



#InvestInUtahKids

An Agenda for Utah's New Governor & Legislature

December 2020



VOICES FOR UTAH CHILDREN

We at Voices work to make Utah a place where all children thrive. We start with one basic question:

"Is it good for kids?"

At Voices for Utah Children, we believe that every child deserves the opportunity to reach his or her full potential. And to achieve this vision, we focus on **five key areas** that benefit healthy development of all children:



Health



All children deserve to receive affordable, comprehensive, & high-quality healthcare.

School Readiness



All children deserve to receive the services & support they need to enable them to start school prepared for success.

Safety



All children deserve to be safe in their homes & communities from all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation & violence.

Economic Stability



All children deserve to live in families that can provide for their needs & make investments in their future.

Diversity



All children deserve to reach their full potential in a society that closes opportunity gaps & recognizes and values diversity.

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INTRODUCTION

Voices for Utah Children is proud to welcome a new Governor and Legislature with this #InvestInUtahKids Agenda that lays out the most effective – and cost-effective – steps that our newly elected leaders can take in the years to come to create the best possible future for all of us in Utah by supporting our children.

We begin with an overview of the challenges facing Utah's 930,000 children, 29% of Utah's population, the highest percentage of any state in the nation, well above the national average of 22%. [1]

We then proceed through the various public policy areas that have the greatest impact on children, including education, health care, and juvenile justice, concluding with a discussion of what the recommended policy changes would cost and how to pay for them.

Perhaps the best news we have to offer the new Governor and Legislature is that Utah is well positioned to address the challenges facing our children. Our economy is performing better than nearly any state in spite of the coronavirus pandemic. And 2021 is expected to be the year that successful vaccines make it possible to emerge from the pandemic and restore a sense of normalcy to our lives.

But if the pandemic leaves behind anything, we hope it will be a lasting understanding that the gaps and flaws exposed by it in our social, economic, educational, and healthcare systems should no longer be considered acceptable, and returning to normal should not mean returning to the way things were on the eve of the pandemic. We hope that this document may provide food for thought about the ways we can all work together to make a better future for all of Utah's children.

[1] 2019 figures from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS)

THE LINK BETWEEN INVESTMENT IN CHILDREN & ECONOMIC GROWTH



When we invest in our children,
we build a better tomorrow



**Investment in the
Development of
Young Children**



**Increased School
Readiness**
Increased Educational
Attainment



**Increased Workforce
Productivity**
Increased Competitiveness
of Utah Businesses



**Enhanced Economic
Growth & Prosperity**
Reduced Poverty,
Dependency, Substance
Abuse, Crime, Incarcerations



UTAH'S GROWING GAPS AMONG

DIFFERENT RACIAL, ETHNIC, & ECONOMIC GROUPS

Utah ranks well overall relative to other states and the nation as a whole when we evaluate the state of our children. Thanks to our strong work ethic, resilient families, and cohesive communities, we enjoy a child poverty rate that is lower than nearly every other state.

Yet our 10% child poverty rate in 2019 (which we now know to have been the peak year of the economic cycle) still represents 91,000 Utah children living below the poverty line. We also know that two-fifths of these children live in extreme poverty (in households with incomes below half the poverty threshold).

Furthermore, we know that these rates of poverty-at-the-peak are higher than the lowest poverty rates in past peaks such as in 2001, when we had a child poverty rate of 9%, or in 2000 and 2007 when our extreme child poverty rate reached a low of 3%. [2]

In addition to the rising poverty trend in successive economic cycles, we are also witnessing growing gaps between majority and minority groups, between rich and poor, and between urban/suburban and rural Utahns.

For example, last year Education Week listed Utah as among the worst states for our growing educational achievement gap between haves and have-nots. [3] And our gap between White and Hispanic high school graduation rates is 3 percentage points wider than the national gap. [4]

Thus, while Utah has been more welcoming of immigrants and refugees than many states and enjoys a richer cultural mix and more vibrant economy as a result, an important question remains: Are we prepared to take the steps needed to avoid going the way of other states that allowed majority-minority gaps to widen and fester, leading to more deeply entrenched problems?

This challenge becomes all the more urgent when we consider that Census data reveal that Utah's college completion rates (BA/BS+) have already fallen behind the national average among Millennials (the age 25-34 cohort), continuing a disturbing pattern of Utah gradually losing our lead over the nation in this category of educational achievement in each successive generation.

As the Deseret News reported last year, while the Wasatch Front was booming, "rural Utah is a starkly different profile with some counties experiencing a stagnant economy, high poverty rates and job losses." [5]

The good news is, as Stephen Covey said, "I am not a product of my circumstances, I am a product of my decisions." The decisions we as Utahns make now will shape the future our children inherit.

Will Utah successfully address the challenges we face in the years to come by proactively adding the new tools we need to our state's toolkit? **The answer is up to us.**

[2] Kids Count Data Center at datacenter.kidscount.org

[3] <https://secure.edweek.org/media/v39-3-quality-counts-2019-k-12-achievement-table.pdf> via <https://www.edweek.org/ew/collections/quality-counts-2019-state-achievement/state-grades-on-k-12-achievement-map-and.html>

[4] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_coi.pdf

[5] <https://www.deseret.com/2019/1/17/20663540/a-tale-of-2-utahs-group-hopes-lawmakers-take-steps-to-tackle-urban-rural-divide>



EARLY EDUCATION

The early years in a child's life are critically important in terms of social, emotional and cognitive development. All children deserve to start their lives with a real chance to succeed and be happy later in life, but not all children have access to the things that set them up for that kind of future. When the wellbeing of young children is at the center of public policy and community investment, our entire state does better.

That is why Voices for Utah Children focuses on promoting targeted investments in early childhood care and education, structured to meet the unique needs (and build on the unique strengths) of Utah's many diverse communities.

It is possible to build an early childhood system in Utah that supports families by making sure they have access to affordable and appropriate options for their children's early care and learning—whether children spend their days at home, in formal child care, at public school, or in the care of trusted family and friends.

Even before the pandemic forced statewide shutdowns in March, the child care system in Utah was too small to serve the needs of Utah workers. According to a report released in early March by Utah's Office of Child Care (OCC) [6], there is a 65% gap between workers' need for child care (for children six and younger), and the system's ability to provide it.

[6] <https://jobs.utah.gov/occ/ccaccess.pdf>

[7] <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/resource/2020-cares-act-ccdbg-supplemental-funding-allocations-for-states-and-territories>

We need to start building necessary child care funding into our state budget.

For years, Utah has budgeted the bare minimum "Maintenance of Effort" funding required in order to draw down federal dollars for child care programs. That wasn't working for Utah families before the pandemic, and the low-commitment approach is counterproductive for our economy now.

For FY21, the legislature should be prepared to replace, with state money, the approximately \$40 million in emergency CARES Act funding [7] that is currently barely keeping Utah's child care sector afloat. This would allow the Office of Child Care to maintain "emergency" adjustments to the state subsidy program, to better support working families as they contribute to growing communities and a healthy economy.

Statewide, child care providers have shown that they are committed to the children and families they serve. Those centers and home-based programs that have stayed open, largely report that they are doing so – while operating at a financial loss and at some personal risk – because they are loyal to their families and want to support them at this difficult time.



State leaders need to honor that commitment and loyalty by doing whatever is necessary to:

- ✓ Keep open child care businesses healthy and strong
- ✓ Help closed programs re-open safely and quickly
- ✓ Encourage more new child care settings to open in 2021

People can't go back to work without knowing that their children will be cared for while they are on the job. If state leaders want Utah workers to be able to reengage in traditional economic activity by this summer, they need to get serious about child care.

K-12 EDUCATION

The early years of a child's education are the most important. When we ensure that children meet their reading and math benchmarks by 3rd grade, they are more likely to stay in school, are in a better position to support themselves, and avoid delinquency that leads to imposing burdens on the community.

One solution: Increased access to full-day kindergarten (FDK).

Because state law only requires schools to offer half-day kindergarten, we only give schools (about) a half a Weighted Pupil Unit (WPU) for every enrolled kindergartner – or, exactly, 55% of a WPU. If schools want to offer MORE than a couple of hours of kindergarten to families in their area, they have to figure out how to pay for that extra 45% of a WPU, per each student, on their own.

One source of funding schools can use to cover that extra 45% WPU is the Optional Extended-Day Kindergarten program, administered by the Utah Board of Education. It's not enough to fully fund a full-day program, but it helps. Funding for the OEK program has remained the same since 2007: \$7.5 million. There has been no increase in state funding for the past 13 years.

In 2007-08, \$7.5m covered about 6,600 .45 WPUs. This was enough to cover a full day of kindergarten instruction for only about 14% of all enrolled kindergarteners in the state that year.

.55 WPU

.45 WPU



By 2019-20, \$7.5 million in the OEK program means a dwindling full-day kindergarten funding effort. Costs go up, but funding stays the same. No wonder Utah ranks so far toward the bottom of the nation in FDK participation.

In 2020, we added \$5 million to our full-day kindergarten funding effort (and another \$5 million in federal funding via the CARES Act - but that is one-time emergency funding that doesn't count toward the state funding effort). The \$12.5 million in state OEK dollars amounts to a funding effort equivalent to 7,417 students.

If, during the 2021 legislative session, we replace the \$5 million in CARES Act funding with ongoing state funding, that would increase the state's FDK funding effort to the equivalent of 10,384 students, or 21% of all Utah kindergarteners.

To allow all Utah families access to the kind of kindergarten program they want, in their own neighborhood, it will cost about \$82 million to make up that .45 WPU for ALL UT kindergarteners.

Of course, not all Utah families want to enroll their children in full-day kindergarten. For some, half-day kindergarten is a good fit for their kid and their family.

For example, if we assume only 85% of Utah kindergartners would be enrolled in voluntary full-day kindergarten, then it would cost only about \$70 million to cover that extra .45WPU for interested Utah families.

The state has already committed \$12.5 million toward that goal, via the OEK program – leaving about \$52.5 million to go before we achieve “right-sized” kindergarten programming for Utah families.



Overall, Utah K-12 education remains last in the nation in per pupil investment. Certainly we do more with less better than probably any other state. But our large class sizes and high rates of teacher attrition and turnover limit our ability to rise above our current “respectable” performance, according to a recent analysis by the Utah Foundation. [8]

One result is that our high school graduation rates are generally no higher than national averages for every racial and ethnic category, and usually far behind. For example, Whites in Utah graduate high school at the same rate as Whites nationally (89% in 2018), while Utah Latinos’ high school graduation rate of 78% is well behind the national Latino high school graduation rate of 81%. [9]



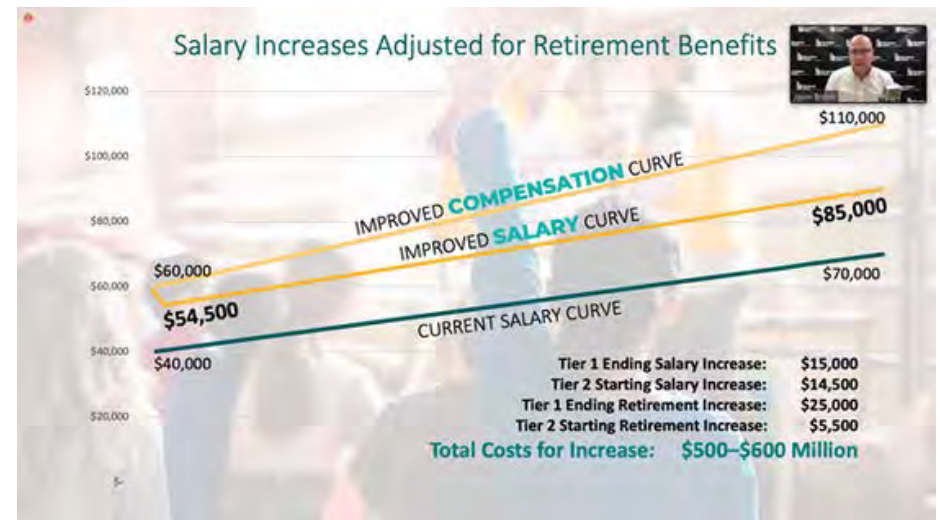
[8] www.utahfoundation.org/reports/making-the-grade-k-12-outcomes-and-spending-in-utah

[9] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_coi.pdf

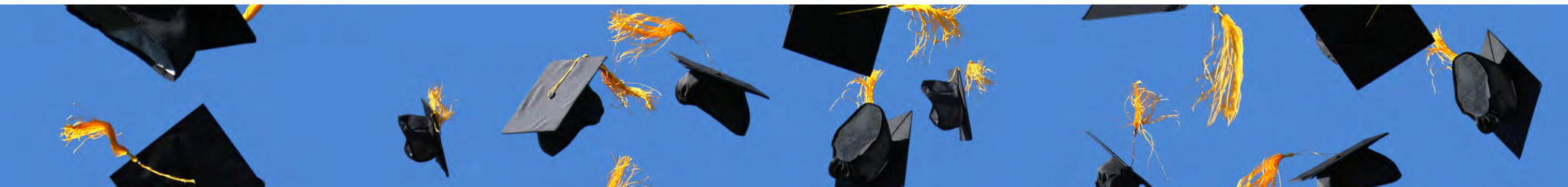
[10] <https://envisionutah.org/future-of-education-in-utah>

How much would it cost to address the deficiencies in Utah’s public education system?

In 2019, Envision Utah convened a high-profile “Teacher Compensation Task Force” that concluded that it would cost \$500–600 million annually. [10]



In 2017, the Our Schools Now initiative proposed to increase education funding by upwards of \$700 million. As discussed in the section on revenues below, these figures amount to between one-quarter and one-third of the amount of revenue Utah has lost to tax cutting in recent decades.





Utah has one of the highest rates of uninsured children in the nation.

Between 2016 and 2019, even before the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic, our rate of uninsured children increased from 6% to 8.3% from 59,000 to 82,000. **We now rank among the worst in the nation, 46th place, when it comes to insuring our kids.**

Unfortunately, this is another area where we experience large gaps between majority and minority. For example, our 2019 gap between White and Latino child uninsured rates was 11 percentage points (6% vs 17%), compared to just 5 percentage points nationally (4% vs 9%). In fact, in 2019 Utah had the highest rate of uninsured Latino children in the entire nation – for the 3rd year in a row. [11]

But solutions exist:

1

We can invest in consistent outreach funding so families know what health care options are available to them, since the majority of uninsured children are eligible for Medicaid or CHIP. (If not for Medicaid and CHIP, Utah's child uninsured rate in 2019 would have been 21% instead of 8%.)

2

We can ensure that children enrolled in Medicaid are guaranteed year-round, continuous eligibility, similar to private health insurance.

3

We can cover all Utah children regardless of their citizenship status.

4

We can protect Medicaid coverage for parents, without bureaucratic barriers or added red tape. Research finds that when parents have coverage, children are more likely to be covered too.

COVID-19 has heightened and exacerbated many disparities and inequities within our health care system.

Helping all kids and families connect with affordable, consistent care is a key way we can get through this crisis and have a strong recovery.



[11] All data from Kids Count Data Center: datacenter.kidscount.org

MENTAL HEALTH CARE

When children have insurance, they are more likely to be able to access mental health resources. What's more, pediatric health care providers are on the front lines, able to screen, identify, and treat conditions before they escalate or reach a crisis point. Therefore, helping all kids have access to consistent health coverage means we are better able to address kids' mental health crises.

An unprecedented number of Utah children are experiencing mental health crises and challenges. Utah has taken considerable steps to invest in Utah children's mental health.

We can build on these investments by:

1

Making permanent recent state and insurer crisis-related changes to telehealth. Telehealth is a proven way to help kids regularly access mental health care.

2

Increasing school-based health care services including school nurses, school counselors, and access to preventive care in schools. School health services are critical to identifying and treating mental or physical conditions before they escalate, so kids can focus on learning.

3

Help all children get insurance; when kids have coverage, they are more likely to afford mental health care.

MATERNAL & FAMILY HEALTH

One in three Utah women experience mental health problems during pregnancy or postpartum, and the pandemic has only heightened the needs of new moms, dads, and caregivers.

Moreover, suicide and drug-related overdoses are now the leading causes of maternal mortality in Utah.

In 2019, the Utah Legislature invested in funding to support maternal mental health referral networks and awareness. Too many families are needlessly suffering because their symptoms were ignored or dismissed. When parents have access to quality, affordable mental health support, the whole family is stronger.

We need policies that ensure health care providers are screening and have the proper education and training to refer a mom in need. Too many families are needlessly suffering because their symptoms were ignored or dismissed. When parents have access to quality, affordable mental health support, the whole family is stronger.

100% KIDS COVERAGE COALITION

Voices for Utah Children's "100% Kids Coverage Coalition" is a coalition dedicated to ensuring that all children in Utah have health insurance coverage. The Coalition includes partners, social service care providers, health care providers and families from across Utah.

Health insurance is the essential foundation to help children thrive; when children are insured, they have better health, educational and economic outcomes- both in the long and short term.



JUVENILE JUSTICE



A youth-centered juvenile justice system meets the needs of the children involved in it, while producing positive outcomes for Utah families and protecting community safety.


We are committed to the belief that children should be nurtured, educated and given an equitable chance at success in life. That means allowing young people to make mistakes, learn from them, develop accountability to themselves and their communities, and work through their own unique challenges as they prepare for their lives as adults.

Increasingly, Utah's juvenile justice system reflects this approach, which is supported by an increasing body of research on youth outcomes.

Statewide reform, since 2016, has reduced substantially the number of children who are funneled toward the most expensive and least effective interventions (out-of-home community placements, detention and secure care facilities).

Utah has been reinvesting the money saved through reform into earlier interventions that support youth and their families.

These early interventions focus on the underlying problems that often drive youth misconduct (such as family stress and lack of support at home, poverty, mental health and substance abuse issues, bullying and lack of engagement at school), rather than simply dealing with the resulting misbehavior.



We encourage state leaders to embrace the success of recent juvenile justice reforms, by extending the “early investment” and “early intervention” philosophy to other policy areas that affect Utah children and their families.

In the area of youth misconduct and juvenile justice, we urge elected officials to support innovative school-based efforts to meet the unique needs of individual children, within a safe and supportive school community.

Children need a chance to learn and grow — and that includes the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them, without being pushed out of school and into the court system.

We can have an even greater and longer-lasting impact on youth behavior and related outcomes, though, by investing far earlier in our young people — rather than waiting for them to make painful and sometimes destructive mistakes, before assessing and meeting their underlying needs.

Home visiting programs that support high-risk young parents, access to prenatal and postpartum health interventions, high-quality early education opportunities (including safe and reliable child care, as well as preschool programs), and economic supports for families with young children all work to reduce the likelihood that a young person will engage in the kind of misconduct that necessitates court intervention later in life.



IMMIGRANT FAMILY JUSTICE



Immigrant and refugee families are important members of our communities. 

Immigrants and refugees in our state face unique challenges that can be addressed through intentional investments from different levels of government, collaborations, and empowerment of immigrant and refugee leaders and organizations.

Outlined in this section are ways that Utah can help support its immigrant and refugee families.

CHANGE POLICY

Take steps to invest time to audit & reverse local and state policies that can be harmful to diverse communities.



Increase Language Access

Utah has given priority to several issues that support immigrants and refugees such as driving privilege cards, welcoming refugee families, and in-state tuition for immigrant youth. Unfortunately, not all the policies that have passed have thought through the impact to our diverse communities.

In 2001, an “English Only” ballot initiative passed that has become a barrier to accessing critical instructions and information, especially now as we face a pandemic. Currently, the English Only Law has created barriers for entities to provide translated critical information to families around the state.

In the short term, policymakers can make changes that would allow greater local flexibility to the law so more government entities around our state can provide translations to their local communities. In the longer term, Utah should reverse this harmful policy in its entirety.

Studies show that children who are bilingual or know other languages have advantages when learning to read and in their overall cognitive abilities. [12]

[12] <https://www.waterford.org/education/why-bilingual-students-have-a-cognitive-advantage-for-learning-to-read/>



Ending the English Only Law in our state will send a message to our children and youth that being bilingual, or knowing additional languages is not only important but, welcome.



End Local Collaborations with Immigration Customs Enforcements (ICE)

In a brief Voices released last year, we highlighted how deportations impact the mental health of immigrant children and cause economic hardships to families. [13] Local counties around the state have unique opportunities to change their practices to no longer do the work of federal government agencies and instead focus solely on local enforcement.

In a recent blog post by the ACLU of Utah, they outlined the unintentional consequences that harm immigrant communities when collaborations with ICE occur and violations of rights that happen with immigration detainees that are honored all around the state. [14]

Just as importantly, mistrust in government entities continue to increase when immigrant families see loved one's face deportations or fear that the immigration statuses of victims may be used against them.

To continue building and maintaining trust with immigrant communities, we must acknowledge the harmful effects deportations have on families, neighborhoods, and all around our state.

These complicated collaborations cost our counties funding that could be used for community investments within the county for programs and organizations that work with immigrant and refugee families.

INVEST IN COMMUNITY DRIVEN SOLUTIONS

Invest in existing culturally appropriate programs and organizations.



Sustainable Funding for Community Health Workers

It is time to invest in long-term sustainable funding for Community Health Workers. Community Health Workers (CHWs) play a vital role in improving equity in public health for communities who have historically faced barriers in access to healthcare and other services.

During the pandemic CHWs have been key to bridging the needs of communities of color and immigrant communities around the state. The COVID Community Partnership Pilot Program has shown how important it is to provide resources to organizations who are reaching communities in need. [15] The model of this pilot to provide barrier free testing, supporting contact tracing, and connecting people in need with resources when they are quarantining have all been key to serving communities who have been hardest hit by the pandemic.

CHWs are integral members of communities of color; their role within the larger public health eco-system is essential to improve health disparities and outcomes of communities of color including immigrant and refugee families.

They provide culturally appropriate support to community members by connecting them to resources, health education, and advocacy among other things. Investments in CHWs have a proven track record of success to improve outcomes and are driving culturally appropriate and grassroots focused solutions forward.

[13] <https://utahchildren.org/newsroom/speaking-of-kids-blog/item/1014-immigrant-families-in-utah-addressing-immigrant-children-s-mental-health>

[14] <https://www.acluutah.org/legislation/the-community-lobbyist/item/1643-another-duct-in-the-pipeline-how-the-deportation-machine-is-fueled-by-local-law-enforcement-agencies>

[15] <https://www.health.utah.gov/disparities/data/ohd/CCPPilotProjectNov2020.pdf>



CREATE AN INCLUSIVE FUTURE

State and other local leaders must invest in actively promoting dialogue around immigrant issues.



Fight the chilling effect of the Public Charge Rule

The new Public Charge Rule has increased fear, anxiety, and uncertainty to families across Utah. Although only a small portion of immigrants are subject to the Public Charge Rule, the “chilling effect” has been very harmful to immigrants and refugees all around our state.

This “chilling effect” refers to the fear that families have that they may be subject to the Public Charge rule and choose not to sign up for programs they or their children are eligible for.

Leaders both from the private and the public sector can provide information and positive statements encouraging families to apply for programs they may be eligible for such as Medicaid, CHIP, and SNAP.

Fighting the fear with proper information is important so families who are eligible for programs can know when the Public Charge Rule affects them or not.

Messaging and communications efforts can also be used to improve outreach for public programs such as Medicaid and CHIP like mentioned in the health section above.

While litigation continues, leaders in our state can continue to do their part to decrease fear and promote positive messaging for immigrant and refugee families, thereby strengthening Utah overall.



FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

How to Pay for #InvestInUtahKids



Every year, Utah's taxes (income, sales, gas, and property taxes) generate revenues that government then expends in ways that profoundly affect families and communities. The fiscal choices Utah makes — such as whether to invest in Utah's future or give in to the temptation to cut taxes below their current overall low level — will make a critical difference in the lives of the next generation of Utahns.

If we make the best choices, we can help foster opportunity for all our children and lay the foundations for Utah's future growth and prosperity.

Last year the Utah State Tax Commission and the Utah Foundation both published research showing that taxes in Utah are the lowest that they have been in 30-60 years, following repeated rounds of tax cutting. [16] Voices for Utah Children has calculated that the tax breaks passed in recent decades now amount to 18% of all revenues, an annual total of \$2.38 billion. [17]

To put this scale of revenue reductions in context, the Tax Foundation reported that the Brownback tax cuts in Kansas that caused so many difficulties there in the last decade amounted to 15% of overall revenues before they were reversed. [18]

Tax cutting is undoubtedly popular, especially in election years, but is it always wise?

[16] <https://le.utah.gov/interim/2019/pdf/00003720.pdf> and <http://www.utahfoundation.org/reports/a-lighter-load-utahs-changing-tax-burden/>

[17] <https://www.utahchildren.org/newsroom/speaking-of-kids-blog/item/1029-utah-tax-history>

[18] <https://taxfoundation.org/every-tax-cut-kansas/>

At some point we need to ask ourselves a difficult question: Is the current generation of Utahns doing our part, as earlier generations did, to set aside sufficient resources every year to invest in our children, in our future, in the foundations of tomorrow's prosperity and quality of life?

OVERALL UTAH TAX LEVEL



At the same time, we should also take care that public revenues are generated in ways that are fair. No family should be taxed into poverty as the price of educating their children. Currently, while we've moved in a better direction over the past 25 years, Utah does tax about 100,000 families into or deeper into poverty every year. In addition, the lowest-income Utahns pay a higher overall tax rate (7.5%) than those with the highest incomes (who pay 6.7% of their incomes in state and local taxes).

That's one of the reasons why Utah should become the 30th state in the nation with our own Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), starting with Utahns working their way out of intergenerational poverty, the proposal that was included in the ill-fated December 2019 tax restructuring legislation.



THE VIRTUOUS CYCLE

How Upfront Investment in Children Pays for Itself



Increased Public Revenues



Reduced Public Expenditures to Address Social Dysfunction



Additional Upfront Investment in Children



Enhanced Economic Growth & Prosperity



Reduced Social Dysfunction



CONCLUSION

One of the greatest thinkers Utah ever produced, business guru Clayton Christensen, who passed away earlier this year, wrote a decade ago in the Harvard Business Review, "If you study the root causes of business disasters, over and over you'll find this predisposition toward endeavors that offer immediate gratification." Are the dangers of short-term thinking any less when it comes to government policy?

Past generations of Utahns established a record of making sacrifices for the long-term betterment of our state. What about us today? Are we willing to live up to their example and make the upfront investments in our children that will redound to Utah's long-term benefit?

This concludes our #INVESTINUTAHKIDS agenda for Utah's New Governor and Legislature. It is clear that investing in Utah's future, means investing in its most important and valuable resource- our kids. All of them.

Please contact Voices for Utah Children if you have any questions regarding the information and recommendations listed in this agenda. We encourage and welcome your collaboration and partnership.



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