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In Utah, a plan to cut 12th grade

The proposal by state Sen. Chris Butters would chip away at Utah's \$700-million shortfall. He's since offered a toned-down version: Just make senior year optional.

February 15, 2010 | By DeeDee Correll

Reporting from Denver — At Utah's West Jordan High School, the halls have swirled lately with debate over the merits of 12th grade:

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For student body president J.D. Williams, 18, the answer to both questions is a resounding no. "I need this year," he said, adding that most of his classmates felt the same way.

The sudden buzz over the relative value of senior year stems from a recent proposal by state Sen. Chris Butters that Utah make a dent in its budget gap by eliminating the 12th grade.

The notion quickly gained some traction among supporters who agreed with the Republican's assessment that many seniors frittered away their final year of high school, but faced vehement opposition from other quarters, including in his hometown of West Jordan.

"My parents are against it," Williams said. "All the teachers at the school are against it. I'm against it."

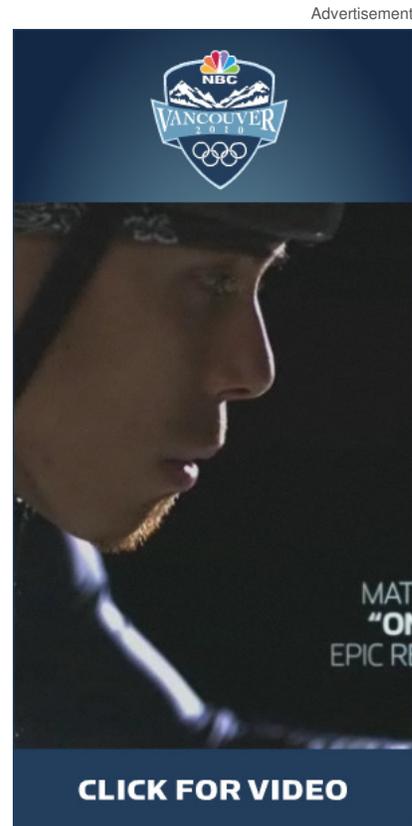
Butters has since toned down the idea, suggesting instead that senior year become optional for students who complete their required credits early. He estimated the move could save up to \$60 million, the Salt Lake Tribune reported.

The proposal comes as the state faces a \$700-million shortfall and reflects the creativity -- or desperation -- of lawmakers.

"You're looking at these budget gaps where lawmakers have to use everything and anything to try to resolve them," said Todd Haggerty, a policy associate with the National Conference of State Legislatures. "It's left lawmakers with very unpopular decisions."

In Utah, the opt-out proposal could prove more politically feasible.

"The bottom line is saving taxpayer dollars while improving options for students," said state Sen. Howard A. Stephenson, a Republican and co-chairman of the Public Education Appropriations Subcommittee. "The more options we give to students to accelerate, the more beneficial it is to students and taxpayers."



But some education officials say they don't think the plan represents a change.

"We've always had an option in place for early graduation," said Debra Roberts, chairwoman of the Utah Board of Education, adding that it was OK to give students the choice to graduate early, but that they shouldn't be pushed to leave.

About 200 students a year take advantage of early graduation, said Brenda Hales, state associate superintendent.

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