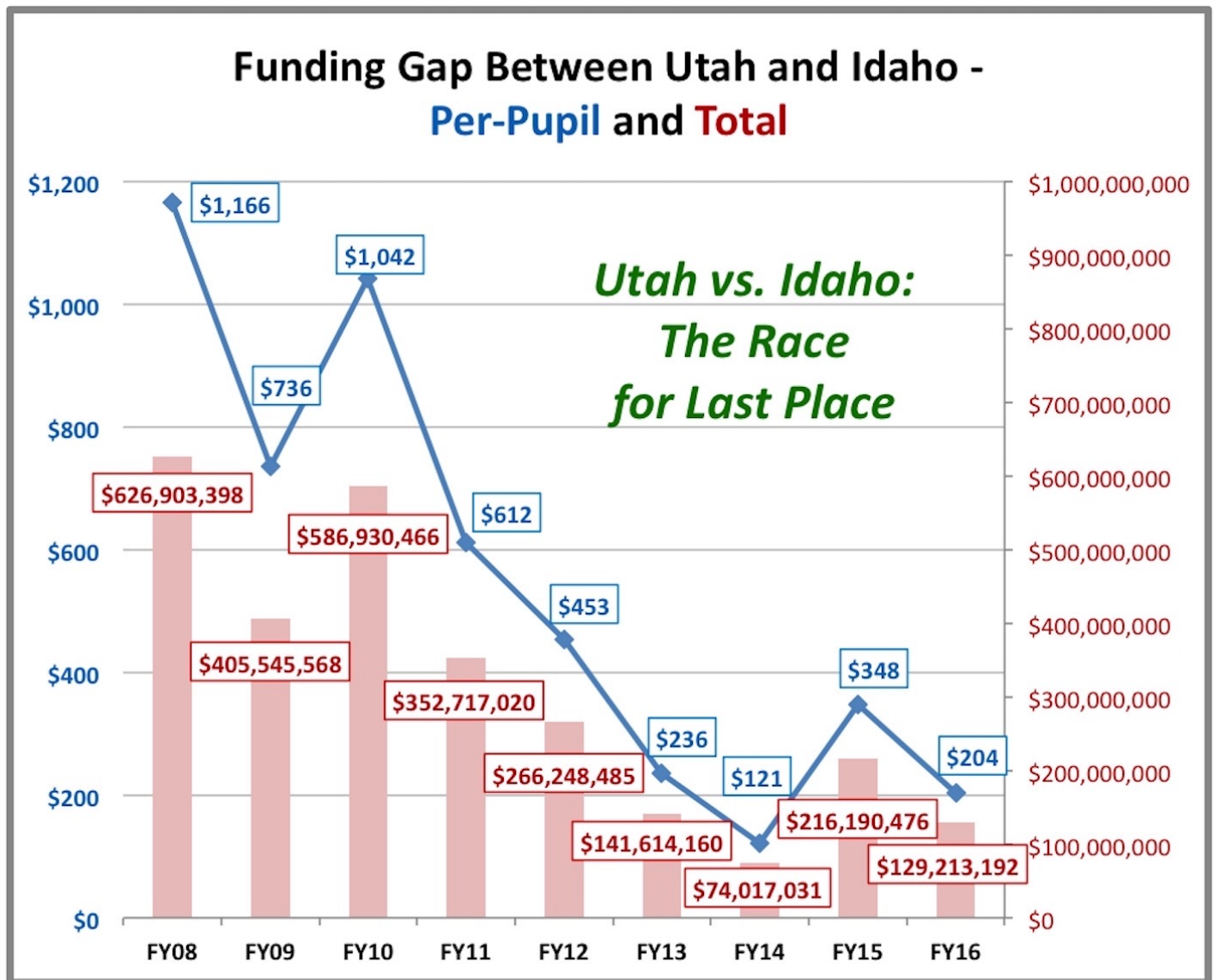


Utah Education Funding: What Are the Facts?

Published: Monday, 29 October 2018 06:19

Written by: Matthew Weinstein



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As Utah begins voting on a non-binding ballot question regarding a possible tax increase to finance additional education investment, what are the facts about recent trends in Utah's level of K-12 investment?

For example, how does Utah rank among the 50 states?

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The latest federal data released earlier this year ranked Utah once again in last place in per-pupil current expenditures, as has been the case every year since 1988.

The most recent Census Bureau report, released May 21, 2018 and available online at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/school-finances.html>, finds that Utah spent \$6,953 per pupil in the 2015-2016 school year, compared to \$6,575 the year before. Since the national CPI-U inflation rate was 1.3% between 2015 and 2016, this represented a real increase of 4.4% in Utah's per pupil education investment between the two school years.

Unfortunately, even such a substantial increase was not enough to surpass our perennial rival for 49th place, Idaho. In recent years, the gap between Utah and Idaho had shrunk to as little as \$121 per pupil in FY 2014, a gap Utah could have overcome that year with an additional \$74 million budget allocation. Then it grew in FY 2015 to \$348 per pupil, which would have required \$216 million in additional funding to overcome. But for FY 2016 the gap shrank again to \$204 per pupil, which would have required a budget increase of \$129 million to surpass Idaho. (See chart below.)

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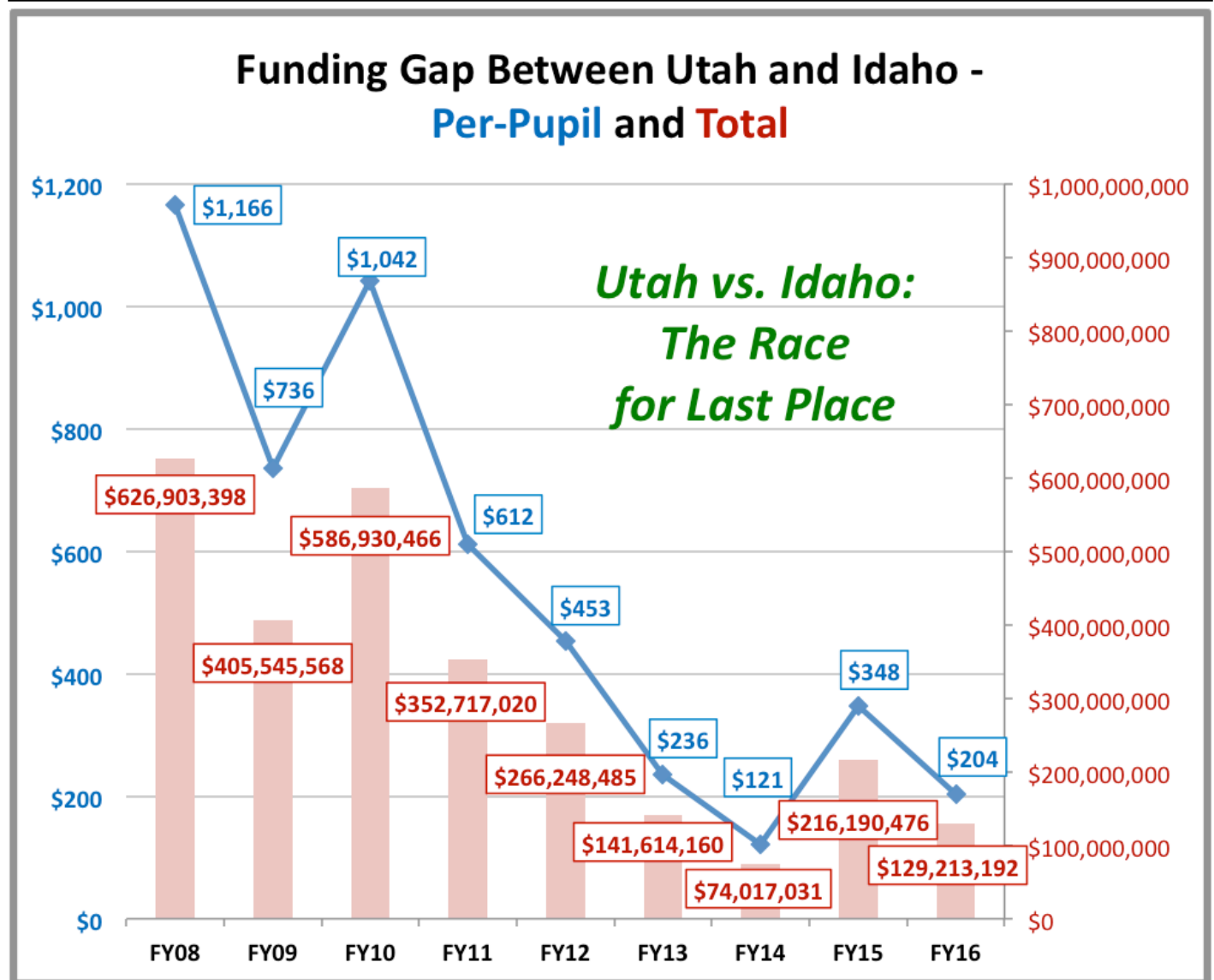


Chart by Voices for Utah Children based on finance data from U.S. Census Bureau and school population data from Utah State Board of Education. The left axis and blue line represent the annual per-pupil education spending gap between Utah and Idaho. The right axis and red bars indicate the total education funding gap each year—in other words, the additional funding amount that would have been required to surpass Idaho in per-pupil education investment.

How does Utah compare to the nation as a whole?

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In FY 2016, while Utah invested \$6,953 per pupil, the US average was \$11,150. Certainly, Utah has a lower cost of living than the national average, but our 3% advantage in that regard (according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis of the federal Department of Commerce) does not come close to the 38 percentage point gap between Utah and the US average that year.

If there was one bright spot in the new FY 2016 data, it was that Utah's 4.4% real increase far exceeded the national increase of just 1.3% in per-pupil K-12 education investment.

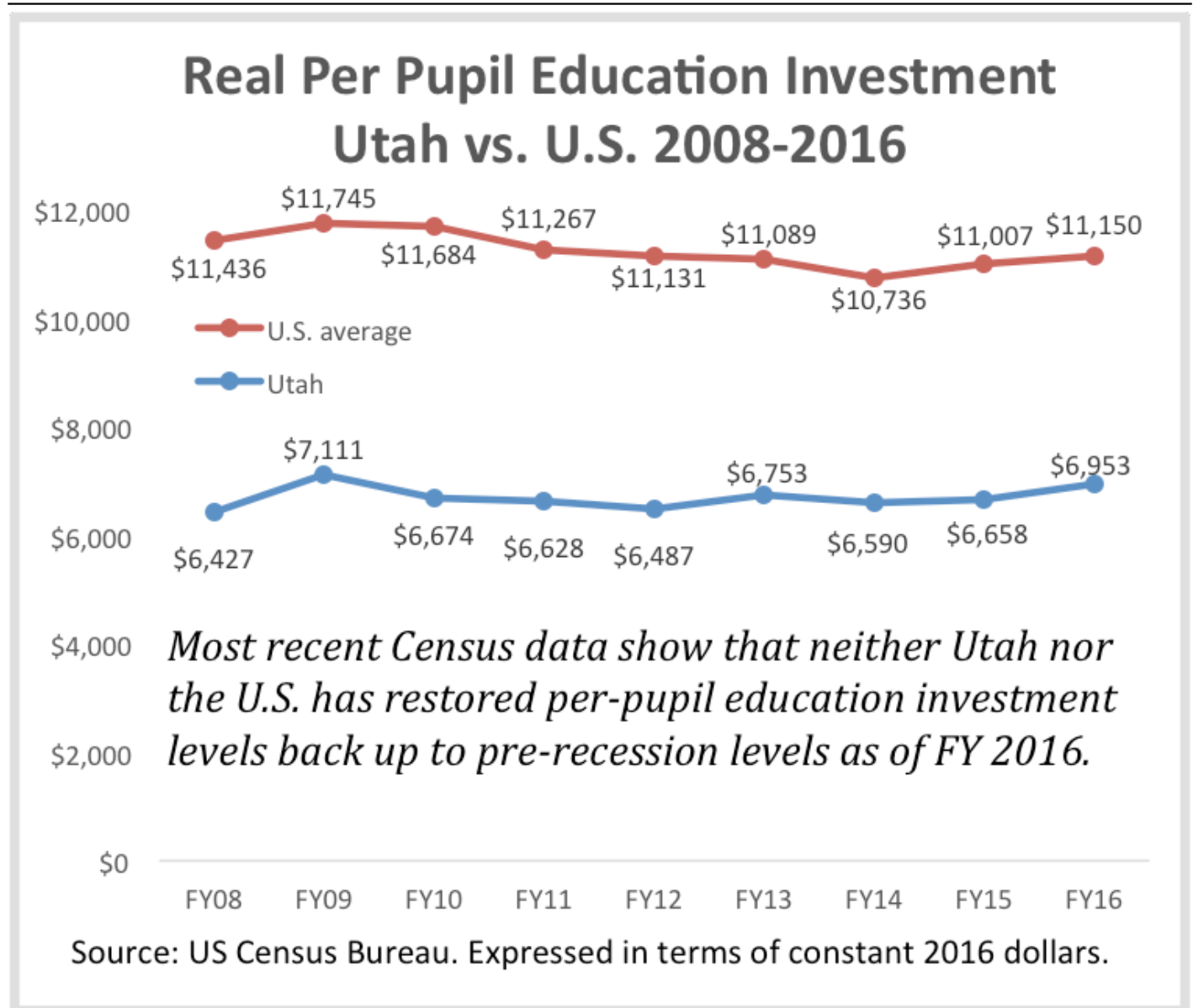
How does Utah's current level of education investment compare to a decade ago, before the Great Recession?

In real terms (after taking inflation out of the equation), Utah's per-pupil education investment peaked in FY 2009 at \$7,111 (expressed in terms of 2016 dollars). The FY 2016 figure of \$6,953 is still 2.2% below its pre-recession peak. Nationally, the data are even worse as the national average of \$11,150 in FY 2016 was 5.1% below its FY 2009 peak. (See chart below.)

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What should Utah do?

On the one hand, Utah has made substantial improvements in our educational results as measured by NAEP test score rankings in recent years, a remarkable achievement given our meager financial investment, and a testament to the commitment of Utah educators and education administrators, as well as to the thousands of parents who volunteer in the classroom to offset staffing shortages.

On the other hand, our high school graduation rates remain behind national levels for

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every racial and ethnic group, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. In other words, whites in Utah graduate high school at a lower rate than whites nationally, Latinos in Utah graduate at a lower rate than Latinos nationally, and the same for Asian Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans. The only reason Utah enjoys a higher overall high school graduation rate than the national average is because we are still whiter than the nation as a whole. But we are rapidly becoming more diverse, and our growing minority populations – one quarter of our future workforce based on child population data – require additional attention to avoid the growth here of the majority-minority gaps that have plagued much of the rest of the nation.

It seems difficult to imagine Utah achieving our potential unless we are willing to restore our education funding effort at least to the levels that earlier generations were willing to pay, especially given our large class sizes and high student-to-teacher ratios and rates of teacher attrition. And that is not even mentioning our underfunded Pre-K programs, which reach just a small fraction of the at-risk families that need them, or the fact that our post-secondary educational achievement is not even close to the goal of “66 by 2020” that state leaders have set.

Thus, the question on the ballots that Utahns are currently filling out and mailing in is a crucial – and rare – opportunity for Utahns to weigh in on whether we are willing, as earlier generations were, to set aside sufficient resources every year to make the investments in the next generation required to ensure our state’s continued prosperity and success.