



Utah Education Funding Study

Summary 5: Policy Recommendations

**Targeted Programs—
Recommendation 5. Reexamine the Related to Basic programs to optimize coherence, stability, continuous improvement, and balance with Basic School Program funds.**

KEY FINDINGS

- Phase 1 findings with respect to Core Components of a minimum school program and Current Distribution Formulas.
- Phase 2
 - ▶ **Finding 7.** More equitable state funding systems run the vast majority of all funding through the equitable state formula.
 - ▶ **Finding 30.** Case study schools recognize and invest in social-emotional resources to support the “whole child.”

Key Considerations

Recommendation 5 is distinct from the others in that it offers considerations for continually improving and optimizing the Related to Basic (RTB) programs as a whole, rather than specific changes to the existing set of programs. It is beyond the scope of this study to evaluate each individual program. Rather, the study team considered the RTB programs as a whole and how they can be



Our recommendations are organized into four broad domains that speak to distinct aspects of the state funding system, and thus to distinct but interconnected opportunities for improvement.

Funding Generation

Funding Distribution

Targeted Programs

Effective Practices

best leveraged to serve state educational principles. Specifically, the study team offers considerations in four particular areas: coherence, stability, continuous improvement and evaluation, and balance with the BSP.

Coherence

Addressing gaps in system coherence may be possible through RTB programs if they can be organized around a few high-leverage purposes that serve key state goals (coherence of purpose), and if funds can be allocated in proportion with the priority of the goal served by any particular program (coherence of prioritization).

For example, Phase 1 findings suggest that investment in social-emotional learning is the one area of misalignment between the state's strategic planning and the current distribution formulas. Currently, investment in social-emotional learning makes up a very small proportion (< 0.5 percent) of all RTB funds. If supporting social-emotional learning is a high priority in state strategic planning, this does not seem to currently be reflected.

As a starting point for improving the coherence of RTB programs, the study team offers the following specific considerations:

- Do the purposes of the RTB programs overall and of each individual program support Utah's most critical state strategic goals?
- Is the allocation of RTB funds reflective of state priorities, allocating significantly more funding to programs serving high-priority goals?

Stability

Stability of funding is often a concern for district business administrators, who must think a few years beyond the current year and anticipate changes in their district's budget. Through our engagement with business administrators in Utah, we often heard concerns about the regular fluctuations in the RTB programs in particular. This perception is supported by the numbers. Specifically, changes to the value of the WPU, the foundation of the BSP, have ranged from -1 percent to 2 percent year-over-year between FY 2011-12 and FY 2018-19, accounting for inflation. Conversely, changes to total funding for RTB programs have been more volatile, ranging from -3 percent to 16 percent in the same period, again accounting for inflation. Even more volatility is present when considering individual programs year-over-year.

Given this volatility, the concerns expressed about this volatility by business administrators, and consensus that stability is a strong feature of strategic financial planning, opportunities to improve the RTB programs in this respect may exist.

As a starting point for improving the stability of RTB programs, the study team offers the following specific considerations:

- When considering long-standing programs, how predictable has funding been year-over-year?
- With respect to new programs, is there a sufficient and predictable initial period over which the program will be phased in and funded?
- When preparing to end a program, is there a sufficient and predictable closing period over which the program funding will be drawn down?

Continuous Improvement and Evaluation

Serving as a laboratory for new programs using innovative approaches to meeting key state strategic goals in new ways is perhaps one of the more exciting systems-level roles that the RTB programs can play. Programs serving new or underserved goals in innovative ways can be piloted through the RTB programs and support continuous system improvements over time.

However, not all RTB programs fit this category of innovative pilots. Some may be in the very early stages of developing key program elements (**Prototype Development**), others may be piloting or carrying forward a successful innovative practice to a broader scale (**Pilot and Scale**), while others may have a long track record of implementation sufficient to allow for more rigorous and formal evaluation (**Formal Evaluation**). One way to improve RTB program success may be to more clearly define what stage of development a program is in and design its implementation to both fit that stage and progress to the next stage.

Whether an innovative new program fails to succeed in its earliest stages or falters as it expands its scale, the possibility of failure is the main risk of using RTB programs to test innovative approaches. Without failure, though, improvement and learning cannot proceed. A process of continuous improvement, however it is structured, must allow for the first idea to be, as the Carnegie Foundation puts it, “possibly incorrect and definitely incomplete.”¹

One strategy for mitigating the risk(s) of failure is to develop a robust process of evaluating and improving programs at each stage of development.

With this in mind, the study team offers the following specific considerations to support policymakers to improve the role that RTB programs can play in continuous systems improvement:

- Is a robust process in place for assessing the effectiveness of all RTB programs, particularly those using innovative and untested approaches?
- How should RTB programs be implemented differently depending on their stage of development (e.g., Prototype Development, Pilot and Scale, Formal Evaluation)?
- How can program effectiveness be assessed through a process of continuous improvement, rather than a “sink or swim” approach?

Balance with the BSP

With systemwide coherence in mind, it is ideal that the constellation of RTB programs complement, rather than conflict with, other components of the system, particularly the BSP. To the extent that RTB programs either overlap or conflict with BSP programs, there are likely opportunities to improve balance between the two.

A concrete example of this is the Enhancement for At-Risk Students (EARS) program, which would be duplicative with the add-on WPU for ED students in Recommendation 2. If the state adds it to the BSP, it would be logical for this new adjustment to replace EARS, and for the current EARS funding to be diverted to support the new weight, to maintain balance between the BSP and the RTB programs.

1 Robinson, J. P. (2018). Drawing from improvement science to bridge education research and practice. Brookings Institute., p. 3.

This is a very clear-cut example of what may prove to be a more complex and ongoing process of regularly rebalancing programs in the RTB with the BSP. Policymakers may want to establish a more structured process by which this process occurs on a regular timetable.²

As a starting point for balancing RTB programs with the BSP funds, the study team offers the following specific considerations:

- Across the BSP and the RTB programs, are there any overlapping, competing, or conflicting programs?
- Is there a sufficient process in place to regularly review the BSP and the RTB programs, and does it sufficiently consider the balance between these two components of the MSP?

Effective Practices—Recommendation 6. Establish a competitive grant focused on supporting schools to develop effective processes within two key strategic areas.

KEY FINDINGS

- Phase 2
 - ▶ **Finding 25.** Districts with case study schools consistently provide a high level of autonomy and flexibility for schools to determine how to spend their funds.
 - ▶ **Finding 27.** Culture and leadership among case study schools are important features of their success.
 - ▶ **Finding 28.** Case study schools prioritize staff support, including structures for staff collaboration and school-directed and embedded professional development opportunities.
 - ▶ **Finding 29.** Data use to improve instructional practices and target support to struggling students is common among case study schools.
 - ▶ **Finding 30.** Case study schools recognize and invest in social-emotional resources to support the “whole child.”

Intended Effect

A focus on a deeper and more qualitative review of successful school settings was an important complement to the more quantitative analyses conducted for this study. Its overarching goal was to understand the practices of successful schools in sufficient detail to illuminate findings regarding how resources can be used well and efficiently, and how nonmonetary resources (e.g., community engagement, volunteering, parent engagement) can support or complement effective practices and resource use.

The results of this analysis paint a picture of a high-functioning school environment that makes strategic investments and, more importantly, fosters a collaborative culture that well positions the school to make the most of these investments. The recommended grant represents a first step toward this process of encouraging these effective practices across the state, through:

² It should be noted that a process that might have been leveraged for just this purpose was previously in place under H.B. 230, 2018 Gen. Sess. However, this act was subsequently repealed.

- **Investment in two key strategic priority areas: data use and social-emotional learning.** Both have a broad footprint in school operations, from overall administration to classroom interactions.
- **A competitive process to surface and elevate more, and more diverse, examples of success.** Schools and districts with the most potential to improve in these areas will provide the whole state with a richer picture of the conditions necessary for success.³
- **Prioritization of schools willing to maximize opportunities for staff impacted by the recommended grant to collaborate and to access embedded professional learning.** The study team found that successful settings are intentional about creating their school cultures to put student needs first, to be collaborative, to support teachers' professional growth, and to have a commitment to continuous improvement.

Although the recommended grant would focus on two specific strategic areas for investment, a school's autonomy to fully design and implement a plan aligned with the school's unique context is a critical feature of potential grantees. In addition, the study team recommends that a process of testing and refinement be established both for the grant overall and for the implementation process of each grantee individually.

Alternative Policy Options

There is one primary possible alternative approach to encouraging improvements in data use and social-emotional learning:

- **The USBE could develop and provide resources and support to districts and schools in these areas directly.** A potential benefit of this might be the ability to bring best practices to more districts and schools quickly, through the USBE's existing infrastructure. However, an important downside to centralizing the process is that doing so, by definition, standardizes to some extent the approach to improvement and does not provide schools with opportunities to foster these areas of focus with autonomy, which have been critical to the case study schools' success.

This alternative approach might be best implemented after a more robust profile of successful efforts is available from a wider pool of schools across the state. This can be used to establish a consensus about programs to improve data use and social-emotional learning in Utah. Such a consensus may also support progressing the recommended grant to the next stage of development, and ultimately scaling it to a wider population of schools and districts.

³ Emphasizing an applicant's "potential to improve," rather than demonstrated prior achievements, is especially important for gathering diverse examples of success. For effective practices to be scalable, how to implement the practices in settings that are not already primed for success must be clear, even for settings that are actively struggling to succeed.

Detailed Modeling of Possible Implementation

The study team makes no specific recommendation about the amount of funding provided for the recommended grant, and has not modeled its impact. In general, given the emphasis of case study schools and their districts on autonomous development, and given its status as a new program, the recommended grant would likely be at too early a stage to warrant a large immediate investment. This is not to suggest that the two strategic priorities do not require a substantial investment, only that, in order for such an investment to be effective, a period of development and refinement is critical before the investment in these important priorities reaches the necessary scale.