

Utah at the Crossroads: Challenges for K-12 Education in the Coming Ten Years

Research Report #653, September 2002

Lesson Summary

This report discusses the difficulties in financing public education in Utah. It shows how Utah students perform on standardized tests. The report then focuses on the coming enrollment boom in K-12 education and slowing economy and what effects these forces might have on public education. The report concludes with a discussion of the new federal mandates under "No Child Left Behind" and the challenges Utah will face in meeting those requirements.

Related Websites

- No Child Left Behind site: <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/>
- State Office of Ed data files: <http://www.usoe.k12.ut.us/homepage/datafile.htm>
- Utah test results: <http://www.usoe.k12.ut.us/eval/results/>

Utah Core Curriculum

- **U.S. Government 6210**
6210-0302 Federal monies influence local policy
6210-0402 Participate in activities that promote public good
- **Economics 6320**
6320-0603 apply economic concepts and economic reasoning

This lesson plan is provided by Utah Foundation to assist in using the accompanying Research Report in high school or middle school classes. Please feel free to copy the Research Report for your students.

Vocabulary

Convergence: when two or more unrelated items meet and begin to act in a united or uniform manner.

Crux: the essential point or problem around which a variety of issues hinge.

Delineate: clearly outline.

Demographics: the statistical characteristics of human populations (as age or income) used to identify trends.

Earmark: to set aside or reserve for a special purpose.

Graduated Rates: a higher percentage of taxation for higher income groups, (the more you earn, the more you pay).

Homogeneity: having identical characteristics.

Preponderance: overwhelmingly large or prominent.

Proxy: someone or something acting in the place of another, a stand-in.

Quandary: a dilemma or perplexing problem.

Quartile: the values that make up one-fourth of a whole.

Static: stationary or unchanging.

Quick Questions

1. What is Utah's education paradox?

Answer: Utah has high taxation and a high percent of budget spent on education, but the lowest per-pupil funding and the largest class sizes of any state in the nation.

2. What is unique about Utah's demographics, and how does that affect public schools?

Answer: Utah has the highest birth rate and the largest percentage of children under the age of 18 of any state in the nation. This creates a large number of children for public schools to educate, making it hard to provide sufficient funding per pupil.

3. What are the three major assessment tests given to students during their school career?

Answer: NAEP, SAT 9, and Core Assessments (Criterion Referenced Tests).

4. Generally, how do Utah students' scores compare to national averages on recent tests?

Answer: In most cases, Utah is above average, especially in the upper grades on the SAT 9.

5. Explain the differences between the 1990s and the 2000s in terms of enrollment in K-12 schools and the Utah economy.

Answer: In the 1990s, the economy grew, enrollment growth slowed, per pupil funding increased and class sizes became slightly smaller. The 2000s are anticipated to have high enrollment growth and a slow economy.

6. What is No Child Left Behind?

Answer: A law signed by President Bush that requires schools to try to improve student test scores each year for each racial and income group. It also describes punishments, such as state takeovers of schools that do not measure up.

7. List some of the major challenges Utah faces as it tries to comply with No Child Left Behind.

Answer: Test scores of minority and low-income students, limits of Utah's State Office of Education's ability to administer reform. Rural school districts and the lack of certified teachers.

Critical Thinking Activities

1. You are a member of a group appointed to come up with ideas on how to deal with Utah's coming enrollment boom and slowing economic and tax revenue growth. You must come up with alternatives on how to continue funding K-12 education in Utah. What suggestions do you have? Would a tax increase work? If so, what taxes would you raise? Would you decide to cut other programs to shift money to education? If so, which ones? Is there something you can do to ensure the economy grows at a healthy rate to produce sufficient revenues? How are you going to help those with below-average test scores? Review all the options in small groups and present the group's recommendations to the class.
2. Internet Assignment: As a proposal to maintain or increase funding for education, Governor Leavitt has proposed changes to water subsidies in the state. Assign the students to research the proposals that he is making and the reactions by the different political leaders and local agencies, such as water boards or counties. Then, read Utah Foundation's April 2002 report on water consumption and pricing (found at: www.utahfoundation.org/reports.html). Based on the readings, have the students prepare a reaction appropriate for different parts of the state. Why do different leaders or geographic parts of the state have such varying reactions? What compromises would they suggest for the greatest good?

3. You are an administrator of a school that has been listed as “out of compliance” under the new No Child Left Behind law for the second straight year. The reason given for your listing was that your students failed to make adequately yearly progress on the CRT Language Arts/Reading tests in all grades. You must now draw up a two-year plan for improvement. What would you include in that plan? Would your teachers be required to lengthen the amount of time they teach reading? Would you offer tutoring for struggling students? What other ideas can be implemented and how can you ensure these changes will result in better test scores next year?

4. While supportive of the concept of No Child Left Behind, some schools that are struggling for compliance feel that there is a need for some exceptions. For example, schools may have to test children whose parents move frequently. Consequently, the students have not been in the school very long and there hasn't been much time to correct their academic deficiencies. The impacted schools have requested some leniency in reporting, such as only listing the scores of students who have been in attendance for a minimum length of time. School critics have asked “What part of No Child Left Behind don't you understand?” Do students feel that there should be some provision for short-stay students to be omitted from the school's scores? What other solutions would they suggest to fairly assess schools in different circumstances?

Quiz Page

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