

# The Salt Lake Tribune

## Our economy can't handle tax hike, and schools show they don't need it

Evelyn Everton

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Utahns know the importance of a strong public education system — and today our public schools rank 10 spots higher in the national rankings published by Education Week than they did five years ago. Unfortunately, a new organization would prefer to ignore this progress and raise taxes on all of us.

The group, "Our Schools Now," recently wrote [an op-ed in these pages](#) calling on the state to raise the personal income tax to increase government spending on education. The facts show this is not only unnecessary, but would set our state back.

Hiking the income tax now would put the brakes on our booming economy. Gov. Jon Huntsman cut the state income tax from 7 percent to 5 percent in 2008, and in recent years Utah's economy has enjoyed some of the strongest growth in the country. Businesses and workers have flocked to the state, which created 49,500 new jobs in 2016. Unemployment is falling and wages are rising.

There's no reason to believe these tax cuts hurt the quality of public education. In fact, high school graduation rates have risen by 15 percentage points since 2008.

Low taxes have clearly worked for Utah. Why reverse course now? Raising the income tax would only make the state less competitive by driving away workers and entrepreneurs.

During a recent presentation before state legislators, a representative of Our Schools Now tried to downplay the economic damage of their proposal by making the dubious claim that income taxes don't hurt economic development. As evidence, he said that out of the 87 start-up companies in the country worth at least \$1 billion, 55 are located in California and 15 in New York — two states with income taxes higher than Utah's.

Wealthy executives might be able to afford living in those states, but regular people are packing their bags. California's population growth has stalled at under 1 percent, while New York's is shrinking. Residents of those states are moving to places that offer greater opportunity, like Utah — which boasts the highest rate of population growth in the nation. People vote with their feet, and they are voting for less taxes, not more.

Nevertheless, Our Schools Now thinks that a \$750 million tax hike is necessary to improve student learning. The group likes to point out that Utah spends less per student on education than any other state.

It would make more sense to judge schools based on student performance. By that measure, Utah's schools are competitive with those of other states. Our high school graduation rate is 85 percent — 5 points higher than the national average — and our science programs are some of the best in the country. In fact, proponents of education reform frequently cite Utah as a state that is spending less on education but maintaining high test scores.

There's no denying that our schools could be improved, of course. But there's also no reason to think that simply spending more on education will improve test scores. A 2014 study by the Cato Institute analyzed student performance in all 50 states going back to 1972 and compared it with state spending on education. The study found there is "essentially no link between state education spending (which has exploded) and the performance of students at the end of high school (which has generally stagnated or declined)."

If the backers of Our Schools Now wish to ignore this reality and send more of their income to the government, they should feel free to do so. But it's unfair to make hardworking families do the same.