

Legislature starts divvying out money

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Utah legislators seem to be getting ready for tough times ahead, but teachers are worried the tough times may already be here. It's all part of the struggle to create the state's \$11.5 billion budget.

It's evidence that Utah's economy is slowing down and worry that things might get worse that are sparking a conservative attitude at the Capitol. But this year, in the big picture, legislators still insist they're being generous with public education.

For public schools, the dollar amounts are not what teachers had hoped. Last fall, the governor proposed \$2,500 raises for teachers and a whopping 7 percent increase for the WPU, the basic schools budget. Instead, the raises are \$1,700, and lawmakers are proposing a 2.5 percent WPU increase.

The difference comes down to less available money now than everyone expected. "The increases that we are making to the WPU and for teacher raises are not as originally proposed, but then neither are the revenues," said. Rep. Ron Bigelow, executive appropriations co-chair.

In fact, overall schools are getting a hefty funding boost: a total of about 7 percent, according to legislative leaders. But a lot of the difference is going to new programs like year-round schools, raises for outstanding math and science teachers, enhanced English-language programs, and so on.

Teachers' union president Kim Campbell says the Utah Education Association (UEA) is pushing for the funding of the basic needs first. "Everything else, besides the flat teacher raises, will have to come out of that--health insurance increase, all programmatic increases of the district. So that is a problem," Campbell said.

Even with the third-highest surplus in state history, dozens of programs, large and small, are competing for money right now. Lawmakers are worried about tough times ahead too, socking away \$100 million in the rainy day fund.

Eyewitness News did find one group that's happy: Medicaid advocates, hoping for \$2 million for dental coverage. "We understand that it was difficult for them to find sources of money, but they were creative and found some cash," said Lincoln Nehring, of the Utah Health Policy Project.

It's not over yet. The budget numbers can still be changed in the final days of the legislature session, but it will take a lot of persuading at this point to do that.