

What Utah's History Teaches Us About Vouchers

PART 1 OF 6

BY SUTHERLAND INSTITUTE

By the time Latter-day Saint pioneers settled the valleys of what would become Utah, they were already steeped in a rich culture of education. Due primarily to the heavy missionary component of their religion, Latter-day Saints embraced education from the Church's founding. Education was a prized expectation in spreading the Good Word. LDS missionaries were, and to this day are, instructed to learn all about the world around them for relevancy, practicality, and context in influencing all who cross their paths. Add to this expectation the day-to-day necessity of personal and economic development and education becomes highly valued in the lives and culture of Latter-day Saints.

This fact, then, sets a primary context for understanding the role of education (and schooling) throughout the history of Utah: a love of education grew, first and foremost, from religious motivations. So it comes as no surprise to discover that Utah's schools began as integrated institutions within the LDS Church, Utah's first progressive settlers.

For the first 20 years of Utah state history the average school house served every community as the center of secular and religious education, worship, and sociality. Church wards were the geographic boundaries of community schools, LDS bishops were tasked with their organization and appointment of teachers, and lay members were elected as school board trustees. The appointment as teacher was viewed as a church assignment, or "calling," that was filled

in the very homes of the appointed teachers.

During these early years, there were no compulsory attendance laws or a mandated curriculum. No family was forced to educate their children in either secular or religious knowledge nor were families required by law to send their children outside of the home for schooling.

Several sentiments were clear from the records of those early days. First, the Latter-day Saint people were encouraged by their Church leaders to gain as much education as they could. Second, schooling was essentially a private matter. Third, the community interest in educating children was limited to facilitating private efforts. Poor families leaned on their more prosperous neighbors for assistance in paying teachers for their services. Fourth, the levying of taxes was approved for the construction of school houses, but not for the payment of teachers and supplies.

The public policy question of taxing citizens to pay for schooling was controversial. While today using taxes to pay for public schools is an obvious and common practice, and any controversy now settles typically on how much money Utahns pay in taxes for their public schools (or what they get in return), early Utahns were not so settled. The idea of taxing citizens for educational purposes was not at all obvious. In addition, any public sentiments prompting LDS families to create cooperative schools did not automatically lead to taxing powers in behalf of those efforts.

The 1864 Territorial Superintendent's report included this revealing

statement, "The Superintendent, consulting public opinion, does not favor education by taxation, because while the sentiments of the people are so favorable to education, they are equally unfavorable to taxation."

Most Utahns today would argue that public schools serve a very clear public interest. Again, this sentiment was not so clear for our forefathers. Today we wonder what our children would do if they were not in school. Back then, the idle time of school-age children was not a concern. Those children would be working and trying to create and maintain their family homestead. Practically speaking, there was no idle time among children in Utah's founding years. In other words, there really were no "public interest" arguments in educating children. If a "common good" existed it was found in the private interests of families to progress their religion and themselves.

From 1847 to 1868, the "education identity" of Utah was distinctly religious in its motivations and orientations, private and familial in its control, and broadly supportive of educational advances throughout the community.

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(This excerpt from the Sutherland Institute's *Vouchers, Vows, and Vexations: The Historic Dilemma over Utah's Education Identity* is the first of a six-part series on the history of education in Utah. The full essay can be found at www.sutherlandinstitute.org.)