

# Utah's education governance system is broken

**By John Florez**

*Published: Monday, Oct. 4, 2010 12:00 a.m. MDT*

Stop blaming teachers for our faltering schools. It's lawmakers' responsibility to make them work.

Politics and management are what needs fixing. Until our elected leaders have the vision and courage to invest in ensuring that our students are able to successfully compete on a global level, we will relegate students and our nation to mediocrity (for which our state leaders seem willing to settle). Rather than only demanding accountability for teachers, hold school board members, administrators and principals responsible for providing the support, respect and trust teachers need in order to come to the classroom ready to challenge and motivate their students. Do what the CEO of WD-40 Gary Ridge suggests in his book "Helping People Win at Work," subtitled, "Don't Mark My Paper, Help Me Get an A." He held his managers accountable for the success of their workers.

Our educational governance system is broken and needs leaders to fix it instead of blaming others, finding excuses and complaining. Most disturbing, they have resigned to accepting mediocrity in our students' education. They find excuses, "We don't have the money, the feds own all the land." And when things don't work, they blame administrators and those at the bottom of the food chain — teachers.

State leaders tell us they are doing the best they can with the money they have; well, so do families, but they will go to the mat for their children. They realize their children need a world-class education to succeed in today's economy. They set priorities. Politicians should do the same. Voters keep telling them education is a priority and are willing to pay for it. Yet, we have state politicians spending time on wedge issues instead of daily problems families face — jobs, mortgages, gas, tuition, lunch money and paying their medical bills.

It's naive to say, "If we have a healthy economy, then we can pay for education." We first need to invest in a world-class education system that prepares students with the knowledge and skills needed for today's high-performance work organizations — creativity, imagination, innovation. That is what our children need in order to have well-paying jobs, and not just any job, as our governor seems to suggest is good enough. Our state leaders only heard Jeb Bush talk about the need for accountability; they missed two critical points: "Invest in what you want," and work on improving education for the lower group of performing students and scores will rise for the whole system.

Our education governance structure, as practiced by the current political incumbents, has created inertia. The Utah Constitution calls for the Legislature to "establish and maintain" the state's public education system with State Board of Education responsible for the "general control and supervision" of public education. So why don't lawmakers let the board carry out its duties? They should stop micromanaging and stop changing laws on a whim. With such confusion and lack of respect for administrative boundaries, there is no accountability. Weak politicians seem to like it that way because they can claim "It didn't happen on my watch."

Wouldn't it be something if we had schools where politicians and teacher unions put children first? Leaders should stop complaining and blaming others for our problems. We need leaders who will commit to the future of our state, will stop playing "poor baby" and will stop blaming teachers. We need bold leaders who think and act first class. We need leaders who are willing to take risks. That's the price of growth. Standing still is not an option.

Voters must elect leaders who have the political will to restructure our convoluted education governance and management system so that it is accountable and responsive to voters. To do less is to relegate our children to a second-class education. It's our call.

A Utah native, John Florez has founded several Hispanic civil rights organizations; been on the staff of Sen. Orrin Hatch; served on more than 45 state, local and volunteer boards; and filled White House appointments, including deputy assistant secretary of labor and as a member of the commission on Hispanic education. E-mail: [jdflorez@comcast.net](mailto:jdflorez@comcast.net).