

DOUBTS FLY ON CENTENNIAL UTAH SCHOOLS SENATOR: CENTENNIAL SCHOOLS FALL SHORT

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The Salt Lake Tribune. Salt Lake City, Utah: April 20, 1995. pg. D.1

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One month after a poll showed that many Utahns know nothing about Gov. Mike Leavitt's pet education project, a member of his own political party is questioning the effectiveness of the Centennial Schools program.

"Centennial Schools really aren't what we thought they'd be," Salt Lake Sen. Howard Stephenson said Wednesday during a meeting of the Education Interim Committee. The program "is falling far short of what we had hoped for in reaching children."

Two years ago, Leavitt unveiled his plan for "planting seeds" of change in Utah's public education system. The Centennial Schools program was supposed to give parents, teachers and principals more decision-making power and flexibility in spending school funds. Nearly 200 schools now are involved.

Despite all the planning and the millions of dollars that have gone into the project, this "is like trying to move a beached whale," said Stephenson. "I hear it from parents; I hear it from teachers. Most of them say they haven't seen any change."

Last fall, the Republican senator had complained the program didn't encourage "bold" change. Leavitt then said bureaucrats reluctant to give up power were partially to blame.

Then last month, a study released by Brigham Young University showed that more than half of 500 Utahns surveyed knew nothing at all about Centennial Schools. Only 8% reported knowing a great deal about the program. The remaining 38% knew "a little."

"We've been quite pleased with Centennial Schools," said Vicki Varela, spokeswoman for the governor. "Have we revolutionized the world? No. It's not possible to do that, and it's probably not a good idea."

Still, Varela said, schools across the state are coming up with plenty of creative initiatives, and the best ideas are "cross-pollinating" among individual schools.

"Parents are more involved today than I'm ever aware of before," said Riley O'Neil, deputy superintendent for Granite School District. He credits the Centennial School requirement that schools involve the community in drafting strategic plans.

He also says teachers are integrating curriculum in interesting ways so that an essay assigned in English class may help a student understand the principles being taught in science.

"It's going to be real difficult to do those kinds of things without some economic benefit" such as Centennial Schools funding, he said.

The Education Interim Committee agreed to discuss Centennial Schools at a later meeting.

Rep. Lloyd Frandsen agreed that it was a good idea for lawmakers to take another look, just as it's important to follow up with all programs passed by the Legislature. But he reminded the other committee members of one obstacle to school reform: themselves.

"One of the reasons we can't bring about educational reform is because of institutional memory. It's the nature of the Legislature to think in two-year cycles: the item is hot, then we follow it for a brief period and then we drop it," said the South Jordan Republican. Then new lawmakers come along, new plans are drafted and old programs are forgotten -- or reinvented, he said.