

# Good News for Juvenile Justice Reformers, from the 2019 Legislative Session

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**Written by: Anna Thomas**

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Fans of juvenile justice reform have a lot to be happy about, with regards to the recently concluded legislative session.

Thanks to the hard work of many committed elected officials, reform-minded public administrators and community-based advocates, Utah kids are more likely, in the years ahead, to get positive early interventions in lieu of ineffective punishments. And, if early interventions don't have the desired impact, [kids who end up in juvenile court are more likely to have a defense attorney](#) to help them navigate the legal process.

In general, [Utah is on a good path](#) when it comes to improving outcomes for kids who might otherwise become involved in the juvenile justice system. Nearly three years ago, the state embarked on a [rigorous analysis of that system](#), identifying barriers to youth success and inefficiencies that lead to poor outcomes and wasted tax dollars. You may recall that Voices for Utah Children and other community stakeholders [worked together to highlight the racial disparities](#) revealed by that analysis.

Those many months of work evaluating Utah's system, through the lens of national best practices and research on youth development, gave rise to [HB239, a comprehensive legislative proposal that passed into law during the 2017 legislative session](#). We've been moving in the right direction since.

[Rep. Lowry Snow \(R-Saint George\) led the charge on HB239's passage and implementation](#), and he continued his championship of reform during the 2019 session with both [HB340, School Absenteeism & Truancy Amendments](#), and [HB404, Juvenile Justice Reform Amendments](#).

HB340 did not pass – but, according to the sponsor, that was never really the purpose; he wanted to kick off a conversation about alignment and best practices. The bill was a response to concerns and confusion among various school districts as to what constitutes “chronic absenteeism” and “truancy,” and what the appropriate administrative responses should be ([especially after HB239 precluded schools from sending kids to juvenile court for this low-level school-based misconduct](#)). Expect to see this effort return to the hill next year, with lots of input from district-level

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stakeholders, as well as juvenile delinquency experts.

HB404 did pass, despite being introduced pretty late in the session. This bill made some minor statutory adjustments to keep HB239 implementation running smoothly. It also created a special account to ensure that all the tax dollars saved by NOT locking up kids who don't need to be locked up (juvenile secure care costs Utah tens of thousands of dollars annually *per child*), is designated for early interventions that help kids avoid contact with the juvenile justice system. Essentially, HB404 aims to realize the "reinvestment" part of juvenile justice reinvestment.

Senator Todd Weiler (R-Woods Cross) was the floor sponsor of HB239, and continued his advocacy for reform in 2019, as well. Specifically, Sen. Weiler sponsored [SB32, Indigent Defense Act Amendments](#), major provisions of which will work to ensure that young kids who appear in juvenile court have meaningful access to a defense attorney (he also co-sponsored HB404, with Rep. Snow).

Voices for Utah Children worked closely with S.J. Quinney College of Law at the University of Utah and the Utah Indigent Defense Commission to explore the issue of underrepresentation of young people in Utah's juvenile courts. [Our report, "And Justice For All Kids"](#) confirmed that many young people – especially those in rural areas, those from non-English-speaking families and those from indigent families—experience unnecessary barriers to obtaining a defense attorney, who can help them navigate complex legal proceedings. SB32 will remove several of the most prominent barriers to legal access for these young people, which we fully expect will result in better outcomes - and fewer negative future implications for youthful misconduct – for those few Utah kids who require court intervention to put them on the right path.