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Jay Evensen: In fight over school funding, don't eliminate choices

By Jay Evensen

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Utahns are hearing some strange political noises these days. State lawmakers, mostly conservative to the core, are entering a legislative session with a booming economy — December's unemployment rate was 3.5 percent — and a healthy state surplus — estimated at \$638 million — and yet many voices are calling for tax increases.

A news conference on Tuesday typified this. Business leaders and the Salt Lake Chamber joined to say it's time for lawmakers to "look at all the options on the table." While they didn't specifically endorse an increase in the state income tax or gas taxes, the message was clear.

The state should no longer struggle to choose between funding education and funding transportation, they said. It should do both. The state's strong economy is seen as an opportunity for higher taxes.

Well

Raising the gas tax would be about as useful as charging your child for using the family typewriter. Cars are becoming more fuel-efficient — the federal government wants to raise the average miles per gallon of new cars to 54.5 by 2025 — and hybrids and electrics are becoming more prevalent. People will be using gas stations less as time goes by, even if prices remain low.

And making the gas tax a sales tax would only turn every drop in pump prices into a state fiscal emergency.

Meanwhile, raising income taxes for schools probably is a political non-starter. But regardless of whether that happens, the need for more money should not come at the expense of other things that are improving education in Utah.

Chief among these is school choice. National School Choice Week began Jan. 25. As an illustration of how the movement has grown, Forbes contributor Maureen Sullivan said there were only 150 events to commemorate this four years ago. This year, more than 11,000 were planned nationwide. Among these was a scheduled rally at the Utah Capitol, sponsored by the Utah Association of Public Charter Schools, which was expected to involve more than 400 charter students.

Utah voters rejected private school vouchers in 2007 — an unfortunate decision to end an effort that, by now, could have had a significant positive impact on school funding. But the state has embraced charters, which are public schools that operate under contracts, freeing them from many state regulations imposed on other public schools. That has been a good thing.

The state now has 109 of these and, according to the Utah Association of Public Charter Schools, they are teaching 12 percent of Utah's public school students. The Center for Education Reform gave Utah a B rating last year for its charter program, ranking it 11th best in the nation.

Advocates want to make sure this continues. They see some possible obstacles ahead, especially in the way we select members of the State Board of Education.

Last year, U.S. District Judge Clark Waddoups threw out the state's current method of choosing board candidates, which had required the governor to select two finalists after a committee had narrowed the list. At some point during the current session, the Legislature is likely to decide how to change the system.

The likely three options are to allow people to vote on all comers in a nonpartisan race, to allow political parties to winnow the candidates in a partisan race or to let the governor simply pick who sits on the board.

Of these, charter advocates fear the nonpartisan option the most, noting it would take only a few enemies of school choice to begin making life difficult for charters.

That would be a shame. A recent PDK/Gallup poll found about 70 percent support nationwide for charter schools, with 54 percent saying charter students receive a better education than other public school students.

That last point is a source of endless debate. Recent research published by the Cato Institute suggests charters are improving overall. But studying performance can be tricky. School choice allows some students who might otherwise fail to succeed, even if they may not do spectacularly well.

Yes, tax increases deserve a thorough debate in this legislative session. One thing lawmakers should not do in their effort to shore up school funding, however, is to begin limiting choices.