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The Salt Lake Tribune

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GOP OKs \$25M more for schools - with strings attached

By Roxana Orellana
 The Salt Lake Tribune

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Who should decide how public schools spend money?

School districts believe they should, but Republican lawmakers beg to differ.

House and Senate Republicans, at the urging of Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr., on Monday agreed to add another \$25 million to state education coffers. That's on top of \$1,700 teacher pay raises and a 2.5 percent increase in the weighted pupil unit (WPU) they've already recommended.

But the additional \$25 million from a state reserve fund would come with strings attached, a proviso that concerns education lobbyists.

Under the plan endorsed by House Republicans, \$5 million would fund signing bonuses for new teachers, and the other \$20 million would go to the Utah State Office of Education to fund pay-for-performance programs individual school districts would devise to offer teachers merit raises.

Senate Republicans signed off on a similar plan, although they'd spend \$1 million on teacher recruitment and retention.

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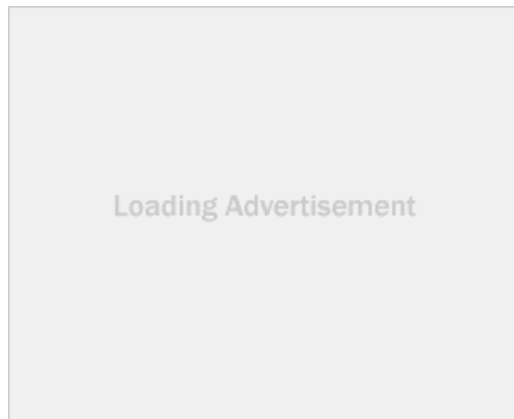
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Education lobbyists would rather the state simply increase the WPU - the amount the state awards schools on a per-pupil basis to fund operational costs - by another 1 percent and let districts spend the money where they believe it's most needed.

"It's disappointing the Legislature has chosen to . . . divert funding to specialized programs that . . . if you were to add up the money that would fund those programs, could add another 1 1/2 percent to the WPU," said Kirk Sitterud of the Utah School Superintendents Association.

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Education officials are equally unhappy about lawmakers' decision Monday to combine education initiatives that require new funding into a single bill they're expected to debate today. Educators say the omnibus bill includes legislation that lawmakers had earlier rejected.

Sarah Meier of the Utah School Boards Association joined other members of the Utah Public Education Coalition in saying she wishes lawmakers would listen to what people in the schools have to say.

The groups want the Legislature to invest in a solid foundation for schools, then fund and expand existing programs before creating new ones.

Lawmakers responded by saying they are working hard to fund public education.

Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, said leaders of both houses created the omnibus bill to improve efficiency as the session draws to a close Wednesday.

Putting all the initiatives in a single bill creates an opportunity for the public and lawmakers to consider each program as it compares to others, he said.

Funding debate

* **The issue:** Whether lawmakers should specify how \$25 million in additional education funding should be spent.

* **What's new:** House and Senate Republicans on Monday said they'll recommend that the money fund specific programs rather than being included in the amount the state awards schools on a per-pupil basis.

* **What's next:** The plan must be approved as part of the overall state budget.

What schools stand to get from the Legislature

The Republican majority so far has recommended:

* \$1,700 pay raise for all teachers.

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