# The 2021 Utah Legislative Session: Was It Good For Kids?

**Published: Thursday, 18 March 2021 10:40**
**Written by: Sara Gunderson**

**We appreciate the many legislators that supported bills affecting children. In summary, it WAS a good year for kids, but we still have plenty to do and we look forward to working together to #investinutahkids!**

## Early Childhood

Early childhood care and education had several key wins. The legislature approved:

- $7m in new funding for Optional Enhanced Kindergarten (which many districts use, with other funding sources, to offer full-day kindergarten)
- $3m in new funding for School Readiness grants (to support high-quality preschool programs)
- $5m in newly restored funding for preK-3 teacher professional development.
- In addition, new legislation directed expansion in eligibility for working families to receive state childcare support, and several bills aimed to create efficiencies and financial stability for the childcare providers these working families rely on.


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## Juvenile Justice

In the area of Juvenile Justice, legislators approved several bills that continue the state's effort to refine ongoing efforts to reform and improve the juvenile justice system, which included:

- A bold bill outlining and clarifying the Miranda rights of youth who are interrogated by police (ensuring that either parents or attorneys are present for such questioning.
- An innovative pilot program to offer youth in secure care access to college courses through Dixie State University.
- Finally, school-based discipline and the role of School Resource Officers (SROs) received some attention, with legislators giving a moratorium on criminal enforcement of state truancy laws during the remaining months of the pandemic and providing additional direction with regard to SRO training in public schools.

## Health

We were thrilled to see our Legislature take significant steps to prioritize children's health coverage this Session and reduce Utah's too-high number of uninsured children.

- House Bill 262 (Representative Welton) provides ongoing funding for CHIP/Medicaid outreach so that more families can connect with affordable health insurance options for their kids. In addition, Senate Bill 158 would have removed barriers to health insurance, so all Utah children could get covered and keep their coverage.
- In addition to children's coverage, we saw important steps forward for children's access to mental health this legislative Session including HB 337, sponsored by Representative Eliason, which will allow more early childhood providers to receive valuable training in infant mental health and also


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strengthen statewide systems to respond to the mental health needs of young children.

- The legislature also made changes to ensure that funding for Utah's maternal mental health program and awareness campaign were made permanent; thanks to Representative Dailey-Provost for championing this change for families.

- Finally, the legislature also passed a bill that will make it easier for kids to access preventive dental health care. Senate Bill 103, sponsored by Senator Todd Weiler, allows dental hygienists to bill Medicaid, which will help promote greater access to dental care in school-based and childcare settings.

#### Cover All Kids Campaign Update

Senate Bill 158 passed the Senate with broad support, but unfortunately it was not funded. We look forward to continuing to support the bill sponsor, Senator Luz Escamilla, and floor sponsor, Representative Francis Gibson, to get this important bill across the finish line next year.

#### Continuous Medicaid Eligibility Update

Unfortunately, the Legislature did not restore state funding for continuous eligibility for children on Medicaid ages 0-5. Continuous eligibility was funded in the 2020 General Session but eliminated as part of budgetary cuts over the summer. Continuous eligibility guarantees children will have a year of stable Medicaid coverage, as they already have with CHIP. The good news is that thanks to temporary federal requirements, all children currently have this option. However, when the federal public health emergency ends, this option will end too, which could lead to significant loss and disruptions in children's coverage if state funding is not restored. This past year has shown us just how vital it is that all children and families across Utah have access to health care and coverage. Stable, affordable health coverage for all Utahns will be critical to our state's ability to rebound and recover.

### Other Legislative Priorities



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During this past legislative session, we were happy to support a number of bills that are “good for kids” outside of our main policy priorities including the following bills that include policies that we will continue to work on this upcoming year!

- We supported and are glad to continue working with the International Rescue Committee on supporting our immigrant and refugee families through HCR 22: Concurrent Resolution Celebrating the Contributions of Multilingual and Multicultural Families to Utah Schools.

- HB 338: School District Voter Eligibility Amendments would have created a pathway for school districts to choose whether students age 16-17 can vote in their local elections. It was led by a young person, Dhati Oomen, but unfortunately did not pass. We will continue to further advocate for greater youth civic engagement through this bill and beyond.

- Lastly, we supported and advocated for SB 214: Official Language Amendments as a positive first step to ensure we have greater language inclusion in our state. While we recognize that this is not a full repeal of the 2000 “English-only” law, this bill does remove funding restrictions and “official communications that exist” while keeping English as the official language in place.  We will continue to work on ensuring this law is repealed completely in the coming year.

### Tax and Budget

Tax cuts were a big item of discussion, and there were three tax cuts passed:

- There was an $18 million Social Security Income Tax Credit

- $24 million Military Retirement Income Tax Credit

- $55 million Tax Cut tied to the personal exemption related to the dependent tax credit.


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*Voices opposed these three items as they were primarily a benefit to the top 40% of taxpayers and excluded the lowest-income 40% almost entirely.*

We were also advocating for a $7 million Earned Income Tax Credit equal to 10% of the federal EITC targeted to Utahns in intergenerational poverty. This was passed in December 2019 as part of the tax restructuring law that was repealed in the 2020 Session. Lastly, there were two bills to lower the State Income Tax Rate, which did not pass. We were opposed to both bills for a number of reasons.  The cuts would have led to a more regressive tax structure and depriving us of much needed future revenues.

We have many unfunded needs and it is our opinion that we should not cut taxes any further until we address those needs and provide the required funds.

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