

Deseret News

John Florez: Issues change, values should not

By John Florez , Deseret News

Published: Saturday, March 9 2013 12:00 a.m. MST



Last Tuesday was one of those instances when Utah lawmakers nixed a bill, SB71, to provide pre-school for at-risk kids. While they tout the importance of children, families, education, caring for those in need and promoting private/public partnerships, they seem to have abandoned those beliefs in this case. (Scott G Winterton, Deseret News)

We all want a government we can trust; however, sometimes our lawmakers seem to have flexible standards and principles. It's hard to understand.

Last Tuesday was one of those instances when Utah lawmakers nixed a bill, SB71, to provide pre-school for at-risk kids. While they tout the importance of children, families, education, caring for those in need and promoting private/public partnerships, they seem to have abandoned those beliefs in this case. Rather than debating the value of an education policy to help at-risk kids get an early start that would improve their chances of succeeding, and involving private investors willing to risk \$10 million to the state's \$1 million, legislators focused

on the technical aspects and failed to see where the proposed bill could save tax dollars. (On the same day, lawmakers voted to advance the prison relocation without debate; the possible cost to taxpayers — more than \$480 million.)

One senator argued that partnering with private investors would not allow for transparency and accountability. According to her, closing the "achievement gap" is not a "noble goal." She thought children should learn at their own pace and to close the achievement gap, they could lower the standards by "bringing down the well-performing students." She seemed to forget the state partners with private contractors, and even subsidizes private companies to move to Utah, with no concern for transparency or guarantee on the state's return on its investment.

Another senator was concerned the childrens' privacy could be violated since the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), federal law that requires protecting the privacy of student records, has problems. He cited one case in Texas where a student's privacy rights were violated. Is one case reason to vote against the bill? Did lawmakers end the Medicaid program when the privacy rights of a group of recipients were violated?

And, there was the senator who questioned what metrics would be used to pay the private investors. Another senator thought that spending money on a small program would take away money from the rest of education, apparently not seeing the millions of dollars in remedial services that could be prevented, or the high cost of lower high school graduation rates.

While there were many questions about technical aspects of the bill, no one asked if the state should have a policy to help at-risk children get a good foundation for learning, in keeping with our values. No one made suggestions how to improve the bill. No one seems to see that the challenges of today's families have changed; that some parents are struggling to meet the basics of life with little time or resources to help their child prepare for school. I wonder if lawmakers had taken time to understand the hurdles some parents have to overcome and

considered how to improve the chances for their children to succeed, then perhaps discussion about the bill would have been different.

Unfortunately, there seemed to be little interest in how the bill was an up-front investment in the state's future workforce and the lives of pre-school children. It appears lawmakers failed to see the disconnect in their rhetoric promoting private sector involvement in solving problems and less government. The matter of how to help less-fortunate children in our society seems to have been lost, and the values we profess to promote were somehow forgotten.

The issues and solutions will change with the times, but our values should not. We like to believe we can trust our leaders to be consistent in their policymaking and in keeping with our values.

A Utah native, John Florez has been on the staff of Sen. Orrin Hatch, served as former Utah Industrial Commissioner and filled White House appointments, including Deputy Assistant Secretary of Labor and Commission on Hispanic Education. Email him at jdflorez@comcast.net.

Copyright 2013, Deseret News Publishing Company