

## **PUBLIC EDUCATION REFORMS ARE JUST 'EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES'**

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School reform: Everybody wants to do it, but how do we know when we've done it right?

Gov. Mike Leavitt's announcement of Centennial Schools, one of Utah's most notable school reform efforts, was done with considerable fanfare: "On January 18 of [1993] . . . I called for one of the most important initiatives of my administration. I asked the schools of this state to participate in a bottom-up restructuring called Centennial Schools. My goal in issuing this challenge was for schools to rethink what they are doing from focusing on the process of education to focusing on student outcomes."

Indeed, positive outcomes ought to be the point of all education reforms. At a time of increasing national concern over lost ground in international rankings, slipping standards, and increased in-school incidences of violence and teen crises such as pregnancy, Utahns have rightly expressed concern about education in Utah.

Sensing this widespread interest in reform, Utah's politicians have proposed and implemented a number of reforms, but substantial changes -- never mind improvements -- in education have not been quite so forthcoming.

For example, there is little evidence that the \$16 million spent on the Centennial School program created much improvement. Research by the Sutherland Institute showed that over a five-year period, the test scores of Centennial School students were no better than the scores of students in non-Centennial schools.

Test scores are not the bottom line in all student achievement, but the Centennial Schools program did not outline any concrete criteria for success. As an independent report requested by the Utah legislature ([www.le.state.ut.us/audit/ad6\\_96.htm](http://www.le.state.ut.us/audit/ad6_96.htm)) put it, "a full review of Centennial School program effectiveness is impractical at this time . . . because the Utah State Office of Education has not identified measurable program outcomes." Without measurable outcomes, school reform programs are nothing more than a means to increase public education funding and temporarily silence concerns, not a means to legitimately improve education.

This lack of accountability is common among public school reform programs. Nationally, as well as in Utah, another reform that is getting a lot of attention is the drive to reduce classroom size. President Clinton challenged Congress to enact his "Ed-Flex" program and put 100,000 more teachers in America's classrooms. Thus far, Congress has provided \$1.2 billion in funding for 30,000 additional teachers. Of this, \$7.7 million will reach Utah, enabling the state to hire 198 more teachers.

Many Utahns have championed smaller classes as the cure for the ills of our crowded classrooms, but the national data do not support this optimism. From 1970 to 1985, the number of public school teachers increased by 7 percent in the United States. The pupil/ teacher ratio fell

from 22.3:1 to 17.9:1 (it is now about 17:1). However, during approximately this same period (1964 to 1977) the nation saw its greatest uninterrupted decline in Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores. If public education across the country and in Utah suffers from more fundamental problems, reducing class size will only increase the number of classrooms in which those problems occur.

Unfortunately, another reform program ripe for failure is Governor Leavitt's new Reading Achievement Program, apparently spurred on by a sudden decrease in SAT literacy scores among Utah's elementary school students (down from the 47th percentile in 1997 to the 44th in 1998). The initiative calls for all students to be able to read by the end of the third grade. A specific outcome -- wonderful! The problem is that the money allocated for the program (\$10 million since 1999) is not tied to achieving that outcome. The schools receive the money whether they succeed or not, and in fact will probably receive additional funding if they fail.

Other Utah reforms have been proposed: a task force on learning standards and accountability, empowered to set performance standards for students; state-wide core curriculum testing; a basic skills test required for graduation; new regulations for teacher certification; testing of new teachers; "strengthening" truancy laws; and a \$1,000 reward for schools that achieve specified reading levels. Each of these programs addresses a small part of the problem, but all fail to address the root issues.

The purpose of our public education program is to produce well- educated citizens. That is the specific outcome we all desire and pay to receive. If the system is failing to produce that result, the people who run that system must be given real incentives to turn failure into success. School reform programs try to micromanage the process. Instead of tinkering with an already bureaucratic process, we need to revitalize the system through competition.

Too much effort is being spent clothing the Emperor of Public Education with buzzwords such as "diversity," "working with others," and "higher level thinking," instead of actually getting down to the hard work of making new clothes: implementing meaningful changes. If Utah is to avoid a fate of mediocrity in education--mediocrity among a group of peers in decline--it must embrace serious and far-reaching reform. This will never happen as long as there are no legitimate incentives for change. More than anything else, the establishment needs an external force to motivate reform, and a good strong jolt of real competition would be preferable by far to slashed budgets or social upheaval. Competition-choice in education--isn't anti-public education, as is often claimed, but may well be the only medicine that can save it.