough of either to sustain an improved system of public education.

It may be that after all of the options for organizing public education are placed in front of the general public the present system, properly focused and funded, is the best option for the future. Public education continues to enjoy strong support at the grassroots level. Parents and students support their local schools while at the same time have doubts about other schools in general. This irony is evident in many communities in the state and nation. It is not without precedent to conclude that when options are clearly understood, citizens make choices that often defy conventional wisdom.

Year-round schools, for example, have advantages both for learning and for the efficiency of operations. Despite a flurry of activity to implement such schools, driven in large measure by enrollment growth, such schools are being replaced by traditionally scheduled schools as enrollment and funding permit. One might conclude that faced with the options, parents and constituents, in general, prefer paying higher taxes or existing taxes over a longer period of time than opt for a year-round school schedule.

In examining these alternative futures, there are some matters that must be addressed, regardless of the specific design. All of these ideas were expressed and reinforced by focus groups members:

1. Schools do not do a good job of telling their story and expressing it in ways that turn the hearts and minds of the constituents they serve. New initiatives, especially, will require new strategies for informing students, parents, and taxpayers.

2. School performance is not what it should be. By and large, students can and should perform better, especially in basic subjects.

3. The achievement gap as outlined earlier is an enormous problem that cannot be ignored.

4. Future schools must be more successful in engaging the participation of parents in the education of their students. Poor parent involvement is a common complaint, but there must be carefully planned and creative ways for schools to get better connected with parents.

5. The continuance of poor teachers is a serious problem. School principals who fail to deal with poor teachers present a serious problem.

6. Schools and districts must find ways to be more productive and effective. Added revenue from state and local sources will demand such efforts.

7. Education improvement cannot be left to schools alone. Business, religious, political, and community leaders must all join the effort to improve opportunities for students. The “voice” for education as described earlier must be rekindled.

It is often said that politics is driven by crisis. The same could be said about public education. Perhaps there is no apparent crisis in education, at least not one that has the drama of natural disasters or the near collapse of the nation’s banking system. But below the surface of normalcy are issues of major significance that could surprise many. For example, neither the state nor the nation can sustain, indefinitely, a high school drop-out rate as high as is currently the case. All students must become ready, in high school, for either college (post-secondary training) or for the workplace; and the requirements for either will demand more skill and education than ever before. Our global economy requires it.

Surprising to some are the well documented changes in U.S educational achievement especially since the 1970’s. Harvard economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz have documented the slow-down in educational achievement for U.S. students and the loss of comparative advantage with other nations (Goldin and Katz, 2008). These phenomena have had a particularly profound effect on income disparity in the U.S. They conclude that:

The slowdown in the growth of educational attainment . . . is the single most important factor increasing educational wage differentials since 1980 and is a major contributor to increased family inequality. If technology continues to race ahead (and history suggests it will) and educational attainment does not begin to increase rapidly, we are likely to see continued increases in inequality. For many reasons, then the United States must find a way to increase the stock of educated Americans.
Whatever the new design or “social contract” may be, the mandate is there that we must do much better in advancing the educational achievement of all students.

Perhaps what is more troubling to many is not simply the decline in educational achievement and public investment but a sense that the idea of public education may be diminishing or becoming lost. Public education, as an idea, has the power to shape people, institutions, and nations. It is not simply the sum of schools and school districts, yellow school buses, and football fields. It is an idea that has given rise to the hopes and dreams of millions of Americans who believe that through their own work and determination they could become an educated person and participate more fully as a worker, family member, and citizen. A recent immigrant was observed saying: “I came to America to live the American dream—to know that I and my children can become all that we want be.”

The current debate about public education is uncertain and conflicted. It is not clear what new plans or agreements will be drafted and signed but hopefully, this great idea of free, universally available, public education will be preserved. It is an idea that is at the heart of the American dream.

SUMMARY

After more than a year of discussion, focus group sessions, and conversations/interviews with many Utah educators and leaders, it has become clear that education in Utah is facing some serious challenges. Enrollment growth in the K–12 system will continue to grow at relatively high rates. Fall enrollment for 2011 will increase by at least 14,000 students. Higher education is seeing unprecedented growth due in part to a weak economy and an increasing emphasis on college attendance and graduation. Both enrollment trends will continue for the foreseeable future. The population, in general, and the school age population will be much more diverse in the future, and such diversity will pose additional challenges for school systems and the state. Responding effectively to a more diverse student body will be more costly than in the past. The economy is undergoing dramatic changes, and the implications for the future workforce are that workers will need higher levels of skill and education in the future. Utah public schools are performing at better than national averages by most measures; but when Utah schools are compared to other states that are most like Utah, overall performance tends to be lower than that of peer states. These factors are not simply assumptions that might assist future planning. They are well documented trends and conditions that will shape public and higher education for many years to come.

One would anticipate that policymakers at all levels would be mobilized to address and prepare for these challenges; but in fact, the state is in a serious holding pattern. There is no plan that gives direction to important issues; nor is there a means for prioritizing remedies. Reducing class sizes, giving teachers bonuses, or labeling schools with letter grades pop out of the political landscape like mushrooms after a storm. After the visit of virtually any “high level” consultant to the state, it follows that a new educational solution will emerge during a subsequent legislative session. Do such strategies work and, if so, by what standards or criteria? What makes such proposals attractive except that one or the other might be cobbled together by certain factions within the body politic? None of this makes sense for good educational practice, nor is there much hope for real progress.

The Book of Proverbs (Proverbs 29:18) says it well, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” At present, the people of Utah are not favored with a vision for education; and they need direction and leadership. At minimum, the authorities that govern education need to collaborate on an agenda that moves education forward and promises a better future. Much of the leadership for this effort lies with the governor to get the parties together on an agenda that meets Utah's most pressing needs. The governor is moving in this direction. At the same time, the Utah Legislature must play a more constructive and helpful role in the future. But there is plenty of responsibility and work to go around both within the educational community and the larger community of church leaders, political and business leaders, students, and parents.

The students of the state deserve it, and the state's future requires it.

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