

Heidi Matthews' Remarks to the State Board of Education
R277-700 Public Hearing, Wednesday, September 20, 2017

I'm here today because teachers from across Utah are concerned by the State Board of Education's apparent willingness to lower the minimum educational standards for our middle school students. We're also puzzled as to why this Board would choose to eliminate credit unit requirements for all courses in grades 7 and 8 right now, when we have just begun a pilot program on competency-based learning.

This Board's own Strategic Plan says "The Utah State Board of Education will set the general statewide conditions in which each student can excel, including **equity of educational opportunities...**"

Therein lies my primary concern... "equity of educational opportunities." I have a very real fear that the students who are already experiencing the most challenges will be the ones most negatively impacted by the R277-700 rule changes.

If we had adequate resources for public education in Utah, this would likely be a different discussion. But many of our communities, especially smaller rural districts, simply do not have the funding to offer programs beyond the minimum set by the state. They just don't.

Please don't misunderstand. We support local control. We stand by the right of parents and communities to prioritize focus and resources in their school districts. We understand that under this rule, LEAs would have the local control to not change a thing.

But think for a moment of the pressure for a school to drop the now optional art program, orchestra or health class – not because they want to, but because their resources are so incredibly scarce and limited. This is not local control – this is local survival.

Local control in no way supersedes the responsibility for equity and to set high minimum standards. Under the guise of local control, this board cannot abdicate its responsibility to provide "equity of educational opportunities" for ALL students.

In this meeting, you'll hear from many who support this rule and its supposed "local control." I can certainly understand how parents of means would have no problem lowering the minimum standards to eliminate things like music and art and health. Parents of means can easily provide their children with these enriching activities on their own.

But I'd ask you to consider those who are not here... Those who don't have the means to take private music lessons or classes at a local art studio. As teachers, it's our responsibility to speak for them, too. I beg you to not lower the bar on these vulnerable young ones who already face an uphill battle. The gap between the haves and have-nots is wide enough. Please don't put music, art and health out of their reach as well.

Ultimately, we believe this rule is unnecessary since the Board already has the authority to grant LEAs flexibility and autonomy through waivers. However, we are at this time simply requesting the Board delay implementation of R277-700 and reconsider its impact. Specifically, prior to implementation of any rule like this, the Board should seek data to clarify:

1. What constitutes “mastery” or course completion under this rule;
2. How elimination of credit units will impact overall student learning;
3. How was it determined that music, art, health and PE had less value than other subjects and does the public agree;
4. If so, how will elimination of these requirements impact overall student learning since many subjects are interrelated; and
5. How this rule could impact classroom conditions that have led to our current teacher shortage.

Until these issues are better understood, we ask the Board to vote to delay R277-700.

The State Board Strategic Plan states: “The foundation of the Utah public education system is to provide an opportunity for educational excellence for each Utah student.” As always, Utah teachers stand ready to support the State Board of Education in this effort.

Sara Jones' Remarks to the State Board of Education

R277-700 Public Hearing, Wednesday, September 20, 2017

First, the rule eliminates the requirement for courses like PE, Health and the arts. But, where was the debate about each course? What criteria underlies the decision to require one course over another? In other words, why did the Board choose to value History as a state requirement but not Health? The decision appears to be completely arbitrary.

The Board has a multi-step process to adopt course standards. The process is well-defined and requires multiple opportunities for review and revision of the standards and requires opportunities for community input for a specific period of time. The process can take well over a year to adopt new course standards.

By comparison the decision to no longer require PE or Health or Music was made quickly with no real discussion about why some courses, but not others, would be required. When did the Board debate the merits of each class that, at some previous point, the Board had determined was vital to the intellectual, social and emotional development of adolescents? What was the basis for making so many courses optional?

Other than monthly Board committee meetings, where was the opportunity for community input about the **value** of requiring any particular course? Unlike the well-defined process for adopting course standards, including a required public comment period, the process for the Board to eliminate required courses was cursory.

Second the rule eliminates the requirement for credit units in grades 7 and 8.

It is astonishing that this rule was passed before the Board completes it's own pilot to develop a framework for competency-based education to be implemented in 2018-19. This is the exact opposite process the Board used to develop a "master plan" for digital teaching and learning first and then award grants to implement based on clear and consistent guidelines for best practices. That was an appropriate process. Identify best practices, develop guardrails to ensure student learning is not hindered and is enhanced, then move to allow districts to implement competency-based elements for their communities, if it is the right fit and if they choose. That is the balance that must be maintained between state oversight and local control.

Local control does not eliminate the state Board's obligation to ensure that every child has equitable access to a quality education. It is the very role of the state Board to create the standards and guardrails necessary to balance state requirements with local control. But this rule establishes no such guardrails – it simply removes long-established practices but does not provide any structure to guide LEA practice.

Finally, what is the Board trying to accomplish with this change and how will the Board demonstrate that anything improved as a result of this change? Will this increase student motivation, satisfaction or engagement in coursework? Will this increase student achievement, promotion from grade 8 to grade 9, or graduation rates? Will student access to a well-rounded curriculum be reduced? The rule fails to set any

expectation to measure the impact of these changes. And, the rule references no best practices or standards for local implementation of competency-based education.

The rule should be delayed until 1) the Board completes its pilot and develops a framework for competency-based education and 2) the Board clarifies the decision about education standards and required courses and involves the community and education stakeholders in that discussion.