

LEGISLATORS APPROPRIATE \$227.9 MILLION FOR UTAH EDUCATION

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The one-day teacher walkout, the tattered textbooks and too-crowded classrooms, the tales of employees lured elsewhere for better pay and tuition spiraling out of students' reach -- in the end, the 2001 Legislature weighed those needs and spent \$227.9 million on Utah's public and higher education.

Lawmakers didn't come up with as much money as Gov. Mike Leavitt had pledged, nor as much as administrators requested. Leavitt initially sought \$245 million for public education alone, a proposal he called the "best ever, by a long shot."

It may indeed have been that, even with some educators lamenting needs not met.

"Good things were done," said Phyllis Sorensen, president of the Utah Education Association, specifically noting money set aside for textbooks, teacher supplies and school buildings. "I want to give credit where credit is due."

Lawmakers gave public education about \$160 million in new money, according to the state Office of Education. And higher education received \$67.9 million in new money -- a 12.6 percent increase over the current year's budget, though \$18 million short of what officials wanted.

Overall, the state Office of Education figured public education received a third the total amount of new money lawmakers had to spend this year -- \$655 million -- though public education makes up half of the state's overall budget.

"On the one hand we recognize and are grateful for the efforts the Legislature has made," Patrick Ogden, state associate superintendent, said Wednesday. "On the other hand, we're concerned that perhaps their efforts fell short of what they could have done."

Specifically, public school teachers walked away from the session unhappy that lawmakers hadn't done better than a 5.4 percent increase in per-pupil spending, most of it aimed at salaries. They noted that other public employees, including those at the state's nine public colleges and universities, will receive 6 percent compensation boosts.

"It's going to feel punitive to teachers," said the UEA's Sorensen. "It treats school employees different than any of the other state employees."

Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, who helped craft the compensation package, brushed aside teachers' concerns, noting that last year lawmakers provided 5.5 percent in per-pupil increases, while other public employees got 4 percent raises.

In fact, most districts gave their teachers a 4 percent increase last year and spent the difference elsewhere.

This year lawmakers offered extra money to public school teachers in the form of a \$10 million fund.

Both public and higher education received money to bolster and expand math, science and engineering programs, as called for by Leavitt. There is \$9.9 million for bonuses for educators willing to teach those subjects in public schools, while higher education received \$4 million to expand engineering and computer science programs and thus create more high-tech workers. Leavitt sees both initiatives as critical to shoring up the state's economy.

Though generally pleased with their share of new money, higher education officials said the total falls short in some areas. It won't, for example, cover the costs of educating the 4,363 new students who entered schools this year.

"In a year when there was so much on the table at the outset, to think that enrollment growth wouldn't be fully funded is unheard of. That is disappointing," said Cecelia Foxley, commissioner of higher education.

The state Board of Regents also lobbied unsuccessfully for money under a new formula designed to fund schools more equitably without huge gains in enrollment.

But they did gain some help in bringing faculty pay up to market levels. Lawmakers carved out an extra \$5 million, at least \$1 million of which was shaved from student financial aid and library funds.

As a result, tuition, which by law must comprise 25 percent of higher education's compensation package, will go up more than the 4 percent hike approved earlier.

Of the state Board of Education's top three priorities, two were not funded, including adding money to hire reading specialists and boost a program which helps students prepare for work.

But public ed received money for the state's electronic high school, to help non-English speakers learn the language and to replace federal money that funded HIV-prevention programs. Lawmakers also intend to sock away \$20 million to help districts deal with projected growth.

-- Public Education's Share:

About \$160 million in new money, including:

\$23.8 million for textbooks and supplies

\$5 million for teacher supplies

\$10 million to build new schools

\$10 million for teacher development

5.4 percent increase in WPU (the weighted-pupil unit covers texts, supplies and teacher salaries)

-- Higher Education's Share:

\$67.9 million in new money (plus \$160 million for capital projects) for:

\$12 million for enrollment growth

\$5.5 million for technology infrastructure

\$7.4 million for fuel and power rate increases

\$4 million to expand engineering and computer science programs

6 percent compensation increase