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Voices for Utah Children announces opposition to Constitutional Amendment G

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Utah Amendment G: Ending the Constitutional Dedication of All Income Tax Revenues to Education

They say:

We say:



Will Amendment G Mean More Money for Education?

If approved, Amendment G triggers HB 357, which requires that education funding will always keep up with inflation and enrollment growth, even in times of recession. That did not happen after the Great Recession of 2008-2009, which was why it took eight years to restore per-student, inflation-adjusted funding to its pre-recession level.

This is a great idea, so why isn't it part of the Constitutional Amendment? And since it's not, how do we know it's a promise that will be kept? There is nothing to stop future Legislatures from changing HB 357. And why wouldn't they change or eliminate it in a future recession when they are faced with the Sophie's choice of cutting either education funding or life-saving social and healthcare services in the midst of a downturn?

Flexibility/Rebalancing

State budget writers have long sought greater flexibility to move moneys around and rebalance the Education Fund (which relies on the income tax, which has been growing relatively quickly) and General Fund (which relies mostly on sales tax revenues, which have been growing more slowly due to the economy's shift from goods (which are mostly taxed) to services, which are mostly not taxed).

Greater flexibility means the ability to shift up to \$600 million annually out of what is already the worst-funded education system in the nation. Utah's K-12 public education system has ranked last in the nation in per-pupil investment since 1988. Funding should be increased, not diverted, so that we can address growing gaps between haves and have-nots and gaps between whites and non-whites that are larger than nationally.

Will Amendment G Also Mean More Money for Social Services for Children and Utahns with Disabilities?

Social services – especially for children and Utahns with disabilities – are underfunded and need more resources. Proponents of Amendment G want to have the flexibility to divert revenues now dedicated to education into social services for children and Utahns with disabilities.

The fact that proponents are promising that Amendment G will mean more money for education AND more money for social services should be a big red flag for voters. How does the math work on that? Where will these additional revenues come from?

The real reason that both social services and education are so dangerously underfunded is the decades of tax cutting that have left Utah's overall taxation level lower than since the 1960s. We should stop trying to fix this problem by robbing Peter to pay Paul and instead restore some revenues in a targeted and fair way, as was proposed by the original Our Schools Now initiative, which we supported together with the business community and education advocates.

[\(view this as a pdf here\)](#)

The state's leading child research and advocacy organization Voices for Utah Children announced its opposition to Constitutional Amendment G in an online press conference today (Monday, October 5, 2020).

Constitutional Amendment G is the proposal to amend the Utah State Constitution to end the Constitutional earmark of all income tax revenues for education. Since 1946 Utah has dedicated 100% of income tax revenues to education, initially defined only as K-12 education and, since 1996, including also higher education. The State Legislature voted in March to place on the ballot the question of also allowing these funds to be used for other purposes -- specifically for programs for children and for Utahns with disabilities.

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The arguments made by proponents and opponents are summarized in [an online document](#) prepared by the state election administrators in the Lt Governor's office. According to that document, "the state spends about \$600 million annually of non-income tax money on programs for children and programs that benefit people with a disability."

Voices for Utah Children CEO Maurice "Moe" Hickey explained the organization's decision to oppose the Amendment: "We believe that the proposed Amendment not only won't solve Utah's state budget woes, it is likely to delay the real fiscal policy changes that are needed. Over the past decade we have been continuously ranked last in the country for per pupil spending. This is caused by our growth in number of students, combined with a lowered tax burden in the past decade. A major question we have to ask is "if the current Constitutional earmark has failed to help Utah invest more in education, how will getting rid of it improve matters?" The unfortunate reality is that getting rid of the Constitutional earmark of income tax for education does nothing to solve the real problem, which is the fact that nearly every area of state responsibility where children are impacted – education, social services, public health, and many others – is dangerously underfunded."

Health Policy Analyst Ciriac Alvarez Valle said, "Utah has one of the highest rates of uninsured children in the country at 8% or 82,000 children, and we have an even higher rate of uninsured Latino children at almost 20%. It is alarming that even during this pandemic, children and families are going without health insurance. There are so many ways to reverse this negative trend that began in 2016. Some of the solutions include investing in our kid's healthcare. By investing in outreach and enrollment efforts especially those that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for our communities of color, we can ensure they are being reached. We also have to invest in policies that keep kids covered all year round and ensures they have no gaps in coverage. and lastly, we have to invest in covering all children regardless of their immigration status. By doing these things we can ensure that kids have a foundation for their long term health and needs. It's vital that we keep children's health at the forefront of this issue, knowing that kids can only come to school ready to learn if they are able to get the resources they need to be healthy."

Health Policy Analyst Jessie Mandle added, "All kids need to have care and coverage in order to succeed in school. We are no strangers to the funding challenges and the many competing demands of social services funding. Without

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greater clarity, more detail, and planning, we are left to ask, are we simply moving the funding of children's health services into another pool, competing with education funding, instead of prioritizing and investing in both critical areas? Sufficient funding for critical children's services including school nurse, home visiting and early intervention, and school-based preventive care remains a challenge for our state. We have made important strides in recent years for children's health, recognizing that kids cannot be optimal learners without optimal health. Let's keep investing, keep moving forward together so that kids can get the education, health and wraparound services they need."

Education Policy Analyst Anna Thomas: "We often hear that UT is dead last in the nation in per pupil funding. We have also heard from such leaders as Envision Utah that millions of dollars are needed to avert an urgent and growing teacher shortage. What we talk about less is the fact that these typical conservative calculations of our state's underfunding of education don't include the amount the state should be paying for the full-day kindergarten programming most Utah families want, nor does it include the tens of millions our state has never bothered to spend on preschool programs to ensure all Utah children can start school with the same opportunities to succeed. Utah currently masks this underfunding with dollars from various federal programs, but this federal funding is not equitably available to meet the needs of all Utah children who deserve these critical early interventions. The state also increasingly relies on local communities to make up the difference through growing local tax burdens - which creates an impossible situation for some of our rural school districts, where local property tax will never be able to properly fund early interventions like preschool and full-day kindergarten along with everything else they are responsible for. Our lack of investment in early education is something we pay for, much less efficiently and much less wisely, later down the road, when children drop out of school, experience mental and physical health issues, and get pulled into bad decisions and misconduct. If kids aren't able to hit certain learning benchmarks in literacy and math by third grade, their struggles in school - and often by extension outside of school - multiply. We should be investing as much as possible in our children to help ensure they have real access to future success - and can contribute to our state's future success. You don't have to be a math whiz - third grade math is probably plenty - to see that the general arithmetic of Amendment G, and the attendant promises of somehow more investment in everything that helps kids - just doesn't add up. We have multiple unmet early education investment obligations right now. Beyond that, we have many more needs, for children and for

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people with disabilities, that we must be sensitive to as a state especially during a global pandemic. How we will ensure we are investing responsibly in our children and our future, by having MORE expenses come out of the same pot of money - which the legislature tells us every year is too small to help all the Utah families we advocate for - is still very unclear to me. Until that math is made transparent to the public, we have to judge Amendment G to be, at best, half-baked in its current incarnation."

Fiscal Policy Analyst Matthew Weinstein shared [information from the Tax Commission](#) (see slide #8) showing that Utah's overall level of taxation is now at its lowest level in 50 years relative to Utahns' incomes, following multiple rounds of tax cutting. He also shared [recent survey data from the Utah Foundation](#) showing that three-fourths of Utahns oppose cutting taxes further and are ready and willing to contribute more if necessary to help solve the state's current challenges in areas like education, air quality, and transportation. He also contrasted the public's understanding that there's no "free lunch" with the unrealistic election-year promises made by our political leadership -- more money for both education and social services if the public votes for Amendment G -- even though Amendment G does nothing to reverse any past tax cuts and address the state's chronic revenue shortages.

The organization shared a [one-page summary of the arguments \(available here in pdf format\)](#) for and against the proposed Constitutional Amendment:

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Voices for Utah Children has also published a full five-page [position paper that is available in pdf format](#).

This press conference was broadcast live at

Media coverage:

- [Deseret News](#)
- [KSL](#)
- [Cache Valley Daily](#)
- [St. George Spectrum](#)
- [KUTV-2](#)

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- Op-eds: [Salt Lake Tribune](#) [Ogden Standard-Examiner](#)