

DESERET Morning News

Senators OK 3 bills boosting education

By Tiffany Erickson and Jennifer Toomer-Cook

Deseret Morning News

Published: January 31, 2008

Lawmakers gave the nod to a number of bills aimed at boosting pay for some educators, lowering class sizes, netting quality teachers for Utah's classrooms and extending the school year.

The Senate passed three bills Wednesday that would address some of the major woes of Utah's public education system — low pay, large classrooms and teacher shortages in math and science.

SB41, sponsored by Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, would allocate \$32 million to allow three school districts to apply for grant money to modify their current nine-month school schedules.

And some lawmakers said the measure is "thinking outside the box" at it's finest.

"This is a great plan — what's amazing is that we haven't done this during the past," said Sen. Chris Butters, R-West Jordan. "This comes close to being a no-brainer, and I don't know of any losers in this."

A \$2 million grant would be awarded to a rural district with 5,000 or fewer students, \$10 million would be given to a district selected that has fewer than 30,000 students, and \$20 million would go to a district with an enrollment larger than 30,000. That money could go to anything from air conditioning to technology — anything related to the schedule conversion.

The grant provisions would require the districts selected to provide opportunities for teachers to increase pay by at least 40 percent. Students would still be attending school 180 days a year, but teachers would be teaching around 220. And buildings wouldn't be sitting empty for three months, something Stephenson said started due to the "19th century agriculture calendar."

Stephenson said on year-round or extended schedules, schools can serve more students with fewer teachers.

"I don't believe we can afford the luxury of three months of an idle education system," Stephenson said. "We complain we spend less per student in the nation but have the audacity to continue with an agrarian model for education — how many businesses would survive if they were idling operations for three months a year?"

The idea is once a few school districts make the switch, offering teachers 40 percent higher salaries, then other districts would follow suit just to be competitive.

With a similar aim in mind, the House unanimously forwarded an \$8.3 million bill to let special-education teachers and speech pathologists earn an extra \$2,000 apiece — up to 10 days pay — for time spent on non-teaching tasks, like paperwork. HB67 sponsoring Rep. Ronda Rudd Menlove, R-Garland, said paperwork required of special educators — federal law requires individual education plans for each student — can

drive professionals away.

"It's a huge frustration in trying to balance that requirement," agreed Rep. Kory Holdaway, R-Taylorsville, and a special-education teacher. "This would help in providing an opportunity for these teachers to come in prior to or after the school year and do a lot of work they are having to do during the school year."

SB35, which also passed the Senate, would set aside \$7 million to pay teachers highly qualified in math, science and technology an extra \$5,000 a year in hopes of stemming a teacher shortage in those areas.

However, the Utah Education Association and a few lawmakers opposed the idea saying it could lead to divisiveness among educators and that there are other shortage areas too.

But proponents say it is time public education be in step with market forces.

Another measure, SB39, also sponsored by Stephenson, would charge a task force of legislators and education leaders and teachers that would look at issues related to math, science and technology education and bring back a strategic plan for improvement in those areas.

"We have a crisis in remaining the leader economically in the world, and unless we focus on this issue of math, science and technology, that crisis is going to continue," Stephenson said.

E-mail: terickson@desnews.com

© 2008 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved