

GOOD IDEA, GOVERNOR

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Equity is a matter of definition. Some will disagree with the definition apparent in Gov. Mike Leavitt's proposal to give an extra share of Utah's new wealth to schools in low-income communities. But they need to understand that traditional funding patterns are not equalizing the educational opportunities of disadvantaged children.

As part of his \$1.7 billion budget recommendation for public education for the coming year, Gov. Leavitt wants legislators to add \$8.2 million to the state's ongoing effort to shrink large classes. In a first for the state, more than half of the new money -- \$5.2 million -- would be spent specifically on schools full of students from low-income families who may not speak English at home.

The governor's worthy goal is to make a big difference at 40 to 60 schools instead of a small change for all.

Some Utahns are bound to complain, because most schools could use more help reducing class sizes. They might argue that schools with heavy concentrations of disadvantaged children already receive extra federal money to hire reading, language and other specialists.

Unfortunately, however, the \$30 million federal boost does not reach all qualified children -- there are 50,000 statewide -- and is not enough to give them a fair chance at success. Many live with parents who have little time to read to them, help them with homework or enrich their schooling with educational trips and home computers. Many move so often that they miss important concepts that prepare them for further learning. Some are hungry, abused or afraid of neighborhood violence.

The test scores and drop-out rates for some of these students tell the story in stark terms. This year at Edison Elementary in Salt Lake City, for example, only five of 68 kindergarten students passed their school-entrance test. Achievement scores in many of Utah's urban schools lag far behind those in more affluent areas. Nearly half of Salt Lake City's minority students drop out before high-school graduation.

Thanks to a healthy economy and hefty budget surplus, Utah can help compensate for the socioeconomic disadvantages facing some of its children without taking anything from more privileged ones. The governor proposes spending \$10.3 million of new tax revenue for textbooks and supplies, \$18 million for information technology and \$50 million for school salaries -- expenditures which would benefit all students.

Meantime, a special investment in disadvantaged children would concurrently address some of the state's most important social, economic and educational needs. By teaching these students what they need to know to be productive citizens, the program can be expected to reduce crime, improve tomorrow's work force and make more families self-sufficient, thereby extending opportunities for success to a larger share of the state's population.

It is gratifying that Gov. Leavitt, as a conservative, can see this connection between individual opportunity and state prosperity. State lawmakers would do well to follow his lead.