

Early Learning

Election Brief

The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute in Spring 2016 convened focus groups to identify important issues in the 2016 election. Education of children in their early learning years of preschool and kindergarten was identified as an important topic. This Election Brief provides a concise analysis of many of the critical issues associated with early learning in Utah so that voters, candidates, and, ultimately, elected officials can make informed decisions.

Summary

Early learning is critically important in a child's life as it establishes foundations for success in later years. Formal early learning programs, such as high-quality preschool and full-day kindergarten, provide a complement to the informal learning that takes place in the home. These programs not only take advantage of the intense brain development taking place in early childhood, they show promise in reducing disparities found between students impacted by poverty and their peers from more affluent households. In Utah, formal early learning programs vary in cost, availability, and quality throughout the state. Utah

lacks a cohesive statewide approach to early educational experiences, and too few families, especially low-income families, are able to access high-quality options. Recently, the state started funding some opportunities in preschool and full-day kindergarten. Unfortunately, current efforts are insufficient to serve all children in the state who would benefit. The state now is poised to increase access and opportunities for early learning in Utah by continuing to provide funding and other resources, and by supporting further efforts to coordinate high-quality early learning in the state.

The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute and Hinckley Institute of Politics, in partnership with the Deseret News and KSL, are pleased to present INFORMED DECISIONS 2016, a series of election products and events that will help voters make informed choices in 2016.

This year promises to be a banner election year in Utah. The state will elect a governor, four U.S. congressmen/women, a U.S. senator, and nearly 90 percent of the Utah Legislature, as well as many other state and local officials. INFORMED DECISIONS 2016 will help voters navigate this important election year with analysis of critical issues impacting our state. It will also provide candidates with an opportunity to explain their views on these and other issues.

Major components of INFORMED DECISIONS 2016

Focus Groups

The Gardner Policy Institute convened focus groups drawn from the general public and issue experts in urban and rural Utah to identify important issues and potential policy options. These snapshots provide a summary of the focus group discussions.

Election Briefs

Analysts from the Gardner Policy Institute, Hinckley Institute, and the Utah Education Policy Center have prepared policy briefs on the major issues identified in the focus groups. These briefs include information on why the issue is important, an analysis of key topics, and potential policy options for consideration. Election Briefs will be released in Fall 2016.

Candidate Conversations

The Hinckley Institute, in collaboration with our media partners at the Deseret News and KSL, will lead a series of Candidate Conversations on targeted races. These forums will be hosted "town-hall style," similar to the CNN Town Hall format hosted by Anderson Cooper in the presidential elections. The Candidate Conversations will be hosted at the Gardner Policy Institute and the Hinckley Institute. The first of these conversations was in June 2016 prior to the primary election. Later conversations will follow in October 2016.

Election Brief

Utah is a recognized leader in several policy areas that contribute to a robust economy. The state is regularly recognized as a leader in the areas of business and transportation planning and coordination.^{1,2} When many states were grappling with unfunded retirement liabilities in their public pension systems, Utah preemptively addressed the issue and aggressively overhauled its retirement and post-retirement benefits in a fiscally prudent manner.³ This same proactive leadership can be applied to the state's education system. In recent years, stakeholders have joined the efforts of educators in the state to coalesce support to move Utah to be a recognized leader in education as well. These efforts have led to an interest and initiatives in strengthening early learning in the state. This election brief provides a high-level summary of early learning and its importance to our state, and potential policy considerations.

What is Early Learning?

We define early learning as both informal and formal educational experiences of children from birth to age six. Informal early learning occurs through routine day-to-day activities and events for all young children (e.g., self-directed play, interactions). Formal early learning occurs in programs that offer high-quality age-appropriate activities designed to facilitate social, emotional, and cognitive development. Formal early learning programs for infants and toddlers may occur through home visiting programs for pregnant or new mothers, structured child care or day care, and early interventions for children with special needs. For 3 - 4 year olds, formal early childhood education may include preschool, which, in addition to providing rich learning experiences, can facilitate the child's transition into elementary school. Today, children ages 5 - 6 typically attend half- or full-day kindergarten in Utah, which in many cases may be their first experience with formal education.

Early Learning Timeline



The governance, design, and standards of early learning programs vary widely across states. Public spending on early learning programs has increased dramatically over the last 15 years and, in some cases, states are providing universal access to pre-kindergarten as well as full-day kindergarten. Initial early childhood education investments, which many believe to be prohibitively costly to state governments, can actually strengthen state economies by reducing the need for costly educational and social intervention programs later.⁴

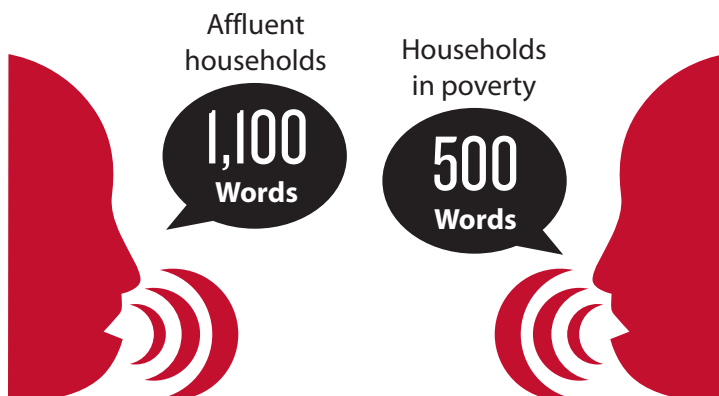
Importance of Early Learning Opportunities

Extensive research has demonstrated that early experiences lay the foundation for a child's ability to succeed across multiple areas of development, including cognitive and academic ability, social and emotional well-being, and physical health. Early and targeted interventions can produce long-term gains for both individuals and society.

Cognitive Development. The most active phase of cognitive development in a person's life begins before birth and continues through the first few years. As learning is cumulative, each experience builds the foundation for the next. The earlier a child is exposed to positive high-quality experiences, the stronger the foundation for that child's well-being, behavior, and long-term learning. Positive experiences and support for parents and caregivers to provide those experiences can help determine later successes for young children.

Access to Opportunities. The ability to access high-quality, affordable early education is an important factor in advancing learning and development and closing large-scale opportunity gaps. Because learning begins long before a child enters a formal educational environment, disparities can begin early, particularly for children living in poverty. For example, research has demonstrated that the number of words a young child knows is different based on socio-economic status and resources available.⁵

Average amount of words known by 3-year olds in...



Source: Zero to Three

Early learning opportunities that provide intellectual and cognitive experiences can supplement and extend childrens' natural curiosity for learning in the formative years, and can produce long-term academic gains. Early childhood education provides experiences and opportunities that can mitigate barriers to achievement.⁶ Similarly, full-day kindergarten provides young children with additional time to develop cognitively, socially, and academically. It is also beneficial to students who may have disabilities or developmental delays, or may not have attended a quality preschool or early childhood program. Studies indicate that compared to half-day kindergarten, full-day kindergarten increases students' academic achievement, literacy and language development, readiness for primary grades, social and emotional competencies, and attendance in later grades.⁷ Overall, evidence indicates that full-day kindergarten and full-day accredited preschool are two of the most effective early learning strategies to ensure children will be successful in elementary school.⁸

Early Learning in Utah

Utahns care about early learning opportunities for children at home as well as in formal educational settings. State law that establishes the public education system acknowledges that educational experiences first begin at home with families as the child's first teachers. Additionally, Utahns recognize that educational opportunities in child care, pre-school, and kindergarten settings are expected to supplement the learning of children and provide critical support for parents and children. Early learning opportunities in Utah include many stakeholders, are governed by multiple government agencies, and are resourced through various funding sources. The Early Childhood Utah Council is a large multi-agency and stakeholder group that promotes early learning and collaboration in Utah.

Without a strong or focused overarching state governance structure or entity that coordinates and ensures the quality of these programs under an early learning umbrella, the availability and quality of programs varies across the state. Some of the state agencies involved include:

- The Utah Department of Health, Bureau of Child Development, grants licenses to child care centers,

primarily to ensure a minimum standard of health and safety. Child care centers may also include structured pre-school programming.

- The Utah Department of Workforce Services distributes grants for child care and maintains a quality indicator rating of some of these formalized settings.
- The Utah State Board of Education, in conjunction with other early childhood education stakeholders, has established Early Childhood Core Standards to guide child care and preschool providers with early learning standards and strategies.⁹ Programs voluntarily choose how these standards are implemented at their site based on individual program needs.

Infant and Child Care. Utah's robust population growth rate and also its nation-leading fertility rate create a significant demand for infant and child care. While some families may not use child care services outside of the home, the availability of high-quality options is important. In 2015, licensed family and center-based child care centers across the state had the capacity to accommodate approximately 36,000 children.¹⁰ Ensuring that high-quality infant and child care options are available provides opportunities for both children and working parents.

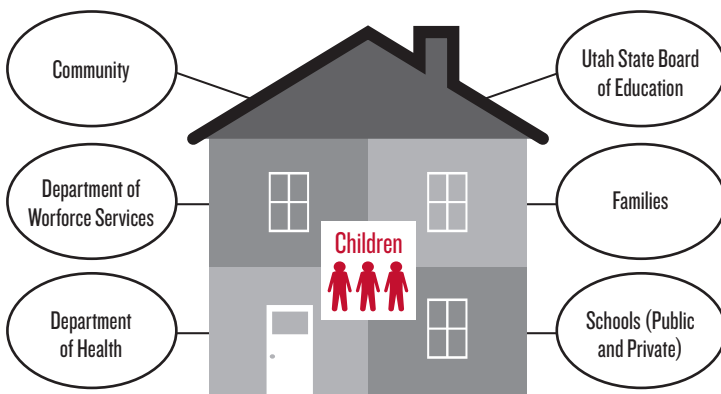
The Department of Health licenses child care providers. Utah's Department of Workforce Services (DWS) has established the *Care About Childcare* website, which reports profiles of licensed child care providers and their rating on quality indicators, when the provider has voluntarily opted in to the rating system. DWS also provides subsidies for low-income families to access child care and is partnering with the State Board of Education on quality indicators of preschool providers.

Preschool. Utah has a diverse range of preschool options, most of which pose some cost to parents. Options vary by community and may include for-profit, non-profit, community-based cooperatives, or parochial preschools, day care centers that include preschool options, in-home preschools, or publicly-sponsored preschools at elementary schools. Some school districts and charter schools have begun to develop comprehensive high-quality options, primarily serving low-income students, but available to others on a sliding fee scale. Similar to child care providers, it is voluntary for preschool providers to adopt the State Board of Education's Early Childhood Core Standards, which include learning targets, strategies, and resources for providers. The state has also provided funding for some free licenses for a home-based school readiness software program through its UPSTART program, discussed later in further detail.

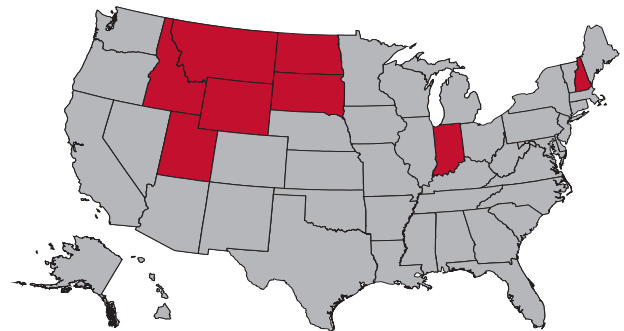
State Preschool Initiatives in Utah

Utah remains one of only eight states that did not enroll students in state-funded pre-kindergarten classrooms for the 2014-15 academic year.¹¹ This lack of state funding means the availability of high-quality options are dependent on local initiatives or programming. Even though Utah does not have state-allocated funding for preschool classrooms or a comprehensive statewide program, the state has begun to lay foundations for comprehensive, statewide early education programming through small-scale initiatives, such as the UPSTART program and the School Readiness Initiative.

Selected Supports for Early Learning

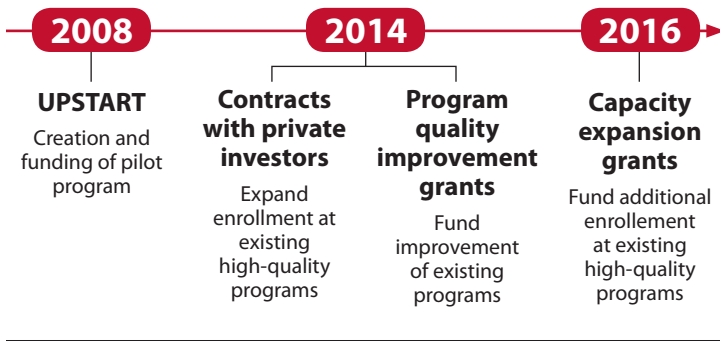


Utah is 1 of 8 states that did not fund pre-kindergarten classrooms during the 2014-2015 school year



Source: National Institute for Early Education Research

TIMELINE: State-funded preschool programs in Utah



UPSTART. In 2008, the Utah Legislature provided funding for a pilot program known as the Utah Preparing Students Today for a Rewarding Tomorrow (UPSTART) program. UPSTART is a kindergarten-readiness computer software program for families to use at home. In the sixth year of the program (2015-16), 5,091 children were enrolled, half of whom were from families with incomes below 200% of poverty.¹² The Legislature appropriated \$4.8 million for UPSTART in FY 2015, \$5.8 million in FY 2016, and \$6.3 million in FY 2017 to continue to expand and sustain the program.¹³

School Readiness Initiative. In 2014, Utah began implementing the School Readiness Initiative. Created by 2014 General Session H.B. 96, the initiative was designed to fund additional capacity at existing high-quality preschool programs by leveraging investments from the private sector. The state repays initial investments plus yield, only if and when the outcomes of the program have been shown to meet the prescribed goals. Additionally, the 2014 initiative provided grants to other programs to enable them to improve their quality. The Utah Legislature has since appropriated an additional \$3 million to the School Readiness Initiative for both FY 2015 and FY 2016.¹⁴

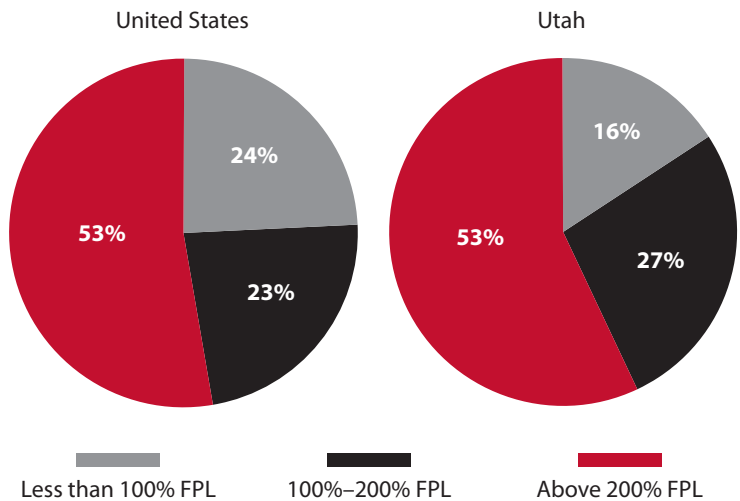
In the 2016 General Session, the Legislature directly appropriated money to expand the high-quality preschools and home-based school readiness computer options, instead of funding expansion of the School Readiness Initiative through private investors. These additional dollars will increase the number of students who can access programs that have been deemed high quality by the State Board of Education. The State Board of Education awarded \$3.9 million in grants to high-quality preschools for the 2016-17 school year, and UPSTART’s contractor, the Waterford Institute, received funding from the State Board of Education to implement the home-based technology component of the School Readiness Initiative.¹⁵

Access and Affordability of Early Learning in Utah

While Utah has a robust economy, it is important to recognize that all Utah families do not have the same level of access to high-quality early learning opportunities, which can be prohibitively expensive for many families. Child care can be one of the largest expenses for a family. Families with young children experience poverty in Utah at higher rates than Utah’s general population. In Utah, 9.4% of all families are estimated to be living in poverty. For Utah families whose children are under age five, the poverty rate is estimated to be 13.7%.¹⁶ Thus, families with young children may be especially unlikely to afford high-quality early learning opportunities at the time those experiences are needed most.

While the percentage of children living below the poverty level in Utah is lower than national percentages, the percentage of children in Utah living between 100% and 200% of the poverty level is higher than the national average. With the median cost of child care for infants on the Wasatch Front approaching \$700 each month, quality child care can be out of reach for families living between 100% and 200% of the poverty level, especially those with multiple children.¹⁷

Children Under Age 6, by Income Level, 2014



Source: National Center for Children in Poverty

2016 Federal Poverty Level (FPL) for a Family of 4	
100% FPL	200% FPL
\$24,300	\$48,600

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

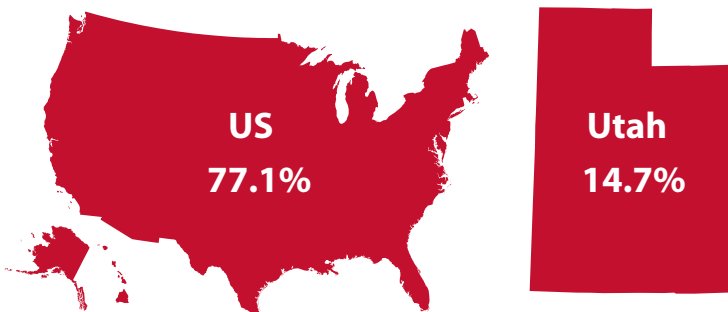
Even with the options available, not all families are able to access high-quality affordable preschool. There are many children who may have limited to or no access to high-quality early childhood programs. It is currently estimated that 59% of all children aged 3 – 4 in Utah are not attending preschool. That number is higher for Hispanic children and also for children living in poverty (both 67%).¹⁸ While many parents may be providing early learning opportunities in the home or through community options, children living in poverty are least likely to participate in formal preschool. These are the children most vulnerable to educational and opportunity gaps, which can magnify over time.

Kindergarten

Across the state of Utah, kindergarten may be the first formal early learning environment a child experiences. Most public kindergarten classes are only a few hours a day, and compulsory education is not required by Utah law until six years of age, which is generally 1st grade.

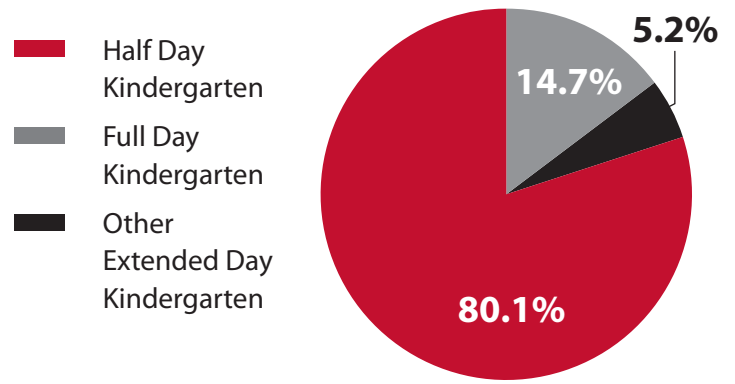
Nationally, 77% of children ages 5-6 are enrolled for a full-day kindergarten, while only 15% are enrolled for a full day in Utah. Utah's basic school funding formula allocates kindergarten students about half of the funding allocated to students in other grade levels. Since 2007, the legislature has provided \$7.5 million for enhanced kindergarten options to those schools with the highest need.¹⁹ Some school districts and charter schools have used local funding and other resources to provide full-day or other extended kindergarten options (such as an additional hour). The majority of schools in the state receive the basic funding for kindergarten students, which only covers the cost of half day.

Percent of Kindergarteners Enrolled in Full Day Kindergarten



Source: National data - Child trends. Local data - Utah State Board of Education.

Utah Kindergarteners by Enrollment Type



Source: Utah State Board of Education

Early Learning Policy Considerations

Utah decision makers are exploring a variety of public policy options to increase access and opportunity for early learning in Utah. We highlight four options here that are worthy of serious consideration:

- Increased collaboration and coordination.** With Utah's early learning governance structure involving multiple agencies and stakeholders, policymakers may consider establishing and funding a state-level coordinating and advising entity for early learning, such as a Children's Cabinet. A Children's Cabinet could consist of a smaller leadership group, working with Early Childhood Utah, created to provide an efficient and focused approach with a shared mission to provide recommendations to policymakers. This effort could also support data integration and coordination between agencies and early education stakeholders to examine outcomes and better inform decisions.
- Strengthening child care licensing.** Utah's child care licensing establishes minimum guidelines for the health and safety of children. While these factors are clearly important, policymakers could consider integrating Utah Early Childhood Core Standards and quality metrics into the receipt of child care subsidies. Government funded subsidies would be based on a quality rating of the child care provided, with increasing subsidy amounts to the highest quality programs;

- **Funding for high-quality preschool and early learning.** High quality preschool programs can improve school readiness for all children, but especially for children living in poverty or those who might lack school readiness. Policymakers should consider expanding funding for low-income students to attend high-quality preschool programs; and
- **Expanding kindergarten.** Utah students attend full-day kindergarten in remarkably low numbers compared to students in other states. Policymakers

can reverse this trend by providing access and funding to optional full-day kindergarten in all public schools.

The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute and the Utah Education Policy Center stand ready to assist decision makers in making informed decisions about early learning policies in Utah.

Endnotes

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Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute

The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute at the University of Utah enhances Utah's economy by placing data-driven research into the hands of decision makers. Housed in the David Eccles School of Business, its mission is to develop and share economic, demographic and public policy data and research that help community leaders make informed decisions.

The Hinckley Institute of Politics

The Hinckley Institute of Politics at the University of Utah is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to engaging students and community members in governmental, civic, and political processes; promoting a better understanding and appreciation of politics; and training ethical and visionary students for careers in public service. Since its founding by Robert H. Hinckley in 1965, the Hinckley Institute has provided a wide range of impactful programs for students, public school teachers, and the general public.

Utah Education Policy Center

The Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) at the University of Utah is a leader in providing valid and reliable research to support evidence-based decision-making. The UEPC engages in research and evaluation, professional learning, and technical assistance to help bridge research, policy, and practice through providing empirical and balanced information. Our work contributes to increasing educational equity, access, and opportunities for all children and adults in Utah, particularly for those who have been historically marginalized.

INFORMED DECISIONS™