

## GENERAL SESSION

February 3, 2016

### **Program Topics: Education Funding, Firearms Safety Education**

#### **Presented by: Education Committee**

Erin Preston & Seraya Amirthalingam

#### **Speakers:**

**Sen. Jim Dabakis** - (D) Utah Senate District 2, Salt Lake

**Sen. Todd Weiler** - (R) Utah Senate District 23, Davis/Salt Lake

**Nancy Neider** - Board Vice Chair of the Ogden Preparatory Academy



*Sen. Dabakis*

**Senator Dabakis** spoke about the motivation for his [Senate Joint Resolution 4](#), "Proposal to Amend Utah Constitution - Education Funding." By many measures, particularly amount spent per pupil and number of students per classroom, Utah ranks worst in the nation. Higher education is also suffering. The state previously paid 74% of higher education and now pays only 52%.

Tuition has gone up dramatically, and students are borrowing more than ever.

Dabakis emphasized the need to increase education funding and attributed part of the current problem to a change made to the Utah state constitution in 1996. Prior to that time, money raised from the state income tax went to K-12 education. The change caused that money to be split between K-12 and higher education. As a result, Dabakis told the group, the state

government was able to use more from the general fund for non-education projects because the responsibility to higher education came from state income taxes.

Furthermore, the state adopted a flat income tax. This second change also was to the detriment of education funds.

SJR 4 calls for removal of the 1996 change to the state constitution that funded higher education from state income tax. Instead, that money would be reserved for K-12.

Dabakis wants two more changes to the way the state finances schools. He said that by applying a graduated tax to those earning more than \$250K per year, the state could raise an additional \$177 for schools. He has sponsored [SB104](#) for this purpose. He also advocates raising the sales tax rate by an additional 1%, resulting in an additional income of between \$450M and \$600M. That money would go into the state's general fund to be used for both K-12 and higher ed.

During the question period, Sen. Dabakis continued to emphasize the need for more education funding, saying that this was more important than the details of how that

money is distributed for particular expenses.



*Sen. Weiler*

There were two rebuttals offered to Dabakis' argument in favor of SJR 4. The first was in impromptu remarks by **Sen. Todd Weiler**. He noted that Utah spends over 60% of state income on education, showing that it is indeed Utah's highest commitment. The students in the state have an increasing graduation rate, and Utah fifth graders

rank in the 10 top ten overall in the nation on the NALP test. Utah always ranks in the top 25. [Ed. Utah's 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores were in the top 10; in 2014 Utah ranked slightly below 25<sup>th</sup> in most categories.]

He attributed the statistics offered by Sen. Dabakis to the large family sizes in Utah and the large number of women who care for their families and remain out of the workforce. He said Utah would always remain near the bottom in per pupil funding, and that in fact, Utah ranks lower than 50<sup>th</sup>, behind "Guam or somebody."

When Utah removed the tax on food, it cost Utah public ed about \$100M/year. That narrowed the tax base instead of broadening it. He objects to this as bad tax policy, something that he says most Democrats will not admit.

A further perspective was given by WSLC Education Director Erin Preston, a founder of a charter school in Utah. She felt that the 1996 change was meant to help all public schools in Utah work together on

funding, but that the result was an adversarial stance between different entities. Many education bills allocate money from the state's general fund to particular projects such as technology.

Utah will see a decrease in public education funding this year, despite calls for increases in the Weighted Pupil Unit allocation by about 3.5%. This is because higher ed continues to take increasing amounts.

In response to a question, she said that there was no simple guide to how Utah finances education. Attending legislative committee meetings has been helpful to her as a charter school founder and involved parent.

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Sen. Weiler addressed the group in reference to his [SB 43](#) bill "Firearm Safety and Violence Prevention in Public Schools". The bill allocates \$75K for producing an instructional video for public schools. The one hour production about basic gun safety would be required viewing for either 5<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> graders (the grade is in flux at the current time, and there are exceptions to accommodate parental preferences).

Sen. Weiler offered a few anecdotes about a deaths or dangerous situations that occurred due to children not understanding basic gun safety. Guns are prevalent in Utah, children often come across improperly stored or lost guns, and they need to know that they should not handle them. Children who are properly trained will contact an adult for help.

This bill has passed committee and is scheduled for its second reading in the Senate. The House sponsor is Daniel McKay.

In response to questions, Sen. Weiler said that educating parents would also be helpful, that parents might be able to view the video at home with their children, and that one hour of supervised viewing would not be onerous for teachers or students. He also noted that while he feels that locks on

gun cabinets are a good idea, he does not feel that the government should tell people what to do in their homes.

**Nancy Neider**, who has had some 20 years of experience in law enforcement, opposes SB43. As a parent who owns and stores guns in her home, she feels that one hour of instruction is far too little. She has given her children over 40 hours of weapons training with a great emphasis on safety.

She also related an anecdote about a gun accident that was caused by improper handling.

Her 11 year old son has shot an AK-47 and several semi-automatic weapons on a gun range. It is part of the continuous training that she feels is necessary because guns hold a special fascination for boys.

A little bit of knowledge is not a good way to foster gun safety, in her opinion. She would like to help Sen. Weiler develop a more useful and comprehensive gun education program.

Eric Preston noted that the current time, Sen. Weiler knows of no other similar programs so he cannot compare his proposal to others.

In response to a question, Neider agreed that children raised in homes without guns might be those most in need of this education. She also emphasized that an occasional reminder not to touch guns, while generally helpful, is not a substitute for the repetitive training and reinforcement that children need.



*Nancy Neider*

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