2026 Legislative Recap: Was it Good for Kids?

Published: Friday, 03 April 2026 08:00
Written by: Moe Hickey



Utah has long branded itself as the best state for families. We celebrate our high birth rates, our focus on the future, and our “pro-family” values. But during this year's 2026 legislative session, one truth stands out: budgets are moral documents. And while the rhetoric suggests children are our priority, the final appropriations told a different story.

The 2026 session was not without progress. Lawmakers maintained Utah’s longstanding commitment to K–12 education by passing the public education base budget, continuing Weighted Pupil Unit increases, and supporting targeted literacy efforts for students most at risk. These are important investments, and they matter deeply. But they also reveal a persistent pattern in Utah policymaking: we invest only after children arrive in school, while doing far too little to support them before they ever enter a classroom.

That is a costly mistake—and far too often, children are the ones who pay the price.

This year’s session made three things clear: Utah continues to underinvest in young children, prioritize tax reductions over family stability, and fall short of extending the same care and opportunity to every child in our state.

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The science of early childhood is clear. By age five, roughly 90% of brain development has already occurred, and decades of research show that the greatest returns on public investment come during the earliest years of life.

Yet the 2026 session brought no major new investment in the prenatal-to-five period, no transformative commitment to child care affordability, no substantial expansion of support for infants and toddlers, and no serious effort to build the kind of early childhood infrastructure families need to thrive. *Instead, this session highlighted a deeper contradiction in Utah's priorities.*

Even while the state maintains billions in reserve funds, lawmakers chose to reduce ongoing revenue through tax cuts rather than make meaningful, lasting investments in children and families. Although the passage of the Child Tax Credit amendments offered an important step forward, it was modest in scale compared to the broader opportunity the state chose not to seize.

Prioritize Kids Not Tax Cuts

When lawmakers prioritize permanent tax reductions over direct support for children, that is not a neutral fiscal decision. It is a trade-off. In 2026, children were too often on the losing end. Nowhere was this disconnect more visible than in child care.

Utah continues to treat child care as a private burden rather than essential infrastructure.

Small-scale proposals and incremental solutions are not enough to meet the scale of the crisis families face. If child care were treated with the same seriousness as roads, water systems, or broadband, the state would be building a durable system rather than relying on piecemeal efforts that leave families and providers behind.

All Kids Deserve a Bright Future in Utah

The session also raised troubling questions about who counts in Utah's vision for the future. A wave of immigration-related proposals sought to restrict access to public benefits, sending a chilling message to the many Utah children who live in

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immigrant families. Even when such bills fail, the climate they create causes harm. When parents fear seeking healthcare, early intervention, or basic support, children pay the price.

The bottom line is simple: *Utah has the resources to lead the nation in child well-being, but it has not yet shown the political will to align its budget with its values.*

The 2026 legislative session was steady, but insufficient. Until Utah invests upstream in young children, in family stability, and in equitable opportunity, its claim to value children will remain more of a slogan than reality. We are grateful to the partners, advocates, and community members who showed up this session to speak out and stand up for Utah's children. The work ahead is clear, and the time to act for Utah's children is now.

-Moe Hickey, Executive Director

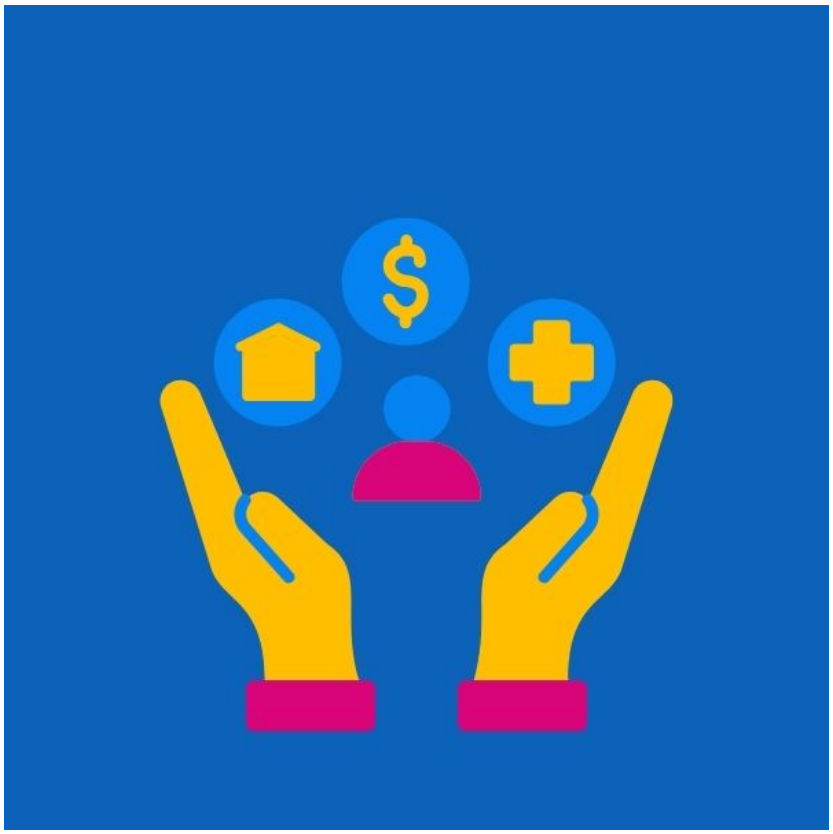
Legislative Recap by Policy Area

We invite you to review what occurred during the session by policy area. Each of our analysts has prepared an overview and updates on the legislation we tracked.

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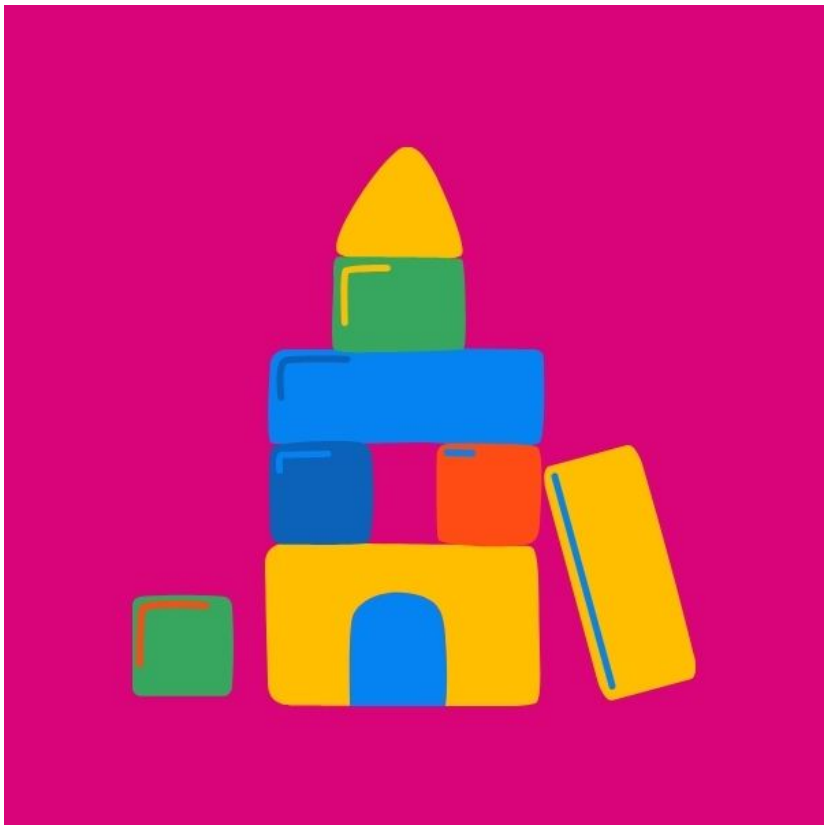
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