When Considering the Best Form of Governance for Public Education, Remember This:

Diffusion of Power Is the Cornerstone of Our Republic

by David Thomas, Member, Utah State Board of Education

Some have argued that eliminating the elected and constitutionally empowered Utah State Board of Education in favor of a system under the centralized authority of the governor would be a good thing for two reasons: First, increased efficiencies and, second, the governor is the chief executive for the state and therefore, should oversee public education. So what’s so wrong with that? Don’t we want to build efficiencies into state government?

Proponents of this proposal would set up the “more efficient government straw man” to divert attention away from the actual philosophical debate: centralization v. diffusion of political power. This philosophical debate was the crux of the infighting over the formation of our Compound Constitutional Republic. As Timothy Baldwin stated in his essay, Centralizing Power: The Tyrants’ Agenda, “The formula for slavery, corruption and oppression is the same today as it was yesterday: concentration and centralization of power. Thus, decentralization and separation become tools of freemen.”

Our Republic was built on the concept of diffusion of political power. That is where we get the saying that the best decisions are made by the level of government closest to the people. According to the Benjamin Franklin Library, diffusion of power may not be efficient, but it was the way our Founding Fathers ensured that the government would not be dominated by one specific group of special interests.

While Republicans can cheer for a governor from their own party, the cheers will turn into boos if a Democratic governor were elected and chose a new direction for public education. When we talk about gover-
nance, especially governance that is embedded in the Utah Constitution, it is for the long term—the very long term. Political parties come and go, the constitution will always be the anchor.

As for efficiencies, there is a difference between being efficient and being successful; or more to the point, being effective. One can be very efficient, but still fail miserably. The 15 members of the State Board come from all walks of life and bring many unique and diverse experiences with them. They bring new ideas to the table. Whereas the governor has many agencies, departments and programs to manage (over 200 at last count), the State Board has only one focus—one agency—public education. However, that public entity happens to take close to 50 percent of the state budget. Having 15 overseers of more than $3 billion makes sure the money is spent well and most effectively. Notice that I didn’t say most efficiently, because with 15 bosses, it takes time to get things done. However, the final product is a good product. As I noted in other blog posts,* Utah’s elected state board produces higher achieving students than do education systems with the governor at the helm.

So the next time someone says that the governor can govern public education more efficiently, point out that a representative state board of education can govern public education more effectively.