

Education

Focus Group Snapshot

The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute and the Hinckley Institute of Politics, in partnership with Deseret News and KSL, convened focus groups in April and May 2016 to identify important issues and policy options on the minds of the public and policy experts. While not representative of all voters, this qualitative research provides guidance to candidates and a deeper understanding of specific issues on people's minds. This snapshot, which is a collaboration with the Utah Education Policy Center, provides the results of these focus groups and serves as a guide to candidates on sentiments regarding education policy.

Summary

Participants emphasized the importance of education as a preeminent policy issue in Utah. They discussed early childhood education, Utah's teaching workforce, and postsecondary education. Participants expressed support for early childhood education and recognized it as an important foundation for students' success. Most advocated for increased support of both preschool and full-day kindergarten, especially for those students who lack access to these opportunities. Participants spent time discussing

the important, yet sometimes underappreciated, job of being a teacher. They worried about the viability of a future teaching workforce, and favored increased support of teachers. Participants recognized the value of postsecondary education and training, and emphasized the need to further address issues of affordability and accessibility. They also suggested that conversations with students begin sooner to help them understand their postsecondary education options.

INFORMED DECISIONS | 2016

The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute and Hinckley Institute of Politics, in partnership with the Deseret News and KSL, are pleased to present INFORMED DECISIONS 2016, a series of election products and events that will help voters make informed choices in 2016.

This year promises to be a banner election year in Utah. The state will elect a governor, four U.S. congressmen/women, a U.S. senator, and nearly 90 percent of the Utah Legislature, as well as many other state and local officials. INFORMED DECISIONS 2016 will help voters navigate this important election year with analysis of critical issues impacting our state. It will also provide candidates with an opportunity to explain their views on these and other issues.

Major components of INFORMED DECISIONS 2016

Focus Groups

The Gardner Policy Institute convened focus groups drawn from the general public and issue experts in urban and rural Utah to identify important issues and potential policy options. These snapshots provide a summary of the focus group discussions.

Election Briefs

Analysts from the Gardner Policy Institute, Hinckley Institute, and the Utah Education Policy Center will prepare policy briefs on the major issues identified in the focus groups. These briefs will include information on why the issue is important, an analysis of key topics, and potential policy options for consideration. Election Briefs will be released in August and September 2016.

Candidate Conversations

The Hinckley Institute, in collaboration with our media partners at the Deseret News and KSL, will lead a series of Candidate Conversations on targeted races. These forums will be hosted "town-hall style," similar to the CNN Town Hall format hosted by Anderson Cooper in the presidential elections. The majority of these Candidate Conversations will be hosted at the historic Wall Mansion on South Temple Street. The first of these conversations will be in June 2016 prior to the primary election. Later conversations will follow in October 2016.

Education

THEMES AND SENTIMENTS

The comments made by participants can be grouped into several themes. The following notes, taken during the focus group proceedings, provide additional detail and color for each theme and provide instructive guidance for candidates.

Theme #1: Early childhood education deserves even more emphasis.

Research has demonstrated that early educational experiences lay the foundation for a child's learning and life successes. The earlier that a child is exposed to positive and quality educational experiences, the stronger the foundation for that child's learning, behavior, and health.

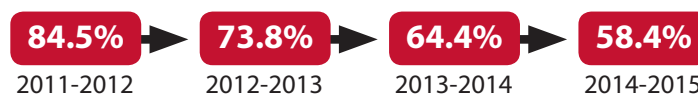
- Early learning opportunities, such as high-quality preschool and all-day kindergarten, are important for the long-term success of children and the state.
- Many participants support state-funded early childhood education, particularly for families who cannot otherwise afford them.
- Participants expressed both the integral role of the family and educational learning opportunities, and how both need to be present to support young children.

Theme #2: Utah's educators should be a higher priority.

Quality educators are a foundational factor for student success. There is concern that qualified Utah teachers are leaving the profession. By the end of their 5th year of employment, a little over 40% of Utah's teachers who were hired in 2010 were no longer teaching in Utah's public school classrooms.

- Participants expressed concern about the negative dialogue and tone surrounding public education and a perceived lack of respect for the teaching profession.

Retention of New Utah Teachers, 2010-11 Cohort



Source: Utah State Board of Education and Utah Education Policy Center

- Participants expressed frustration that teacher pay is too low. Some commented that societies demonstrate what they value by making investments, and that as a state, Utah has not demonstrated that teachers are valued as professionals and educators.
- Teachers need more development and support.
- More emphasis needs to be placed on retaining teachers.
- Increasing demands and challenging working conditions, coupled with the increased focus on accountability, may place blame and inordinate responsibility on teachers.

Theme #3: Information about, and affordability in postsecondary education, matter.

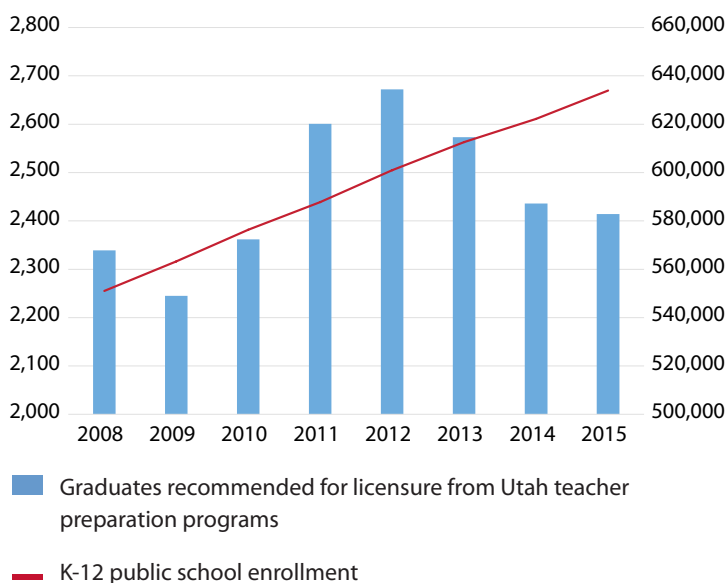
Today's knowledge-based global economy rewards individuals with skills gained through postsecondary education or training. High school graduation alone is no longer sufficient. Completing a certificate or degree can produce numerous benefits, both to the individual and society. While the factors that contribute to access and success in higher education are complex and nuanced, preparing students academically, financially, and with other skills necessary to succeed in college and careers is of critical importance to Utah.

- Families need to have additional information and begin learning earlier about the existing opportunities for scholarships, grants, and funding for college and other postsecondary options.
- Access to postsecondary options is critical, particularly for students and families from underrepresented groups and those who otherwise would not have access to postsecondary opportunities.
- Emphasize and publicize technical and trade options after high school, in addition to the traditional college route.

Theme #4: Additional Educational Priorities

- Focus group participants expressed concerns that the direction from state leadership regarding education is fractured and continually changing, and that there is a need for more stability.
- Increased state funding for education needs to be considered, given the outcomes that most people desire from the education system.
- Utah may need to address inequities of opportunity and prioritize additional funding to schools and students who need additional support to ensure their success.
- Utah has a growing K-12 student population, but there are fewer graduates from the state's teacher preparation programs. This imbalance could affect the availability of teachers in the next few years.

Increasing Imbalance between Student Enrollment and Potential Teachers



Source: Utah State Board of Education and Utah Education Policy Center

SUMMARY OF PROCESS

The Informed Decisions 2016 focus groups included a random draw of the general public, as well as leaders in business, government, and non-profit organizations. Six focus groups were held in April and May 2016. Each group discussed three separate topics: taxes, infrastructure, and education. These topics and their specific questions were chosen and honed as a team effort between the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, the Hinckley Institute of Politics, and the Utah Education Policy Center. The Gardner Policy Institute agreed to keep individual comments made by participants confidential. All participants were responsive, engaged and enjoyed the opportunity to discuss the issues presented.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

The following people participated in Informed Decisions 2016 Focus Groups. In addition, a group of randomly selected members of the public shared their views.

Pamela Atkinson	Luis Garza	Keith McMullin
Jonathan Ball	Pam Graf	Cristina Ortega
Stefanie Bevans	Mike Green	Scott Parson
Mark Bouchard	Andrew Gruber	Tami Pyfer
Becki Bronson	Terry Haven	Christine Redgrave
Anne Burkholder	Kimberly Henrie	Allison Riddle
Carlton Christensen	Robert Hunter	Jonathan Smith
Mike Christensen	Ally Isom	John Valentine
Bill Crim	Stu Jones	Evan Vickers
Wes Curtis	Mike Leavitt, Jr.	Jarett Waite
Phil Dean	Jill Remington Love	Linda Wardell
Sophia DiCaro	Marina Lowe	Thom Williams
Sydnee Dickson	Jennifer Mayer-Glenn	Mayor Maile Wilson