

# Deseret News

## Senate GOP rejects preschool bill that would have set public-private partnerships

By Benjamin Wood , Deseret News

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Tayden Larsen and Kylee Stauffer work on water color paintings in Aubrey Katyryniuk's preschool [class](#) Monday, March 4, 2013 at Calvin Smith Elementary school in Taylorsville. (Scott G Winterton, Deseret News)

SALT LAKE CITY — Sen. Aaron Osmond, R-South Jordan, said he worked for more than a year on [SB71](#), a bill targeting Utah's educational achievement gap by expanding high-quality [public preschool](#) paid for through private investments.

Osmond met with educators and community advocates, gaining the support of the Utah Education Association, Parent Teacher Association, State Office of Education, United Way and other stakeholders while also collecting \$10 million in commitments from the private sector.

But he did not gain the support of his Republican colleagues in the Senate. On Tuesday, distaste for public preschool and skepticism over the lasting efficacy of early intervention resulted in an 11-17 defeat of the bill, mostly along party lines.

SB71 would have created a system of public-private partnerships in which investors would contribute the money necessary to expand high-quality preschool programs for at-risk children. The investors would receive [tax incentives](#), but would also invest with the understanding that their funds would be repaid with interest if the programs were successful in improving student performance and resulting in cost savings to the state.

"Yes, it's out of the box," Osmond said of his bill. "It's time for us to think outside the box in order to expand the funding necessary."

He frequently gave the example of Granite School District's preschool program, which since 2006 has successfully set hundreds of at-risk students on a path of grade-level achievement while saving \$1.8 million in special education costs.

Presenting SB71, Osmond recognized the philosophical divisiveness of his bill's subject. He emphasized that he was personally opposed to universal preschool and urged his colleagues to judge the legislation based on available research that shows the benefit of [early childhood education](#) to the low-income and English language learners populations.

"Let's be data driven, not fear driven, not perception driven," Osmond said. "Let's talk about the facts and make a decision on the facts."

Only 47 percent of English language learners graduated from high school in 2012, according to the State Office of Education. Low-income students show a graduation rate of 67 percent.

In 2011, the most recent year for which national data is available, Utah's 57 percent Hispanic graduation rate was the fourth worst in the country.

Minority students now account for 23 percent of the state's student population, and that number is growing at more than double the rate of the state as a whole, according to the most recent population figures by the State Office of Education.

Sen. Pat Jones, D-Holladay, said she has received numerous emails from constituents both in support and opposition to the preschool bill, including one she described as offensive that suggested the bill was little more than a way for illegal immigrants to obtain free [day care](#).

Jones said she supported the bill because it was an investment into the children who would one day be Utah's teachers, doctors, lawyers and truck drivers.

"What we're doing here is trying to close the achievement gaps," she said. "Our economy will not grow if we don't pay attention to this natural resource of ours — our children."

But other lawmakers see the achievement gaps differently. Sen. Margaret Dayton, R-Orem, said students should be allowed to learn at their own pace and added that gaps could hypothetically be closed by bringing down the well-performing students.

"It makes me very uncomfortable to hear about closing the achievement gap," Dayton said. "I don't think that is a noble goal."

Sen. Daniel Thatcher, R-West Valley City, one of only five Republicans — in addition to Osmond — who voted in favor of the bill, expressed some of the conflict he felt toward SB71.

Thatcher said he was conceptually opposed to universal preschool and concerned about whether the benefits of such programs could be sustained throughout a child's educational career. But he also said that too many of Utah's children, particularly English language learners, struggle to even comprehend their teachers, let alone excel academically.

"This is one of those difficult bills where both sides are right," Thatcher said. "We can't be surprised that these children are failing to achieve when they can not understand the classroom they're in."

Osmond was adamant that the bill would create only voluntary preschool programs and would not interfere with the role of parents. The bill's language included limits to the number of hours per week children could be in preschool, required parents to volunteer in their child's school in order to participate in the programs, and also included an at-home technology learning option.

He said most white, middle-class students are adequately prepared for school at home by their parents, but for a growing number of Utah's increasingly diverse population, targeted educational services in the early years can make a dramatic impact in a child's life.

"This isn't an alternate to parents. This isn't about taking kids away from their parents," Osmond said. "This is about enabling parents with some tools to help their students."

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