

# DESERET Morning News

## Lawmakers combine education, tax bills

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In an unprecedented move, GOP legislative leaders are lumping together two groups of the most important bills to be heard in this year's Legislature — public education and taxes.

While it is not uncommon for legislators to run "omnibus" bills that capture disparate elements of a topic, it is almost unheard of for multiple individual bills — including some previously defeated in the current general session — to be bundled together into one bill. This year's session ends Wednesday at midnight.

Monday night, it was not immediately certain if the tax or education omnibus bill would contain an extra \$25 million in one-time money GOP leaders want to use for new teacher bonuses and bonuses based on teacher performance, details of which also were released Monday. The primary hurdle for House and Senate Republicans is a continuing disagreement over \$1 million for teachers seeking a special national certification.

Senate President John Valentine, R-Orem, said the education omnibus bill includes individual bills some might like and others they don't. Many of those individual bills address education reform, like differentiated pay and longer contracts for math and science teachers.

"Given the fact we only have two days left in the session, I don't know how we could fairly consider them all without having them all in one bill," said Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, chairman of the Public Education Appropriations Subcommittee.

House budget chairman Rep. Ron Bigelow, R-West Valley, told House members that the main reason for combining taxes and public education into two massive bills was to help legislative attorneys who are hard-pressed to keep track of more than a dozen bills in the final days of the session.

One GOP House leader said from a political aspect, having two major bills combining all measures left in those two important topics will allow for two extensive debates, followed by just two votes in each body, ultimately saving time and the possibility of drafting mistakes.

The huge new bills — which were drafted over the weekend by staff — will be explained section by section so that members can vote on each area that used to be a single bill.

"We're not trying to sneak anything through," Bigelow said. "If the votes are not there (for one piece), representatives will vote to delete it, period."

Five tax bills will be lumped into one tax package, and a dozen public education bills will be lumped into the Minimum School Program Act, the schools' budget bill that also will contain a 2.5 percent boost to the WPU, which is the state's basic student funding formula, and a \$1,700 teacher raise.

The bills could have their first floor debates today.

But the bundling has raised concerns among education leaders and some legislators.

The Utah Education Association, Utah PTA, plus school boards, superintendents and principals groups held a press conference on the matter Monday. They urged legislators to put the money going to programs in the omnibus bill instead into the WPU to build a more stable foundation for schools amid economic uncertainty.

Rep. Carol Spackman Moss, D-Holladay, said several legislators were "unhappy to find out today we may have to vote on an omnibus bill ... for significant amounts of money, that were not prioritized or that did not pass through a committee," and that rolling them with other attractive programs twists arms for votes.

For example, HB200, which seeks \$3.5 million to give software to families to prepare preschoolers for kindergarten, and HB278, which addresses charter school funding, both have failed in the House. SB35, which seeks \$5 million for math and science teacher pay, failed in a House committee. Both, however, were funded by the Executive Appropriations Committee.

While not attached to the omnibus bill Monday evening, a deal for spending \$25 million in one-time money the equivalent of a one-time, 1 percent WPU boost also is not without controversy.

The proposal brought to GOP House and Senate caucuses following talks with Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. would put the money into one-time bonuses \$5 million for signing bonuses for newly hired teachers and \$19 million in performance pay bonuses. The money would go to the State Office of Education, which would dole the money to school districts submitting proposals on how they would pay teachers for performance.

That, along with the 2.5 percent WPU increase and a \$1,700 teacher raise, would equal about a 6 percent WPU increase.

The governor had sought a 7 percent increase.

"The governor has been committed to teacher compensation and he has done a lot to ensure that teachers receive a substantial compensation package this year," said Lisa Roskelley, spokeswoman for Huntsman. "I think it's important to put it in perspective. Where last year, we had a surplus of \$1.7 billion and there was a 7 percent WPU (increase), this year, we're minus \$1 billion of that surplus ... and we're looking at a 6 percent equivalent compensation package."

Valentine said public schools are getting half of the new money this legislative session. "I would guess we have increased public education funding more than 50 percent than where it was this time last year," Valentine said.

But a proposed \$1 million for teachers seeking American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence was the hang-up in the House GOP caucus. Some felt the program was not as rigorous as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards process and didn't want to put \$1 million into it.

The UEA wonders if the whole \$25 million could be better spent otherwise.

School districts have many disparate needs be it a bus driver shortage, a need for tutors to improve test scores, or basic science lab equipment, the education groups noted.

"Are we grateful the Legislature is focused on teachers? Of course," said Susan Kuziak, UEA executive director. "But if it's one-time money, let districts decide."

House Majority Assistant Whip Brad Dee, R-Washington Terrace, said he has pounded his head against a wall for the past two weeks trying to get more money to schools.

"I'm dealing with reality in the last days of the Legislature, what we can sell to both bodies in the Legislature and the governor. The governor's already told us what he'd like to do ... and we've reached consensus," Dee said.

"If I had my druthers, would I change that program? Yeah, probably," he said. "But right now, can we get that? No. But can we get \$25 million to education? Yes. That's more important to me now."

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