

Utah's Faltering Education System: A Call for Urgent Action

Utah Democratic Party

January 29th, 2013

UTAH'S FALTERING PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

Utah's public schools are not failing. Utah is failing its public schools.

Once, a generation ago, Utah's school system was a leader in the nation. Utah was justifiably proud of the state's education system. Thirty years ago, our education product was a magnet to attract good paying, cutting edge industries and jobs to Utah. Thirty years ago, there was a vision for careful, but competitive funding for our children's education. Then, Utah ranked easily in the upper third of education results. Our test scores were well above national averages! And Utah led the nation in community support for education. Thirty years ago we had vision. Since then, our vision, our support for education has been lost. The complete lack of commitment to education, has led Utah to spiral downward for generations.

It is a well-known fact that Utah teachers are some of the best and the brightest heroes that our state has to offer. Day in and day out, they fight to make sure that our children are getting the best available education, and they do it in the face of a complete lack of support from the legislative and executive branches of Utah government. They are vilified by Republican legislators, they endure crippling budget cuts that eliminate preparation days, balloon class sizes, and force them to pay for classroom supplies out of their own pockets. And they do it for some of the lowest salaries in the nation. It is a testament to them, and only to them, that we are not last in every educational measure out there.

Research by national independent organizations has exposed an alarming decline in the quality of education Utah is providing its students. Overall, Utah is ranked 38nd in the nation for public education.ⁱ Our students are not reading at grade level, and our graduation rates are plummeting. Utah has set its sights on post-secondary education, but only 23% of our students in 2012 were deemed college ready – a 4% decline from 2011. The facts we set out next to each other are startling.

But the harsh reality is that Utah's public education system has been spiraling downward for generations. Research by national independent organizations has exposed a startling decline in the quality of education Utah is providing to its students. Overall, Utah is ranked 38nd in the nation for public education.ⁱⁱ

Graduation Rates

Between 1998 and 2008, Utah's graduation rate fell by 5.3% while schools nationally experienced a 6.1% increase in the average graduation rate of seniors.ⁱⁱⁱ These numbers are based on the new federal formula, where certificates of achievement^{iv}, GEDs, and/or those took more than 4 years are not included.^v When using the federal formula, Utah's self-reported 90% graduation rate drops drastically to 76%.^{vi} According to the same report, this new graduation rate ties Utah with two other states for the

ranking of 32nd in the nation. These statistics are even more staggering when comparing the classroom experience for most of our public school students.

Over a standard student's four year high school career, 21% of his classmates will have dropped out of high school.^{vii} In the same student's senior year of high school, 7% of his classmates will formally or informally withdraw.^{viii} In addition, 45% of students surveyed said they dropped out of high school because they had fallen behind, either in elementary or middle school, and simply could not catch up.^{ix}

Achievement Gap

Utah demographics are changing at a rapid pace. Minorities comprise 22.2% of our student population^x and nearly one in three of Utahns is projected to be Hispanic/Latino by 2050. In 2012, 39% of students received free or reduced-cost school lunches, a 13.5% jump since 2005.^{xi} The indicators of academic success reveal systemic failures within these populations.

82.2% of Caucasian students pass the Language Arts CRT tests. Our minority students, however, perform significantly worse, as low as 62.2% passing, while only 35.4% of students with limited English proficiency pass. In Math, our minority students have scores as low as 44.7%, and only half of our students with disabilities pass these exams.^{xii} The Latino community, which makes up 15.5% of our population, is taking a huge academic hit. On average, our Latino students score 24 points lower in reading than white students, with only 58% scoring high enough to pass.^{xiii}

In addition to failing test scores, our minority populations are not graduating. In 2011, minority students lost between 27%-39% of their classmates, with students dropping out or moving into programs that do not award diplomas. Latino students are graduating at a strikingly low 57%.^{xiv} African-American students are graduating at 61%.^{xv} Over the past 4 years, the students labeled as "English Language Learners" had a dropout rate consistently above 50%.^{xvi}

Utah is one of five states where the achievement gap is larger than the national average.^{xvii} Experts have identified many reasons why minority groups seem to fall behind, including poverty, parents' education levels, familiarity with the school system, stereotyping in schools, and language barriers.^{xviii} To date, Utah has made little progress in providing support that enables all students, regardless of ethnicity or economics, to achieve at the same level. Utah's low commitment can be seen in the frequent cuts in funding to programs that target these populations.^{xix}

Testing Scores

The Utah Foundation has conducted numerous reviews of Utah's education system, including comparing the state to its "peer states", or states with similar demographics (such as parental education and poverty rates) using NAEP test scores.^{xx} According to their reports, Utah ranks last or second to last in 4th grade reading, math and science between 1992-2009.^{xxi} At the 8th grade level, Utah's students continually come in dead last for the same time span.^{xxii} Based on the Utah Foundation's analysis, Utah

students are ranked as only achieving the most basic level of understanding, or “partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental.” In the twenty year window provided by the analysis, Utah students have **never** reached proficient or advanced levels.^{xxiii}

Results from the 2011 Core CRT Testing tell a similar story. Statewide, only 82.2% of Utah students are passing Language Arts. In mathematics, only 68.5% of students received a passing grade.^{xxiv} In both these calculations, minority students are falling quickly behind. Testing for grades 1-3 shows that 38% of our students require “reading interventions,” necessitated by an inability to read on grade level.^{xxv}

Some in the educational community have stated that they prefer to look at college and career readiness, using test scores from the ACT and SAT to measure the success of Utah’s education system.^{xxvi}

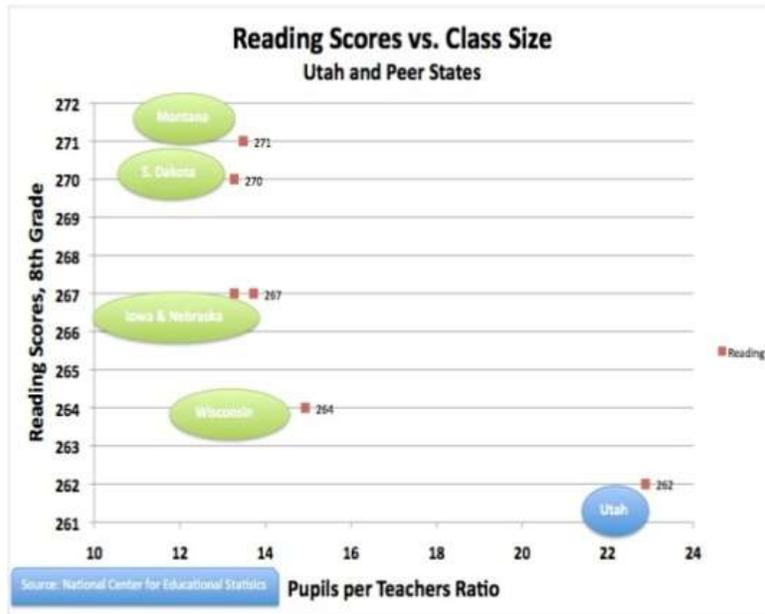
Unfortunately, information released in August of 2012 showed that of the students who took the ACT, just 23% met the necessary benchmarks to be considered college ready, a 4% drop from 2011.^{xxvii} This is indicative of the high percentage of incoming freshmen at Utah’s public who require remedial college courses before beginning their regular collegiate course load.^{xxviii}

Class Sizes

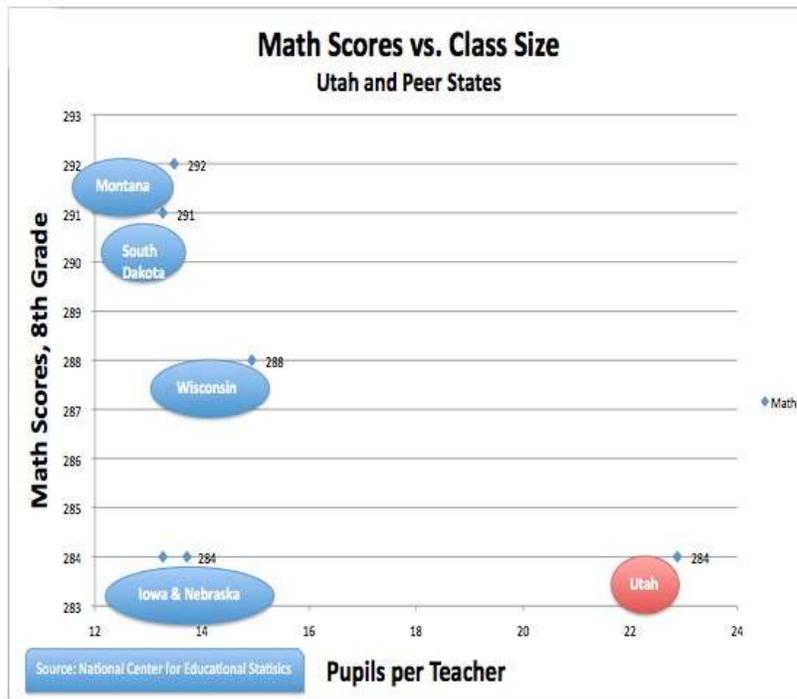
Large class size is one of the major issues negatively affecting Utah’s overall education score. Utah has the highest pupil to teacher ratio in the nation, at 22.1 students per one teacher. All of Utah’s peer states are below the national average of 15.7 students per teacher.^{xxix} Additionally, Utah schools have four times the national average in the ratio of students to counselors, over four times the national average in the number of students per school nurse, and Utah exceeds the average ratios in our peer states by over three times.^{xxx}

According to the Adequate Yearly Progress Report, a school-by-school assessment of academic performance set forth by the No Child Left Behind program, elementary and secondary schools that have class sizes larger than Utah’s are unable to claim academic health.^{xxxi} Even in classes with the median of 22.1 students, it is virtually impossible to provide the personal attention necessary for student success due to limited time for questions, grading, and assessment of written responses to test questions.^{xxxii} There are expressed correlations between class size and test scores within our academic peer states:

Appendix D (continued)



Appendix D.



UTAH'S EDUCATIONAL ECONOMIC FORECAST:

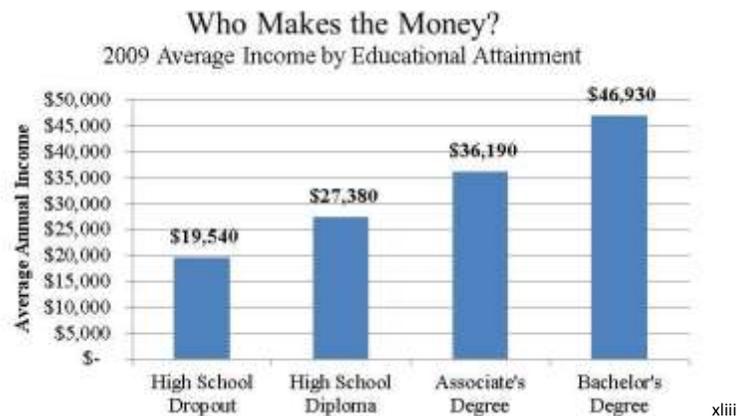
THE IMPACT OF A FALTERING EDUCATION SYSTEM

By the federal standard for graduation calculations, Utah has fallen behind 31 states, and is tied with 2.^{xxxiii} Utah's overall graduation rate stands at 76%, with a significant gap between minorities and non-Hispanic white students.^{xxxiv} African American students currently graduate at the significantly lower rate of 61%, and Latino students at a staggeringly low 57%.^{xxxv} Students from low-income families drop out at six times the rate of their high-income counterparts.^{xxxvi}

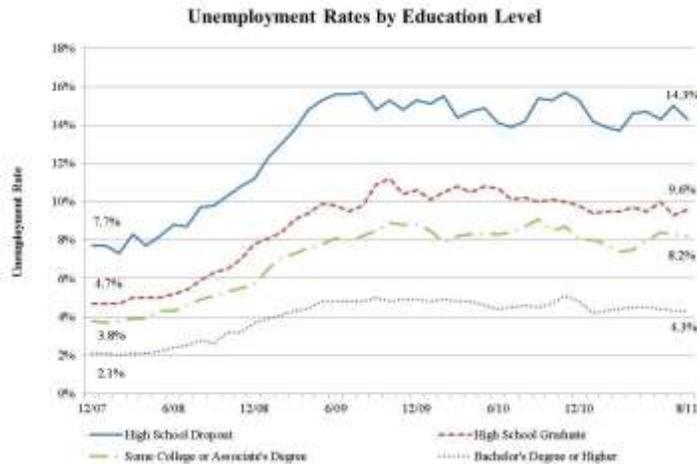
Individuals without a high school diploma are more likely to be periodically unemployed, on government assistance, or cycling through the prison system.^{xxxvii} Because of the continuing changes in the labor economy, dropouts are making significantly less money, with little room to grow.^{xxxviii} Improving academic outcomes can boost the state's economy through increases in earnings, home and auto sales, job and economic growth, spending and investment, and state and local tax revenues.^{xxxix}

Employment

High school graduates earn 24.4% more than those who do not complete their high school education.^{xi} In 2009, the average annual income for a high school dropout was \$19,540.^{xii} Graduates of high school earned \$7,000 more at a yearly income of \$27,380. Those with associates and/or bachelor's degrees jumped in annual income anywhere from nine to twenty thousand dollars more.^{xlii}



High school dropouts are twice as likely to be unemployed.^{xliii} As of 2011, dropouts were unemployed at a rate of 14.3%, high school graduates at 9.6%, people with some college or an associate's degree at 8.2%, and those with a bachelor's degree or higher at 4.3%.^{xliii} When recognized by age group, teens top out at a shockingly high 23%.^{xliii}



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Taxation and Purchasing Power

As a result of lower incomes, high school dropouts are less likely to pay taxes, and more likely to rely on social programs such as Medicaid and welfare.^{xlviii} Graduating a single dropout would result in \$200,000 in higher tax revenues and would significantly reduce the cost burden on government programs.^{xlix} One study found that a single dropout can cost up to \$4,000 a year in lost taxes and increased public health costs.ⁱ are less likely to commit crime or use public services like community health care, housing assistance or food stamps.ⁱⁱ

If half of Utah's dropouts from the class of 2010 had graduated, economists estimate that Utah would have seen \$24 million increased in spending, \$36 million in increased gross state product, 150 new jobs, \$3 million in increased tax revenue, and \$105 million in increased home sales.ⁱⁱⁱ If 60% of those new graduates earned college credentials or degrees, Utah could expect \$32 million in increased spending, \$49 million in increases gross state product, 200 new jobs, \$4.2 million in increased tax revenue, and \$163 million in increased home sales.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Job Growth

Although Utah's unemployment rates are below the national average, the economic recovery has not been evenly dispersed among employers. The largest employment growth in 2012 has occurred in the Professional and Business Services, which added 11,400 jobs as of the October Unemployment Summary.^{lv} However, jobs in this rapidly growing field require a higher level of education, and are not accessible to those without high school diplomas. More specifically, the 2011 Annual Average Report released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows a large disparity between the state's overall rate of unemployment and the higher rate of unemployment in the Latino community.^{lv}

Increasing the number of graduates and those prepared for higher education is essential to meet the growing demands of the future workforce.^{lvi} Economies with low or inadequately educated populaces find it much more difficult to attract new business investment as well.^{lvii} The recession's increase of competition for lower wage jobs has led many to abandon their search.^{lviii}

IN DEPTH: EDUCATION FUNDING CRISIS

Our recent and precipitous decline set aside, Utah has a long and dedicated history of funding education. In 1932, after the legislature adopted deep cuts in the property tax to alleviate the pressure of the Great Depression, Utahns realized that public education needed significant additional support. Despite suffering from one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation, the people of Utah tightened their belts and instituted a personal income tax solely dedicated to funding K-12 public education.^{lix}

Despite being once steadily ranked in the top 10 nationally for funding, Utah has fallen to 29th.^{lx} Over the past 35 years, most states have increased funding of education. Utah has not.^{lxi} This year, Utah is ranked dead last in per pupil funding, an unfortunate title the state has held since 1988.^{lxii}

It has become clear that the GOP's argument that Utah maintains a strong funding commitment but low per pupil spending due to a high birthrate is obsolete.^{lxiii} Rather than continuing to strengthen and properly fund Utah's growing education system, state legislators have prioritized spending in other categories, or reduced tax revenue all together.^{lxiv}

Income Tax

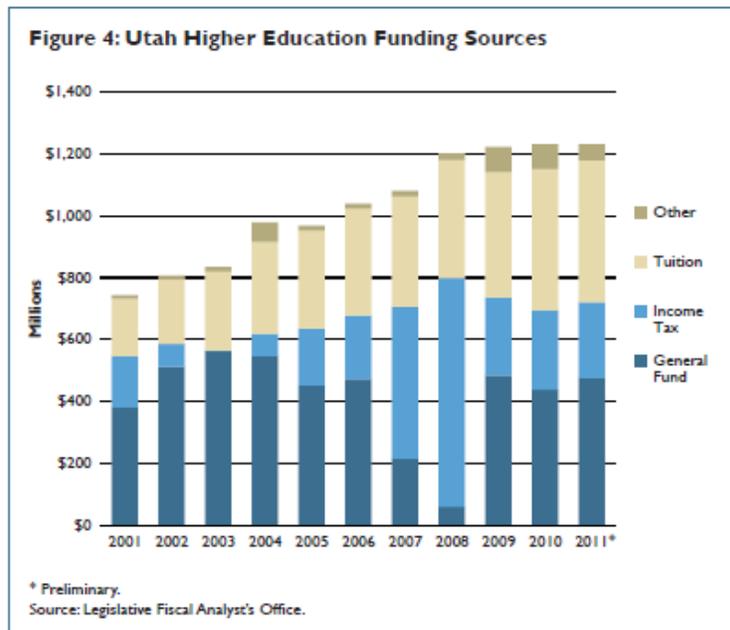
Utah has both an individual and corporate income tax. Following significant cuts to the tax rates over the past 20 years, Utah adopted a flat tax rate of 5% for both individuals and corporations.^{lxv} Utah currently ranks 32nd among states with individual income taxes, and 41st among states levying corporate income taxes.^{lxvi}

Decline in income tax

The individual income tax is the largest source of revenue for the state of Utah and funds public education, alongside the corporate income tax.^{lxvii} The income tax rate instituted in 1932 was increased in 1936 and applied to middle class income earners with no change until 1965, when the top tax was increased to 6.5%.^{lxviii} After another bump to 7.75% in 1975, Utah's income tax provided enough revenue to fund growth and pay wages with inflation adjustments all the way to 1987.^{lxix} Beginning in 1988, the top rate for income tax was periodically lowered until legislators in the 2007 General Session passed the largest tax cut in history, including a \$110 million reduction to the personal and corporate income taxes.^{lxx} Utah then adopted a flat tax of 5% in 2008,^{lxxi} which also included the adoption of a credit-based tax system.^{lxxii}

In the early 1990s, income tax revenue funds increased at a 9% yearly average, giving the state a large surplus.^{lxxiii} In 1996, after 65 years of dedicated K-12 public education funding, a constitutional amendment passed allowing the Education Fund to also support higher education.^{lxxiv} This change allowed the Legislature to continually increase the share of income tax to higher education while

siphoning education funds to other projects, such as prison and transportation programs.^{lxxv} The effects have been catastrophic.



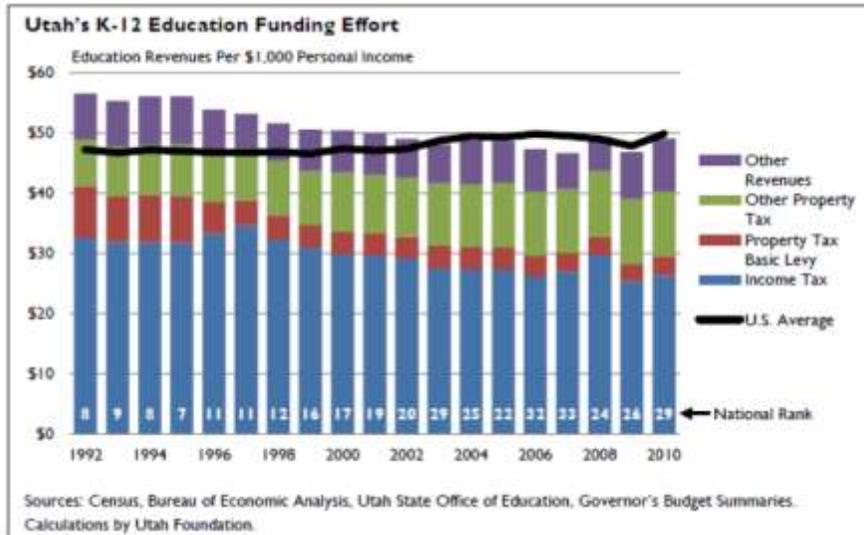
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Property Tax

All residential and commercial properties are taxed, unless legally exempt.^{lxxvii} School districts are required to set a tax rate on all tangible property to contribute to the Minimum School Program, which is the state's finance program for schools.^{lxxviii} The idea behind the tax is that each district is guaranteed a minimum amount, minus the projected revenue from the assessed property tax.^{lxxix} Revenues from the "Basic Levy" are capped relative to the previous fiscal year's revenue, to **prevent** school districts from acquiring large sums of money due to increasing property values.^{lxxx}

Decline in property tax

Utah has one of the lowest property tax rates in the nation.^{lxxxi} Once the primary source of tax revenue, the property tax has diminished greatly over the past 20 years.^{lxxxii} During the 1990s, there was a strong effort to further lower property taxes by doubling the homeowner's exemptions and cutting the basic levy.^{lxxxiii} Cuts to the levy have continued almost yearly as part of the Legislature's budget process.^{lxxxiv}



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Revenue from state and local sources is declining significantly. State funding efforts, once a mainstay of the national top ten, have slipped continually throughout the 2000s, landing Utah at 21st.^{lxxxvi} Due to the consistent cutting of property taxes, local funding has also dropped Utahns to 36th place nationally.^{lxxxvii} Additionally, the “Truth in Taxation” law passed in 1985, which requires public notice and hearings for increases in tax revenues even in the case of inflation or appreciation, has resulted in local government entities using impact fees and sales taxes to supplement their unreasonably low property tax rates.^{lxxxviii}

CONCLUSION

Utah’s education system has been in decline for over 20 years. It is a testament to the quality, persistence, and commitment of our heroic teachers that our education system has not burst apart at the seams. They continue to do more with less, put up with salary freezes, benefit cuts, and palpable condescension from members of the Utah State Legislature. They donate their time, as teacher preparation and professional development times continues to be cut, and they donate their money, as they are forced to buy supplies for their classrooms out of their own pockets. But the current situation is not sustainable and it is not acceptable, and we must get them the support that they, and our children, deserve.

Negative trends from 1992 to the present have continued, leaving our students without the quality education that Utahns have come to expect. Without quick and sweeping efforts to correct these issues, we can only assume that Utah’s scores and national education rankings will continue to fall, outstripping our teachers’ abilities to make up the difference, and debilitating the future achievements of today’s students.

The graduation rate dropped from a 90% rate to 76% with new federal guidelines - negating the previous state trends of including students who did not earn diplomas. Since 1992, Utah has come in last or second to last in national academic assessment scores of 4th and 8th grade students. Utah's classes are packed full of students, with a student to teacher ratio that increases every year. Of all the students taking college entrance exams, less than a quarter of them are college ready.

The negative trends target Utah's minority populations with dramatic effect, demonstrated through 15-20% lower graduation rates depending on ethnicity or economic background. Our Hispanic/Latino students are not performing at grade level, and they are not prepared for college.

Local and state officials have shied away from efforts to address the egregious problems building in our schools. Dropouts can no longer be ignored in a time where our stumbling economy needs the academic support that is necessary for growth. Education must be seen as a worthwhile investment, not a requirement for state funds.^{lxxxix} In an oft-cited report, academic failure is related directly to permanent recession.^{xc} On the other hand, high school graduates have great benefit to their communities. Graduates live longer, are less likely to be teen parents, and are more likely to raise healthy, educated children.^{xc}

Utah's tax burden is only 1.7% higher than the national average while its educational needs are more than 20% higher than the national average.^{xcii} The division of the once dedicated income tax between public K-12 education and higher education has had a significant negative impact on funding our public schools. The legal lowering of state property taxes is whittling away at supplemental income that could be a serious support to the foundation of Utah's education system. State Superintendent Larry Shumway spoke directly to this issue in a speech just before his retirement, stating "We cannot have the best school system in the country and be the lowest in the country in funding. We can't be first if we are always last."^{xciii}

ⁱ Winters, Rosemary. "Utah ranks 42nd in nation for education." *Salt Lake Tribune* 13 Jan 2012, n. pag. Print.

ⁱⁱ Winters, Rosemary. "Utah ranks 42nd in nation for education." *Salt Lake Tribune* 13 Jan 2012, n. pag. Print.

ⁱⁱⁱ Schencker, Lisa. "Utah graduation rate falling fast." *Salt Lake Tribune* 8 Jun 2011, n. pag. Print.

^{iv} Certificate of Achievement is a certificate stating that a student spent the 4 years attending high school classes, but did not earn enough credits to graduate with a diploma.

^v Schencker, Lisa. "Utah ranks in bottom half of country for high school grad rate." *Salt Lake Tribune*. 27 Nov 2012, online n. pag. Web. 28 Nov 2012 <www.sltrib.com/csp/cms/sites/sltrib/pages/id=55349588

^{vi} U.S. Department of Education. *Four Year Regulatory Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates School Year 2010-11, 2012* (Washington, DC) <<http://www2.ed.gov/documents/press-releases/state-2010-11-graduation-rate-data.pdf>>

^{vii} Utah State Office of Education. *2011 Cohort Graduation and Dropout Rate Report, 2011* (Salt Lake City, UT) <http://www.schools.utah.gov/data/Educational-Data/Graduation-Dropout-Rates/FinalCohortGrad2011b.aspx>

^{viii} Utah State Office of Education. *2010-11 Single-Year Dropout Rate Report, 2011* (Salt Lake City, UT) <http://www.schools.utah.gov/data/Educational-Data/Graduation-Dropout-Rates/Final_event_rate.aspx>

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- ^{xv} U.S. Department of Education. *Four Year Regulatory Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates School Year 2010-11, 2012* (Washington, DC) <<http://www2.ed.gov/documents/press-releases/state-2010-11-graduation-rate-data.pdf>>
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- ^{xviii} Schenker, Lisa. "Report: Utah achievement gap among nation's widest". *The Salt Lake Tribune*. 24 June 2011.
- ^{xix} Schenker, Lisa and Rosemary Winters. "National education report card shows no gains for Utah students". *The Salt Lake Tribune*. 3 Nov 2011. Print.
- ^{xx} The National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, tests 4th and 8th grade students in the areas of Math, Science and Reading as an effective way of revealing state and national trends. Understanding 4th grade reading is critical because children at this level begin to have the independent ability to explore text for themselves and use it in critical evaluations, while 8th grade math and science scores signify the preparedness of students to take on challenging high school work.
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