

What Utah's History Teaches Us About Vouchers

PART 3 OF 6

BY SUTHERLAND INSTITUTE

The new Utah State Constitution set the tone for the state's education identity throughout the decades between statehood and the advent of World War II. A "free" education became the opportunity of every state resident regardless of class standing.

The recorded debate at the constitutional convention reveals the thoroughness with which the members of the convention discussed the nature and extent of free schools.

But the message was clear from the outset: the LDS Church is to have no part in the formation and operations of the emerging public school system. The control of education was in the hands of the State Legislature and educational "experts." Interestingly, Section 9 of the Utah State Constitution permits tax dollars to flow to any school, private or otherwise, as long as a school is not "controlled by any religious organization," that is, allowing tax dollars to flow to private schools even with a particular religious orientation, just not controlled by the mother church.

This was the era of Progressive education. Several local issues, and a few national influences, defined this period of cultural sifting and systemic consolidation. Locally, the newly-established public school system struggled for identity. Split geographically between urban and rural communities Utah's public schools faced conflicts from progressive city schools and more conservative country schools.

But progress had its limits. Case in point, merit pay for teachers was

instituted as a tool of efficiency in the Salt Lake School District during the Great Depression. Superintendent L. John Nuttall, Jr. created a way to rank all teachers in his school district with a number from one to however many teachers were employed. A #1 ranking meant you were judged to be the best teacher in the district and salaries were increased or decreased based on these rankings. Not surprisingly, the Salt Lake Teachers Association and the Utah Education Association both opposed merit pay and any kind of rating system as "an attack on their personal integrity and classroom autonomy." The administrative effort did not last long and the district returned to a single salary schedule treating all teachers the same.

Large, consolidated school districts became a progressive craze that stuck. The head of the Utah Education Association, George Thomas, was able to confidently predict that, "We want larger governing units. The day may come when all the teachers and superintendents of the State will be made one State educational commission. When that day comes every boy and every girl in this State will have nearly equal educational advantages...."

Control of education was clearly in the hands of progressive educators. At the prompting of the National Education Association, Superintendent Ernest A. Smith, a non-Mormon serving from 1916-1920, organized a very aggressive effort known as the Utah Plan of 1919. The Plan had four goals: compulsory attendance for every school-age child in the state; compulsory attendance of all non-citizen aliens between the ages of

16 and 45 who could not read or write at the 5th grade level; all children between the ages of 12 and 18 were to be under school supervision, even after regular school hours; and, all Utah children should be medically examined under the control of public schools.

While progressive educators hailed Utah for its "Plan," the U.S. Supreme Court was considering the implications of compulsory attendance in public schools and laws supplanting parental rights and responsibilities. Two Court decisions, *Meyer* (1923) and *Pierce* (1925), coupled with several others to come, represented no small dilemma for Utah's progressive educators. In their wake, the Utah Plan of 1919 never took shape as the Court's edicts reinforced the inherent discomfort that Utahns had about its extreme intrusion into family autonomy.

The period between 1897 and 1940 dramatically altered who controlled the education of Utah's children. This era saw the shift of power move from families and local communities to the State and progressive educators.

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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 third of a six-part series on the history of education in Utah. The full essay can be found at www.sutherlandinstitute.org.)