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Nonschool spending for kids lacking, study finds

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Per-pupil state funding for Utah's children ranks dead last compared to other states nationwide, and noneducation-related spending isn't much better.

According to research by the advocacy and research group Voices for Utah Children, nonschool spending between 2006 and 2009 grew by a thin, inflation-lagging 1.3 percent.

The study, the first of its kind in the state, makes no conclusions nor recommendations but suggests that children, particularly those 5 and under, are being shortchanged.

"That's the age that studies have shown time and again to be critical in the development of a child and the likelihood of success as an adult," Janis Dubno, senior policy analyst for early childhood at Voices told the Deseret News.

"Until now, there has not been any detailed research on actual spending on children across state agencies and programs," Dubno said. "Our findings show that the federal government provides most of the funding for noneducation children's programs in Utah."

Utah spends significant amounts of money on education for children 6 years old and older, but next to nothing on programs for younger children — 88 percent to 12 percent — according to the exhaustive, 80-page report.

"The Children's Budget," which is available online at the Voices Web site, examines state and federal funding for children's programs in Utah, from birth to age 18 for the four fiscal years. It tracks the level of funding, how funding for children is financed and how the money is allocated to children according to its earmarked purpose. Categories include early childhood, health and juvenile justice.

The report is an attempt to give a guideline to government officials in determining if their funding decisions reflect their priorities for children in Utah. It makes no attempt to assess the effectiveness of the programs or flag possible gaps in services, but is an effort to objectively quantify the level of state and federal funding for Utah's children and identifies trends in spending over the period.

According to the latest figures available from the U.S. Census Bureau, Utah spent \$5,683 per pupil to support public education in 2006-07. The next lowest state was Idaho at \$6,625 — which was still \$942 per student more than in Utah. The average nationally was \$9,666 per student, 70 percent higher than in Utah.

The figures do show an approach in spending that is counter to multiple economic and scientific research conclusions that indicate investment in children age 5 and younger improves school readiness as well as decreasing involvement in crime later on, as well as the likelihood of teen pregnancy, delinquency, substance abuse and dependency on state and federal assistance programs. In a sense, the expenditure gets more bang per buck.

"The fiscally conservative approach adhered to by Utah lawmakers and public agency administrators would dictate greater investment in the development of young children," Dubno said.

The motivation behind the report is to offer policymakers a spending measuring tape of sorts, said Karen Crompton, executive director of Voices. "(They) make thousands of funding decisions each year but aren't always able to see what those individual decisions add up to. Once they see the overall picture, they can decide if their spending choices are a reflection of their actual priorities for children."

Right now, the state is spending three times as much on juvenile justice programs than on early childhood programs such as childcare assistance, special education preschool and Head Start, according to the report.

"We're not saying that education-related spending or underwriting programs like juvenile justice aren't necessary," Dubno said. "They are. But prevention through investments in the cognitive, social and emotional development of young children simply makes good economic sense."

► **By the numbers:**

Utah spending on children by the numbers in fiscal year 2009.

- \$2.4 billion: the amount of state funds allocated for education.
- \$41 million: the amount spent on early childhood programs.
- 49 percent: the portion of the state budget spent on public and higher education.
- 87 percent: the portion of total funding for Utah children spent on education.
- 7 percent: the portion spent on other childhood programs.
- 300 percent: the portion of money spent on juvenile justice compared to funding for early childhood programs.

Source: "The Children's Budget," Voices for Utah

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