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.
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 success. 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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Retention Rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>84.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

**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**

- Graduates recommended for licensure from Utah teacher preparation programs
- K-12 public school enrollment

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