



## GENERAL SESSION

January 26, 2011

### **Program Topic: Public Education Budget**

**Presented by:** Education Committee  
**Director:** JoAnn Neilson  
**Co-Chairs:** Leslie Dalton & Natalie Gordon

**Speakers:** Debra Roberts – Chair, State School Board

**Sen. Stuart Adams (R) – Dist. 22, Davis County**

**Debra Roberts** said the State Board of Education is doing something different. In the past, the board has presented the legislature with wish lists, which they believe were largely disregarded. This year education is simply asking to be “held harmless” or secure in the funding that has already been allotted to it.

The education budget, continued Ms. Roberts, is as lean as it can be, with no more fat to cut. It was funded last year by structural deficit (continuing programs which received only one-time money), and the governor's budget makes changes to the structure over a several year period. The goal is to at least maintain current programs. One of these is the all-day Kindergarten for at-need students, which has been making a positive difference in their learning and advancement.

The school board believes it must “draw a line in the sand” regarding music and the arts. It seeks to continue the Sorensen Arts

program and is also asking for some transportation money. Ideally the school board would prefer funding that provides for growth. She appealed to us to contact our legislators and assure them of our support for school growth funding.

The state school board’s mission statement, entitled “Promises to Keep: The Vision and Mission of Utah Public Education,” was distributed to those in attendance. Ms. Roberts emphasized that the standards contained in the mission statement were formulated by the combined efforts of several states, and is not a federally imposed system. Implementation will take about four years.

She also stated that the WPU (Weighted Pupil Unit) is still used as the basic funding mechanism of the budget. In 1996, a Utah constitutional amendment mandated public school money to be shared with higher education. Less general fund and more income tax money is now used for higher

education. The federal “Race to the Top” program was devised as way to incentivize states excelling in education with more federal dollars. In practice, however, it seems to mainly reward states with a more federally friendly political outlook. Utah is chafing under federal strictures, while our own state program of tracking students is not allowed to continue.

**Sen. Adams (R)** said the legislature is concerned about taking money from the federal government because it comes with strings attached. Unfortunately, a large portion of our budget is federally funded. The Utah senate is dealing with a structural imbalance created by using \$300M one-time money for continuing expenses. The \$200M from new businesses coming into Utah is not enough to cover it.

Sen. Adams recounted that during his first session, there were seven or eight special sessions devoted to budget cuts. He contends we must cut state agency budgets by 7%-9% across the board, even though we have a rainy day fund surplus.

On the other hand, Utah is also one of the few states actually experiencing growth and holding a Triple-A bond rating. The Governor believes the economy is doing better, and proposes addressing the structural deficit over the course of six years. The legislature is less sure, and wants to fix it over three years.

Education is by far the largest item on the state budget. There are two sides to funding education. First, 100% of state income tax

goes to public & higher education. Second, districts can raise funds by way of property tax, which stays within the various districts. However, property taxes are not equalized, which offsets the WPU funds. Equalizing the property, or “capital” tax side of the equation would raise some and lower others, so it has not received much traction with the general public.

Responding to questions, Sen. Adams said 70% of Utah land is federally owned; more than all the states east of Colorado, combined. More Utah land is being confiscated even now. U.S. Congressman Rob Bishop is attempting to tackle this issue at the federal level.

While the federal government pays some recompense to the state, it is a pittance compared to the revenue that could be generated if we were able to develop the land, the senator believes. Some of Utah’s protected lands are sensitive, he said. But most of them are not.

Some of the Trust Lands profit is given directly to school counsels, who then determine what their most pressing academic needs are. Sen. Adams said he understood the percent of revenue given to schools is increasing, although he was not entirely sure. He also believes a great many charter school students would be attending private schools if vouchers had not been voted down. Charter schools do get some public money.

**Reported by Ronda Rose**

# General Session 11

## **Program Topic: School Board Elections – Direct Races? Partisan or Non-partisan?**

**Presented by:** Education Committee  
**Director:** JoAnn Neilson  
**Co-Chairs:** Leslie Dalton & Natalie Gordon

**Speakers:** **Rep. Jim Nielson (R) – Dist. 19, Davis County**  
**(Bountiful, Woods Cross)**

**Peter Cannon – Davis School Board**

**Cheryl Phipps – Utah PTA, Legislative V.P.**

**Rep. Nielson (R)** has a bill pending that would provide for the direct election of State Board of Education members, repealing the involvement of the governor’s nominating committee in the selection process. The bill would maintain the elections as non-partisan and move the election to odd-numbered years. He believes voter turnout would improve, as repositioning the timing of the election would significantly raise its visibility level.

The congressman is confident the public “political will” does not exist for partisan elections. Further, he believes on principle that partisan politics would be unnecessarily divisive and should have no place in education. He acknowledged it would fall to the individual candidates themselves to publicize their campaign platforms so the public could make an informed choice in a nonpartisan race.

Responding to questions, Rep. Nielson said that although the governor’s committee does have a vetting process, it is better to trust the voters’ instincts. Eliminating the committee

and establishing a direct election is the most important aspect of his bill. Although it has not yet been numbered or given a fiscal note, the bill does have bi-partisan support.

**Peter Cannon**, speaking in favor of a partisan State Board of Education election, said political parties are a vital, and not evil, part of the electoral process. The financial and public relations support political parties can provide for candidates are crucial.

In his own case, several grassroots organizations, including The 9/12 Project and Utah Eagle Forum, offered him their support. Otherwise, he believes he could never have personally knocked on enough of the 28,000 voters’ doors to win election to his district’s school board. Such grassroots organizations essentially function as political parties, in that they have the structure and the resources for getting a candidate’s message to enough voters. They serve to educate the public on the issues involved, as well as the candidates’ differing views.

The sad truth, continued Mr. Cannon, is that too many uninformed voters decide “on a coin toss” who will be entrusted to spend the huge amounts of tax dollars in our school districts. He believes the UEA (Utah Education Association) will not support partisan school board races. “Utah may be a conservative state,” he said, “but most school boards are not.”

**Cheryl Phipps**, speaking in opposition to partisan school board elections, served four times on the state school board nominating committee. Currently, she said, lobbyists are making the decisions as to who may run for election. This is an insult to the voters, and implies they are not capable of making good decisions. She supports Rep. Nielson's bill, and appreciates the fact that it would move these races to the odd-numbered years.

In a recent Dan Jones poll, 46% strongly opposed partisan elections, with 26% somewhat opposed. The school board deals with issues having nothing to do with party platforms. City council elections are nonpartisan. Government employees could not run in partisan school board elections.

Are partisan elections constitutional? That issue will require a settled interpretation of our Utah Constitution. According to Article X, Section VIII, “No religious or partisan test or qualification shall be required as a condition of employment, admission, or attendance in the state's education systems.” Ms. Phipps then quoted George Washington’s Farewell Address, indicating his concerns regarding partisan politics.

Responding to questions, Ms. Phipps dismissed the suggestion that the UEA is politically left of center. Although it is a false conception to pre-judge “where a person is coming from” because of his or her political party, the fact is, she said, that UEA members are teachers in our conservative state, so the majority are probably Republican.

For a link to more information from *Utahns for Public Schools*, visit the WSLC website listed below.

**Reported by Ronda Rose**

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