2026 Legislative Recap: K-12 Education and Child Care

Published: Wednesday, 01 April 2026 19:36
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The 2026 legislative session brought both meaningful progress and missed opportunities for Utah's children and families. Throughout the session, advocates, educators, and community partners worked to elevate issues impacting child care access, early learning environments, and family stability.

At the start of the session, there was strong momentum around making Utah more affordable for families. Child care emerged as a central policy focus, alongside efforts to expand access to paid family leave for state employees and teachers.

We were proud to participate in two impactful events in the Rotunda that raised awareness of the need for more accessible, affordable care.

- Child Care Day on the Hill, held on February 13th and hosted by Care for Kids, gave constituents the opportunity to connect with their representatives and advocate for stronger child care policies.
- After School Day on the Hill was also a success, with student performances and participation from numerous clubs and organizations highlighting the importance of after-school programs across the state. This momentum led to a significant milestone: for the first time, a Request for Proposals (RFP) valued

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at $3 Million was awarded to support after-school programs.

As the session progressed, several key policies were passed, while many others were substituted or failed to advance, continuing a broader pattern of insufficient prioritization of child care in Utah. The outcomes of this session make clear that early childhood advocates have important work ahead in the coming year to advance policies that create lasting, meaningful impact for children and families.

The session resulted in several important wins, including expanded paid leave for state employees and increased tax credits for businesses that support employees who need child care. At the same time, critical policies, particularly those related to child safety and access to care, did not move forward, underscoring the need for continued advocacy in future sessions.

We are especially grateful to the many advocates, organizations, and families who showed up, including The Policy Project, UAEYC, Promise Partnership, After School Network, and each individual who testified, met, and engaged in ongoing collaboration.

Your voices are essential in shaping a stronger future for Utah's children.

Legislative Priority Outcomes

Below are the following outcomes from legislation we were tracking this session.

POSITION: Support OUTCOME: Passed

Sponsors: Rep. Thompson & Sen. Balderree

HB 190 represents a meaningful step toward involving the private sector in addressing Utah's child care challenges. By expanding tax credits for businesses that offer child care support to their employees, the bill encourages employers to play a more active role in easing the burden on working families. The bill passed the Senate with a 20–6 vote and was sent for enrollment, signaling strong legislative

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support. While this policy helps incentivize employer participation, its long-term impact will depend on how widely businesses adopt these benefits and whether they translate into increased access and affordability for families across income levels. Continued advocacy will be essential to ensure that these investments lead to tangible improvements for parents and children. We appreciate the Policy Project for its leadership on this bill.

POSITION: Support OUTCOME: Failed

Sponsors: Sen. Pitcher & Rep. Peterson

SB 258 sought to provide a practical and cost-effective solution for working parents by allowing infants in the DHHS workplace under defined conditions. This bill was an expansion of the previously passed pilot program. The bill successfully moved through both House and Senate committees, demonstrating bipartisan interest and recognition of the challenges faced by families with newborns. However, its ultimate failure represents a missed opportunity to support workforce retention and ease the transition back to work for new parents. Policies like this can be especially impactful for small businesses and early-stage employees who may not have access to formal child care options.

POSITION: Oppose OUTCOME: Failed

Sponsors: Sen. Escamilla & Rep. Auxier

SB 214 aimed to expand the availability of home-based child care by addressing regulatory and capacity barriers that limit supply. **However, it also increased the number of children receiving unregulated care from 8 to 10.** Home-based providers are a critical part of Utah's child care ecosystem, particularly in rural and underserved communities.

Despite the potential for this bill to receive a substitute that keeps the ratios the same and moves forward with background check regulations, the bill was killed in the House, leaving persistent gaps in access unaddressed. Its failure underscores the ongoing need for policies that support a diverse range of child care options and

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recognize the essential role of small, home-based providers.

POSITION: Support OUTCOME: Passed

Sponsors: Rep. Defay & Sen. McKell

HB 329 marks a significant win for working families by expanding paid maternity leave for state employees. However, when initially introduced, this bill would have provided 12 weeks of paid family leave (the recommended amount) to state employees and teachers. After cutting out teachers and changing the time span to 9 weeks, the bill passed the House. With strong bipartisan support, this policy acknowledges the importance of bonding time and recovery following childbirth, while also helping improve employee retention and well-being. As one of the more comprehensive leave policies in the state, it sets an important precedent and positions Utah as a potential model for other employers. Continued progress in this area could help extend similar benefits to private-sector workers and educators.

POSITION: Support OUTCOME: Passed

Sponsors: Rep. Miller & Sen. Fillmore

HB 290 provides direct financial relief to families by enhancing the state's child tax credit. After passing the Senate with a 26–2 vote, the bill was sent for enrollment, reflecting broad support for policies that address the rising cost of raising children. By putting money back into the pockets of families, this legislation helps offset expenses such as child care, housing, and basic needs. While impactful, continued evaluation will be important to ensure the credit reaches those who need it most and keeps pace with inflation and cost-of-living increases.

POSITION: Support OUTCOME: Failed

Sponsors: Rep. Matthews & Sen. Escamilla

HB 453 proposed a forward-thinking approach to funding early childhood priorities by

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allocating 50% of any unspent state funds at the end of the legislative session to a dedicated account for Early Childhood Education and Behavioral Health. During committee discussions, the funding was casually referred to as “change found in the couch cushions,” yet even this modest and variable investment was ultimately rejected on the floor. The failure of this bill highlights an ongoing challenge: early childhood education continues to struggle for prioritization, even when funding opportunities do not require new revenue. This represents a missed chance to build sustainable, long-term investments in Utah’s youngest children.

POSITION: Support OUTCOME: Passed

Sponsors: Sen. Fillmore & Rep. Welton

SB 69 establishes clearer boundaries around student use of personal electronic devices during school hours, aiming to reduce distractions and improve classroom engagement. A study by the London School of Economics supports this theory when they saw a 6.4% increase in academic scores after banning phones. The bill passed both chambers and was sent for enrollment, making it one of the notable education policies enacted this session. As schools implement these changes, it will be important to monitor how device restrictions impact learning environments, student behavior, and overall academic outcomes.

POSITION: Support OUTCOME: Passed

Sponsors: Rep. Defay & Sen. Millner

HB 393 represents a strong investment in early literacy by enhancing the identification and support systems for students with dyslexia. The bill passed unanimously in the Senate and with overwhelming support in the House, reflecting a shared commitment to addressing learning differences early. By prioritizing early screening and intervention, this policy can significantly improve long-term educational outcomes and reduce the need for more intensive interventions later in a

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child’s academic journey.

POSITION: Support OUTCOME: Failed

Sponsors: Rep. Auxier & Sen. Grover

HB 440 aimed to improve school meal policies. It addressed the issue that many students face of a lack of time to eat during the day, as well as prohibiting teachers from taking away students' recess time as punishment. The data shows that kids need at least 20 minutes to sit and eat. The bill also encouraged schools to consider recesses before lunch. You can read Rep. Auxier's Op-ed in the Desert News for more data on these issues. Both policies would have been monumental in ensuring that children receive the nutrition and movement time necessary to improve their ability to focus during instruction time. It ultimately stalled after being sent back to the Senate Rules Committee. Its failure leaves unresolved questions around how the state will address food insecurity among students and ensure that all children have access to healthy meals during the school day. School nutrition and focus remain a critical component of student well-being and academic success, and this issue is likely to resurface in future sessions.

POSITION: Support OUTCOME: Failed

Sponsors: Rep. Stoddard

HB 180



POSITION: Oppose OUTCOME: Failed

Sponsors: Rep. Lee

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HB 399 proposed limiting the use of “character development” tracking systems in schools. Social and Emotional Learning is considered part of that “character development” agenda. thereby eliminating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). According to Yale University, SEL is essential for future positive outcomes. We know that SEL is a factor in kids learning Emotional Intelligence, including benefiting children for the rest of their life. A Harvard study shows that 71% of employers prefer emotional intelligence skills over technical skills. While the bill did not pass, its failure is viewed as a positive outcome, as it preserves local control and flexibility for schools to support whole-child development. By avoiding a one-size-fits-all restriction, educators can continue using a variety of approaches to foster social-emotional learning and student growth. It is imperative that we continue to ensure Utah does not implement policies like these that can be detrimental to kids' future thriving.

Weekly Updates

The 2026 legislation kicked off with a large number of Child Care and Early Education Bills, which we will continue to monitor through the session.

One of the largest topics of debate in the first week was determining where to make educational budget cuts in the proposed 5% cut from the legislature. Different members of the School Board presented their recommendations. The Public Education Appropriations Sub-Committee will continue to meet throughout the session to finalize their decisions.

S.B 69 **School Device Revisions** was a popular subject as many testified in favor of the bill. Noting that children will have better social and academic outcomes if there is a ban on technology (cell phones, smart watches) from "bell to bell." To clarify, students will be able to bring their devices to school but will not be able to use them throughout the day. The bill passed in the Senate Standing Committee 6-1.

S.B 51 **School Safety Modifications** received a favorable recommendation when first introduced in the Senate. It was then circled the next day to make modifications. This bill would create a system for the State Board of Education (state board) to collect and share information about student threats among local education agencies

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(LEAs) to promote school safety.

S.B 119 **School and Classroom Amendments** also received a favorable recommendation and passed the first reading. Voices of Utah Children opposed this bill because it sets restrictions on which children can attend school, proposes a new curriculum with no specified oversight, and takes money from the Public Education Economic Stabilization Restricted Account, which could be used elsewhere.

You can stay up to date here with more of our tracked Child Care and Early Education Bills.

This past week, S.B. 58 **Public School Attendance Amendments** was passed by the Senate, establishing comprehensive student attendance monitoring and accountability requirements and requiring LEAs to implement enhanced attendance-tracking and intervention programs.

S.B. 180 **School Nutrition Amendments** was introduced this week, requiring the State Board of Education to use a certain percentage of revenue from the liquor tax to support the school meal program. We support this effort to develop creative solutions that help kids get the nutrition they deserve while at school.

We also support H.B. 180 **Dangerous Weapons on Campus Amendments**, which clarifies that an individual who has a concealed carry permit may not open carry a dangerous weapon on the grounds of a daycare, a public or private elementary school or secondary school, or an institution of higher education unless the individual is lawfully responding to an active threat. This week, the sponsor made a substitution for the bill and is awaiting committee.

S.B 51 **School Safety Modifications**, which we have been tracking, was passed by the Senate. It establishes a statewide student threat information-sharing system that will help Local Education Agencies share threatening information more promptly.

H.B 418 **School Class Size Requirements** was introduced by Rep. Teuscher. This bill would limit class sizes to 25, with some exceptions. We support this bill as we know that small class sizes have a positive effect on student achievement.

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H.B 393 **Early Intervention for Dyslexia Amendments** was also introduced by Rep. Defay, which creates the Dyslexia Screening Pilot Program to: provide dyslexia related resources to district and charter schools; and create a dyslexia screener at the University of Utah College of Education and the University of Utah Education Policy Center. Dyslexia is crucial to detect during Early Intervention to improve a child's future outcomes.

You can stay up to date here with more of our tracked Child Care and Early Education Bills.

HB 329 - **State Employee Maternity and Leave Amendments** increases the amount of postpartum recovery leave available to a state employee from three to nine weeks;- requires certain state employers to: provide nine weeks of paid leave to a state employee who adopts a child younger than six years old; and provide three weeks of paid leave to a state employee who fosters a child younger than six year old. This bill passed the committee this week.

H.B 393 **- Early Intervention for Dyslexia Amendments -** creates the Dyslexia Screening Pilot Program to: provide dyslexia related resources to district and charter schools; and create a dyslexia screener at the University of Utah College of Education and the University of Utah Education Policy Center. It received a $477,000 fiscal note in Appropriations on Friday.

SB 214**- Home-Based Child Care Solutions-** Was brought to the Senate Committee on Thursday. This bill would promote safety by ensuring background checks for in-home child care centers. At the same time, it raises the limit of children in care from 8 children to 10 children, which raises a concern about safety. We will continue to monitor the bill.

HB 190 **- Child Care Business Tax Credit** - a bill (see priorities below) to incentivize businesses to help their employees pay for child care, was favorably passed in committee after a passionate discussion.

You can stay up to date here with more of our tracked Child Care and Early Education Bills.

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Published: Wednesday, 01 April 2026 19:36
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This past week brought significant movement on issues impacting child care and early education. Lawmakers heard passionate public testimony urging them to consider community input before making decisions. There were discussions that highlighted broader debates on student and character development, as well as the role of school councils. Conversations also focused on student well-being, including ensuring children have adequate time to eat lunch and protecting recess as a vital part of the school day rather than a disciplinary tool.

A highlight in the Child Care realm was Senator Pitcher getting her bill, SB 258 **: Infants at Work,** passed out of committee, which expands the allowance for certain organizations to allow their employees to bring their babies to work for up to 6 months of age, which would result in better outcomes for baby and parent. We will continue to monitor bills that have a lasting impact on early childhood education.

HB180 Kathy Adams gave a testimony challenging lawmakers to listen to public opinion before making a decision before the committee. The bill was ultimately held in committee, with recommendations to amend it.

HB 273 **- Classroom Technology Amendments:** Was passed favorably in the House Education Committee on February 9th with a unanimous decision by all who were present (10). It is now awaiting the 3rd reading. This bill will require the state board to create a model policy on the balanced use of technology and artificial intelligence in the classroom.

SB 180 **- School Nutrition Amendments:** A bill to continue allowing the State Board of Education to use a certain percentage of liquor revenue to support the school meal program and to expand the definition of an eligible student under the school meal program. It received a favorable recommendation and passed out of the committee.

HB 399 - **Prohibition Against Student Character Tracking and Grading Systems:** Was held in committee on February 12th. This bill would be detrimental to removing Social and Emotional Learning from Schools (or Character Development). Rep Thompson spoke on institutions developing character and stated that this bill would prevent teachers from helping with the overall child. Rep. Hayes made a great

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point about Emotional Intelligence as an essential skill to learn at a young age to better prepare for the workforce. There is talk of creating substitutions and bringing it to the committee again, something we will continue to oppose.

HB 440

Op-ed in the Desert News

Child Care Early Education Bills

SB 81

HB 329**, State Employee Maternity and Leave Amendments,** was passed in the House on February 17th with an amendment to 9 weeks instead of the 12 initially proposed and to exclude teachers. We are disappointed that these changes were made, but hope that they can still pass through the Senate, creating a small incremental change to maternity leave for state employees.

HB 290**: Child Tax Credit Amendments and HB 190**: **Child Care Business Tax Credit** (see priorities below), both passed out of the House on February 17th. Both

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are waiting to be heard before the Senate Revenue and Taxation Committee.

HB 453, Unspent Funding Amendments, was presented to the House committee this week. It creates the Unspent Balances Restricted Account, which would earmark unspent funds for child care, behavioral health, and reading support for kids. Voices for Utah Children and Promise Partnership both testified in support of this bill. The committee asked why children should receive this funding rather than earmarking it for other “needs”. The answer is that early childhood education receives no state funding, resulting in failed intellectual, developmental, and literacy needs. The bill was favorably recommended, 7-4.

Child Care Early Education Bills

HB 453: Unspent Funding Amendments, sadly, was killed on the floor this week. In committee, this bill was referred to as "change found in the couch cushions." This would have earmarked 50% of any extra funds at the end of the session (if any remain) for an account dedicated solely to Early Childhood Education and Behavioral Health. It's sad to see that Early Childhood Education and young children aren't prioritized enough to receive even the change left in the couch cushions.

SB 69: **School Device Revisions ("Bell to Bell Bill")** passed the House this week, making it one of our first early education bills to pass both the Senate and the House. It will now be sent to the Governor for signature into law.

HB 290**: Child Tax Credit Amendments** was heard in the Senate Revenue and Taxation Committee on Monday Morning, receiving a favorable recommendation (5-2). By Friday, it had made its way to the third senate reading calendar after receiving 25 yes votes from the Senate on the second calendar. We will update its final status this coming week.

SB 214**: Home-Based Child Care Solutions-** was heard in the House Economic Development and Workforce Services Committee this week. After much debate among committee members and mixed public comment, it passed with a favorable recommendation (7-2). We will continue monitoring this bill, as we strongly object to adding any more kids to unregulated care, while also appreciating the efforts to

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create mandatory background checks.

HB 190**: Child Care Business Tax Credit-** Was also heard in the Senate Revenue and Taxation Committee on Wednesday. Voices for Utah Children offered a testimony along with many others in support of the bill. The bill passed with a 3-1 vote. It is currently on the second reading of the Senate calendar. We will update its final status this coming week.

SB 258**: Infants at Work-** a bill to help mothers at DHHS continue their pilot program of bringing their infants to work in the first six months, passed in the Senate on the 25th. It is now in the House Health and Human Services Committee.

As we wrapped up the 2026 Legislative Session, we are encouraged to see some movement on child care. We know that the advances made this session are still not enough to ensure that all children have access to safe, affordable child care. We celebrate incremental wins, such as **HB 329 – State Employee Maternity Leave Amendments**, which extends paid maternity leave for state employees. We hope the state will continue to expand leave in the next legislative session and serve as a model for Utah businesses. We also celebrate the Failure of **HB 399,** which would have prevented any "Character Development" curriculum in school.

At the same time, we saw important defeats on bills that would have directly improved child safety in early learning environments. For example, **HB 180 – Concealed Weapons at Schools/Daycare** would have strengthened protections by clarifying rules around firearms in child care settings, ensuring that children and staff are not exposed to unnecessary risk. Its failure highlights the need to continue advocating for policies that make child care centers safer and more secure for every child.

Below are the Updates for some of the Early Education and K-12 Education Bills we followed this session:

HB 290: Child Tax Credit Amendments (PASSED) After a 26-2 Vote on the Senate Floor, it passed and was then sent for enrollment.

SB 258**: Infants at Work (FAILED)** Made it past both committees in the House and

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Senate, but was then killed.

SB 69: **School Device Revisions "Bell to Bell Bill" (PASSED)** passed the House last week, making it one of our first early education bills to pass both the Senate and the House. It was sent this week for enrollment.

HB 190**: Child Care Business Tax Credit (PASSED)** Passed with a 20-6 vote on the Senate floor. Sent for enrollment.

SB 214**: Home-Based Child Care Solutions (FAILED)** Killed in the House

HB 329**: State Employee Maternity and Leave Amendments (PASSED)** Passed after a unanimous vote in the Senate Committee and a 25-2 vote on the Senate Floor.

Passed the Senate unanimously. Was sent back to the house with amendments voted 69-1 in favor, then sent for enrollment.

HB 440 The Senate Education Committee passed it back to Senate Rules and then died there.

HB 399 **- Prohibition Against Student Character Tracking and Grading Systems (FAILED)** Returned to Rules on March 4th, then died.

HB180 - Dangerous Weapons at Daycares and Schools (FAILED) was stuck in the House Rules Committee and died there.

In the News

- Republican lawmaker says Utah Legislature needs to ‘step up’ on child care (KSL)
- Utah lawmaker aims to spend more state liquor tax money on school lunches (KSL Radio)
- Lawmakers quickly advance bill limiting phone use throughout school day (KSL)

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- Utah leaders want to hold back third graders who aren't on reading level. Here's what you need to know. (SL Tribune)
- 'It's not even close': A plan to cut millions from public education didn't go far enough, lawmaker says (SL Tribune)
- Here's a breakdown of Utah's sweeping plan to hold back struggling third grade readers (SL Tribune)
- Opinion: An opportunity to invest in Utah children's futures by Rep. Ashlee Matthews (Deseret News)
- Could this idea help schools in some of Utah's fastest growing areas? (Fox 13)
- High marks: Why is a conservative policy group awarding Utah's K-12 school system an 'A-?'(KSL)
- New bill looks to address book banning in Utah schools, allow state to sue over 'sensitive material' violations (ABC 4)
- We would like a real plan': Utah will be required to help struggling Native American students after years of inaction (SL Tribune)
- Charter schools-backed bill allowing some schools to skip RISE test fails in the House (Utah News Dispatch)
- Facing another year of 'sensitive material' bills, some Republicans are getting fatigued (Utah News Dispatch)
- One Utah lawmaker's push for healthier foods in schools (KSL)
- How Utah unwittingly set off a fight over math standards (KUER)
- 'Babies will be happier': Expanding Utah's infant at work program (Deseret)
- Utah Fits All voucher funding debate: Should private schools be accredited to be eligible? (KSL)
- Utah legislators consider new requirements for seclusion rooms, including video cameras (Fox 13)
- Another chemical may be banned from Utah public school lunches (KUTV)
- Keeping Utah's rural kids digitally connected during longggg school bus rides (Deseret)
- Utah Senate OKs bill to increase number of children allowed in unlicensed home day cares (KSL)
- Utah adds 4 books to growing list of 27 titles now banned from all public schools (Salt Lake Trib)
- To improve early literacy outcomes, Utah proposes $16 million for interventions (Utah News Dispatch)
- Legislature approves bell-to-bell cellphone ban in Utah schools (Utah News Dispatch)

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- Educators speak on Utah ‘bell-to-bell’ cell phone ban bill (ABC 4)
- Bill expanding school lunch for children in need won't advance in Utah's legislature (Fox 13)

Other Legislative Recap Updates

- Children's Health
- Immigrant Family Policies
- Tax and Budget
- Child Welfare & Juvenile Justice

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