

# Wins for Kids during the 2017 Utah Legislative Session

**Published: Monday, 13 March 2017 08:23**

**Written by: Moe Hickey**

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## Early Childhood

Wins for new moms and babies including much-needed funding support for Early Intervention Services/Baby Watch (Sen. Luz Escamilla, D-Salt Lake City, SB 2) and SB 135 which will strengthen statewide, evidence-based home visiting programs for low-income mothers (Sen. Escamilla).

SB 100 (Sen. Ann Millner, R-Ogden) commissions an analysis of early childhood systems throughout the state, to determine where and to what extent early childhood services exist such as developmental screenings, home visiting, high-quality child care and preschool, as well as what access barriers there are between these services and the children and families who need them.

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## Access to Healthcare

A win for families is HB 278 (Rep. Chavez-Houck, D- Salt Lake City), which makes it easier for divorced parents to seek medical care for their children. It requires medical providers to separately bill each parent for their due portion, and prohibits a parent from getting a negative credit report if the other parent has not made his or her portion. The onus is no longer on the parent to track down the full payment or risk a bad credit score. HB 278 will help more kids get the care they need.

Sen. Christensen (R-Ogden) sponsored SB 51, which would return Medicaid managed care services to a fee for service model. Ultimately, this bill was decided outside of legislation, however, the agreement reached will help more children access a Medicaid pediatric dentist or school-based preventive dental care. To further monitor the issue, Sen. Escamilla (D-Salt Lake City) sponsored intent language that directs the Department of Health to investigate pediatric dental care access issues kids enrolled in Medicaid may experience (SB 2).

## Immunization

Rep. Thurston's (R- Provo) bill HB 308 which will strengthen protections for Utah students against disease outbreaks and standardize vaccination exemption requirements and procedures, creating an online education module for those seeking an exemption.

## Suicide Prevention

Lawmakers took several key steps toward addressing bullying, student safety and teen suicide in Utah. Sen. Escamilla (D-Salt Lake City) sponsored SB 161, which strengthens school anti-bullying policies, and gives parents and school staff greater ability to address anti-bullying behavior.

Rep. Eliason (R-Sandy), who was also the floor sponsor for SB 161, sponsored HB 223 which establishes a suicide prevention education program, including firearm safety curriculum to be made available in schools.

A big win this session for Utah kids is the repeal of the so-called "No Promo Homo" in SB 196. Previously schools were not allowed to discuss homosexuality in the classroom and curricula. This harmful and discriminatory policy was repealed thanks

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to the efforts of Sen. Stuart Adams (R-Layton), champions at Equality Utah and others for create a safer, creating more inclusive environment for Utah kids.

## Juvenile Justice

For the last year, the state policy makers have been grappling with how to make Utah's juvenile justice system work better for kids and our community. With the help of the Pew Charitable Trusts, a workgroup made up of key stakeholders—judges, mental health providers, police officers, school officials, prosecutors, and juvenile defense attorneys—made a number of strong recommendations including:

- Keeping kids out of court for low-level status offenses like truancy.
- Bringing much-needed structure to the sentencing process in the juvenile justice system.
- Ensuring that kids don't spend time in detention just because they can't pay restitutions and fines.
- Creating specific performance requirements for community placement programs.
- Ensuring that children have their constitutionally guaranteed right to counsel.

HB 239, Juvenile Justice Amendments, sponsored by Rep. Lowry Snow (R-St. George), incorporated many of these recommendations and received near unanimous support this legislative session. The bill that finally will bring much-needed structure to juvenile sentencing, and require important training for system workers. However, the legislature failed to provide sufficient funding to ensure kids have access to community-based and school-based interventions that offer more opportunities for positive change and that Utah is meeting its constitutional obligation that kids have legal representation.

The passage of SB 134, Indigent Defense Commission Amendments, sponsored by Sen. Todd Weiler (R-Salt Lake), may provide a forum to address the lack of legal representation for kids involved in juvenile justice system by expanding Utah's Indigent Defense Commission's mission to include looking at how Utah will protect children's Sixth Amendment rights, not just adults.

## Public Education

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For decades Utah has languished at the bottom in terms of state investment in our kids. While big reforms inspired by the Our Schools Now initiative did not make it through in 2017 (The Our Schools Now ballot initiative, however, remains very much alive), the legislature did take a number of positive steps.

As a result of higher-than-expected revenue projections, the Public Education Appropriations Subcommittee recommended a 3 percent increase to the value of the weighted pupil unit (WPU) — the basic unit of education funding — as well as \$68 million for new growth in the state's public education system.

HB 168 (Rep. Lowry Snow, R-St. George) appropriates just under \$3 million in TANF funds to help schools establish kindergarten supplemental enrichment programs (extended-day kindergarten). Schools with at least 10 percent of their students experiencing intergenerational poverty will receive first priority for funding, followed by schools in which 50 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The bill also directs the State Board of Education to develop kindergarten entry and exit assessments to be used in conjunction with these programs.

HB 212 (Rep. Mike Winder, R-West Valley) provides bonuses for teachers working in high-poverty schools who have a 70 percent median growth percentile or higher (as determined by SAGE scores). The state and the school district will each provide half of the bonus funds. While there are concerns about the limitations imposed as a result of using SAGE scores as the sole determinant, it is nonetheless a good step toward incentivizing highly effective educators who work in high-need schools. The bill passed the Senate unanimously and now goes to the Governor.

SB 34 (Sen. Ann Millner, R-Ogden) authorizes the State Board of Education to reimburse a local education agency that provides competency-based education for a student who graduates early. In the past, school districts and LEAs lost the remaining per-pupil funding each time a student graduated before the end of their senior year. The bill passed the House unanimously and now goes to Governor Herbert.

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**March 30, 2017 is [Love UT](#)**

**[Give UT!](#)**

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It's a day for Utahns to give to the nonprofits that make Utah special. Every donation to Voices for Utah Children through [Love UT Give UT](#) gives Voices a chance to win matching grants and prizes—and gives you a chance to win a car!

**And you don't have to wait! Donate now at <http://bit.ly/loveUTchildren>.**

For 30 years now, Voices for Utah Children has called on our state, federal and local leaders to put children's needs first. But the work is not done. The children of 30 years ago now have children of their own. Too many of these children are growing up in poverty, without access to healthcare or quality educational opportunities.

**How can you be involved?**

[Make a tax-deductible donation](#) to Voices for Utah Children—or [join our Network](#) with a monthly donation of \$20 or more. Network membership includes complimentary admission to Network events with food, socializing, and opportunity to meet child

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advocacy experts. And don't forget to [join our listserv](#) to stay informed!

We look forward to the future of Voices for Utah Children and we hope you will be a part of our next 30 years.

*Special thanks to American Express for sponsoring our 30th Anniversary Year.*

