



Kindergarten Through 12-Grade Education

September 26, 2024

Following the pandemic, K-12 education became a top concern of the 2020 Utah Priorities Project. That concern was partially driven by the economic needs of working parents, health risks, and educational challenges.¹ For the 2024 Project, K-12 education has become slightly less important, though it is still on many voters' minds. When considering the quality of Utah's schools, 44% of voters agree that "public schools offer all kids access to an education that will allow them to succeed," while 42% disagree. **When asked about voters' top K-12 concern, one-third of voters pointed to teacher pay as the big issue, while slightly more respondents pointed to "what students are taught in school." Liberal voters tended to focus on pay, while conservative voters were more likely to focus on class content.** The final third of voters were equally divided between class size, the need for counselors and support services, and "other." Yet another challenge faced by the K-12 school system is the changing demographics of the state.

Content in Utah Schools

Many who responded to open-ended Utah Priorities Project questions disparaged the role of critical race theory (CRT) in schools. CRT is an academic and legal idea that argues systemic racism is a fundamental part of American society. It contends that racism is not just about individual prejudices but is also built into laws, policies, and institutions that create and maintain racial inequalities.² While CRT is not a subject taught in Utah schools, it may inform how teachers approach students and the inequities they experience.³

Some educators have also argued that the meaning of CRT has been distorted by the Utah Legislature and the Utah State School Board as a way to disrupt Utah education.⁴ Critics of CRT argue that it places too much emphasis on race and other identity groups to explain widespread disparities, and they question the objectivity of scholars' claims.⁵

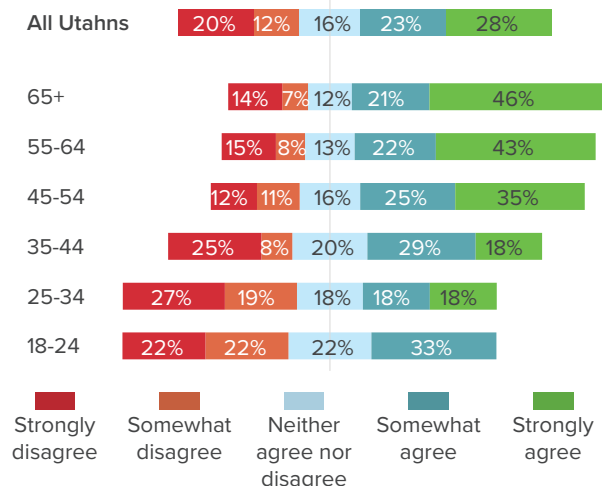
When asked if the way schools are teaching about America's complicated racial history is causing more division than it is creating a deeper understanding of the plight of many Americans, a majority of Utahns agree that it is divisive. Older voters, conservative voters, and voters earning less than \$70,000 are more likely to agree. (See Figure 1).

Another way Utahns are controlling educational content is through a law aimed at removing books containing "sensitive material" from schools and school libraries. A 2022 law deemed any sexual content as inappropriate – banning these books.⁶ The bill altered the existing book evaluation process, which previously considered a book's serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific merit.⁷

In 2024, the issue of book banning resurfaced, whereby if three school districts ban the same book, it becomes banned statewide unless the book is addressed on the Utah State School Board's agenda within 60 days.⁸ Proponents of the bill argue that it protects children from inappropriate and sexual content in school libraries.⁹ Critics contend it promotes censorship and restricts access to diverse ideas and perspectives.¹⁰

Most voters – particularly older generations – agree schools teaching America's complicated racial history is causing division.

Figure 1: "The way schools are teaching about America's complicated racial history is causing more division than it is creating a deeper understanding of the plight of many Americans."



Source: Utah Foundation survey.

Teacher Pay

Nationally, the public school teacher's average salary is about \$70,000.¹¹ The national beginning teacher's average salary was about \$45,000, a nearly 4% increase from the previous year and the largest increase in the last 14 years.¹² However, when adjusted for inflation, average teacher pay has failed to keep up in the last decade. In real terms, teachers are making 5% less than they did ten years ago.¹³ In Utah, the average is about \$63,000 – below the national average with a ranking of 23rd in the nation. Utah's beginning teacher's average salary is about \$50,000, which is above the nation.

Still, Utah ranks highly in retaining teachers compared to other states, with a rate of about 90% over the last five years. However, this rate is lower with early career teachers.¹⁴ Because of early warning signs, the 2024 Utah Legislature passed several bills to intervene. Stipends for Future Educators creates \$8.4 million for eligible student teachers to receive grants.¹⁵ The Mentoring and Supporting Teacher Excellence & Refinement Pilot Program allows seasoned teachers to mentor other teachers while receiving a pay raise.¹⁶ Finally, the Excellence in Education and Leadership Supplement gives the state's top-performing teachers monetary awards.¹⁷

In 2023, the Utah Legislature gave Utah teachers a \$6,000 raise and benefits.¹⁸ This was contingent on the approval of creating the Utah Education Fits All voucher program that provides \$8,000 in scholarships to private school or home school applicants. Educators were unhappy about the two issues being linked, calling it misleading and amounting to a bribe.¹⁹ Some educators have expressed foregoing a pay raise rather than endorsing a voucher program, which they believe could further undermine Utah's already underfunded public education system.²⁰ However, supporters of the program argue that it will not take away money from public schools, instead giving parents flexibility, choice, and resources when it comes to their children's education.²¹

As part of the 2020 Utah Priorities Project, a majority of Utah voters surveyed responded that they were willing to pay more taxes to benefit public schools. In a more specific question in the 2024 Project, 49% of voters were unwilling to pay \$500 more in taxes annually to increase the proportion of good third-grade readers by 10%. It is unclear whether the opinion on the necessity of school funding changed from 2020 to 2024 or whether Utah voters would simply accept the tradeoff if there had been a smaller tax increase.

Demographics and School Closures

A shift in Utah's K-12 population has prompted several school districts to close and shift boundaries. In 2024, the Salt Lake City Board of Education closed four elementary schools at the end of the 2023-24 school year. Similarly, the state's largest district, Alpine School District, has already closed three schools and is considering closing more. The Granite School District has closed four schools and is planning further closures.²²

The decline in district enrollment may be attributed to an increase in private school and charter school options, but the decline in Utah's birthrate is likely the main factor. Research has shown that Utah's total fertility rate is about 42% lower than 50 years ago.²³ In fact, Utah went from having the highest fertility rate in the nation in 2016 to the fourth highest.²⁴ Birthrate projections suggest that school enrollment will decrease by about 40,000 by 2032, not increasing again until about 2036.²⁵

Conversely, some counties in the state, such as Utah, Washington, Cache, and Wasatch counties are expected to see an increase in school-age children over the next 40 years.²⁶ This projected increase is due to overall population growth in certain parts of the state rather than an increase in the proportion of youth.²⁷

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This research brief was written by Research Intern Miamia Natividad with assistance from other Utah Foundation staff.

Endnotes

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