

Editorial

Continued from B1

Yes, all that costs money. But we should not think of it as spending so much as being what it truly is, a debt we owe.

Grading teachers and vouchers may be difficult, but we must do our best

Counting costs and benefits isn't always a neat and tidy exercise.

Consider the accountants who recently told their bosses on the Utah Legislative Audit Subcommittee that a new program intended to retain teachers by giving the best of them a bonus of up to \$10,000 doesn't lend itself to "objective" measurement.

True. But a lot of things in life are judgement calls. Including, often, the grades that teachers assign to their students. Including raises given elsewhere in government and the private sector.

The Utah Education Association has looked askance at the plan, arguing that teachers are supposed to work

collaboratively, not jostle for limited resources.

Maybe. But competition is a fact of life in the real world. And our educators should be professional enough that we won't see the English teacher undercutting the math teacher, who is bad-mouthing the Spanish teacher.

And we should have confidence that parents, principals and others involved will take the process seriously and seize the opportunity to reward the truly inspiring teachers among us.

Our teachers deserve more money, and the best teachers deserve it most of all. Getting more public school spending out of this Legislature, in any form, should be counted as a victory.

So does the fact that the program also boosts the pay of teachers in what the state considers "high poverty schools," where the challenge is the greatest.

The only way to know is to give this bonus program a try. Sic the auditors on it again in five years and we may hope to see what, if anything, it has bought us.

Those same auditors should also be keeping an eagle eye on the first

allocation of the Utah Fits All voucher program. If lawmakers will let them.

The program offers households up to \$8,000 per child — up to \$82 million altogether — to use for anything that smells like education. Not just private school or homeschooling, but also ballet lessons or therapy.

The whole point is that there are few standards and no benchmarks for success. It's mostly a front in the culture wars, a way to deny that public dollars should go to public schools.

But some of the families benefiting feel they've been given a much-needed chance to help children who, in their view, weren't thriving in public schools.

It is good that all of the first year's grants went to families that meet the definition of low-income — \$60,000 a year for a family of four. That already well-off households won't get reimbursed for tony private academies or country club memberships.

This is a program that simply begs to be audited, deeply and often. Republican lawmakers who generally favor oversight of government spending should insist on it.

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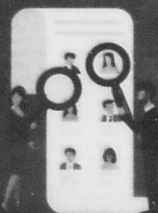
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