

# Teacher to take on challenges as new UEA president

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Growing up, Sharon Gallagher-Fishbaugh often returned from school to find her neighbor Kecia, who was born with Down syndrome, waiting for her.

"I just loved her innocence and spontaneity and ability to make me smile and think of things differently," she said.

But when Gallagher-Fishbaugh returned home from college one year, Kecia was no longer waiting. The girl had passed away. Even now, the memory brings tears to her eyes.

"It's been 30-plus years and I can still see her face at the back door," said the Dilworth Elementary second-grade teacher. "She just inspired me to go into education."

Since becoming a teacher, Gallagher-Fishbaugh has taught hundreds of Salt Lake City children to love learning, mentored other teachers and earned a slew of prestigious awards.

Now, the petite 53-year-old will take on a new full-time challenge: leading the 18,000-member Utah Education Association (UEA), the state's largest teachers union, starting July 15. Those who know her describe her as warm yet outspoken, and UEA leadership is confident she'll help carry the group's priorities to state leaders.

Gallagher-Fishbaugh, however, takes the lead at a challenging time.

She'll have to fight for school funding when there aren't as many dollars to go around. And she'll follow in the footsteps of retiring president Kim Campbell, who earned her share of admirers and critics during the past four years, most notably in the fight against school vouchers. The UEA was a leader in the anti-voucher effort. Voters ultimately rejected vouchers in 2007, but relationships remained bruised between the UEA and some state leaders in the years that followed.

"Since the voucher issue, there was some animosity, probably in fairness, on both sides," said Kory Holdaway, a former lawmaker who is now UEA director of government relations. He called Gallagher-Fishbaugh's impending presidency "a new opportunity to help with making some relationships with lawmakers that may have been difficult to make because of the history that we've had to deal with."

Gallagher-Fishbaugh will also continue UEA's battle to urge lawmakers to re-examine recent tax changes that are costing Utah schools hundreds of millions of dollars. And she'll build on Campbell's efforts to change the way the UEA talks about education issues with state leaders.

"So many times up on the hill, we've been accused of just saying we want more," Campbell said. She said during the past few years she and other UEA leaders have tried to shift the conversation to research and solutions.

"We've been really intentional about saying, 'We're really good at fighting against things we don't like. How do we become an advocate for what we do want?'" Campbell said.

Judi Clark, executive director of Parents for Choice in Education, which was a leader in the pro-voucher effort, said she hopes Gallagher-Fishbaugh continues to exercise the mutual respect and professionalism Campbell displayed even as an opponent on a number of issues.

Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, who leads several legislative education committees, said he hopes Gallagher-Fishbaugh engages with lawmakers. He criticized the UEA and Campbell for not being involved enough in legislative discussions about education during the past few years. He said they've been "virtually silent."

Holdaway disagrees, saying "part of the criticism may be as a result of us maybe not agreeing with what the senator feels like is the direction education needs to take."

Still, Stephenson said he hopes to have more education discussions with Gallagher-Fishbaugh. "If she's that good in the classroom, we can learn some things from her," he said.

Gallagher-Fishbaugh has earned a number of accolades during the 30-plus years she's taught. She was Utah's Teacher of the Year for 2009. This year, she won the National Education Association's top honor, the \$25,000 NEA Member Benefits Award for Teaching Excellence.

She's also a National Board Certified Teacher and has been a finalist for the Huntsman Award for Excellence in Education.

Kari Cahoon, who has taught second grade with Gallagher-Fishbaugh for 12 years at Dilworth, said she's the type of teacher who is always looking to improve, to learn more.

"I think in her entire career she's never just sat back and said, 'Well that's the way we always did it,' " Cahoon said. "She's always been looking...for new and better ways to do things." Dilworth Principal Kenneth Limb said Gallagher-Fishbaugh will help take educators' concerns to policymakers and lawmakers.

"She knows what she's talking about," Limb said. "She knows the issues. She knows the struggle we have in Utah education not being funded as high as we'd like."

Campbell said it's important that whoever is UEA president has recent classroom experience. It's part of the reason Campbell, who has been UEA president for four years, decided not to run for a third term. That, and she hopes to spend more time closer to home in the Cache Valley.

"We ought to keep our perspective fresh," Campbell said.

Gallagher-Fishbaugh is confident she'll be able to communicate to lawmakers and the public exactly how changes in legislation and funding have impacted Utah teachers and students. In recent years, she has seen her own class size increase, teacher training days reduced, and the proliferation of assessments that, she says, don't always inform instruction.

She said she looks forward to representing teachers at the state level and working to address the challenges facing Utah schools today.

"The fact that we are in the spot we're in, in public education, was one of the reasons that pushed me even further into pursuing this position," Gallagher-Fishbaugh said.

Her only sadness, she said, is how "desperately" she'll miss her second-graders.