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It's not how much, but how you spend the money on schools

By Eric Hanushek

As the "hack college professor" referred to by Keith Baker in the Salt Lake Tribune last week, I wanted to set a few things straight. In criticizing my relatively banal thesis -- increased spending does not necessarily translate into increased student achievement -- he resurrected a decade-old debate. Apparently, though, he hasn't been following either the research evidence or the news.

The accumulated research has clearly shown the lack of scientific support for his foolish policy suggestion.

More dramatically, after the historic Kansas City experiment, I figured nobody could suggest with a straight face "throwing money at schools."

Back in 1985, following eight years of legal proceedings, Judge Russell Clark gave the Kansas City (Missouri) School District license to "dream" in deciding what it needed to raise the achievement of black students in the district. Clark would make sure the bills were paid.

Over the next 12 years, the district spent nearly \$2 billion building 15 new schools and renovating 54 others. These buildings included a robotics lab, a 25-acre wildlife sanctuary, a mock court -- including judges' chambers -- and a model United Nations with simultaneous translation ability. Class size came down to 13. Teacher pay increased 40 percent. There were even field trips to Mexico and Senegal.

Despite having provided every resource a district could possibly want, Judge Clark in 1997 declared his experiment a failure. Test scores remained below state _____ and national averages.

Advertisement Kansas City is certainly the most extreme example, but evidence _____ across the country points in the same direction. The Washington, D.C., School District spends more per student -- \$14,000 plus -- than any other district in the country. Nevertheless, student achievement is abysmal. Utah would not want to emulate Washington, D.C.

In recounting this history, I am not suggesting that spending more money decreases student achievement. My point is simply that how districts spend money is at least as important as how much districts spend. Thus, spending fewer dollars per student than other state, as Utah does, is not necessarily a bad thing. Simply throwing more dollars at education probably is.

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