

## TRANSCRIPT

## Utah Lieutenant Governor Remarks

SPEAKER        Spencer J. Cox  
Lieutenant Governor  
State of Utah

EVENT TITLE    *Every Day Counts Policy Forum: Developing Utah Solutions to Increase Attendance and Improve Student Outcomes*

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JOEL COLEMAN

In order to help support this effort, and to send a message to *all* Utahns, we are honored to have a very dedicated state leader with us here today. Our Lieutenant Governor is Mr. Spencer J. Cox, who is a successful business person, a lawyer, as well as a former mayor, county commissioner, member of the House of Representatives—and those are just some among the many positions that he’s held. So I’m going to read the official bio. He’s probably never heard it before, but this is for all of our benefit.

Spencer J. Cox was appointed Utah’s eighth Lieutenant Governor on October 16, 2013. At the time of his selection by Governor Gary Herbert, he was serving in the Utah Legislature and had previously served as a Sanpete County Commissioner and Mayor of Fairview, Utah. He was Vice President and General Counsel for CentraCom, a full service telecom company with one of the largest fiber optic networks in the state. Formerly, he practiced law with the law firm of Fabian & Clendenin in Salt Lake City. Lieutenant Governor Cox earned an associate’s degree from Snow College, bachelor’s degree in political science and Spanish from Utah State University, and a juris doctor degree from Washington and Lee University. He enjoys camping and hiking with his wife, Abby, and with their four children, and playing the bass guitar with his brother in a local rock band. Welcome, Lieutenant Governor Cox.

**[Applause]**

SPENCER J. COX

I would much rather listen to Joel speak. It’s an honor to be here with you today, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for the generous invitation, and thank you for the great work that you are doing here today. I should apologize first and foremost for having to look at my giant head twice. But I wanted to just briefly share an experience with you. And I come from rural Utah. I was born and raised in Sanpete County. I have returned to rural Utah with my family. I commute 100 miles up and 100 miles back almost every day to the capitol. And when you live in rural Utah, as some of you who grew up there and some of you who may still live there, we

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speak a little differently and sometimes we use colorful language, and so I hope you will forgive this story. But it bears repeating today.

Several years ago, when we moved back to Sanpete County, we got a new principal at our high school. He was not a local. In fact, while he grew up in Utah, he had spent several years in New York and had recently come back. For those of you that have spent time in New York, you realize that there is a lot of energy in New York. And he was a younger principal, not the typical principal that we're used to, and he cared about attendance; he cared significantly about attendance. And the very first back-to-school night, where parents are there, he emphasized the importance of attendance, and he overemphasized the importance of attendance, and he talked about carrots and sticks, and he was animated, and he wanted everyone to know that he believed that children needed to be in school.

And my wife was getting excited. She was really excited about this; we have four young children. And there was an old farmer behind her talking to the old farmer sitting next to him, with their cowboy hats on, and one farmer leaned over to the other and said, "Well, he's an excitable little shit, isn't he?" And we laughed, and that was kind of the mindset; that's kind of what he was up against. And to his credit, he succeeded. And he has gotten buy-in from the people in the community that respect him and respect that vision, and attendance has increased significantly in the school. And so, I'm hoping that we can all be "excitable little shits" when it comes to really focusing on this issue and working together on something that matters.

As policy leaders in the state, we wring our hands and we talk a lot about the importance of education, and matters, and how we're going to change that. And now, we have school grading, and we have all these measurements, and all of these things that are important, because we want to increase outcomes. And yet, it's amazing to me that when we talk about the low-hanging fruit, right, there is this unbelievable correlation. We can have the best teachers in the world, and we can have the best curriculum, and we can have the highest standards, and the most incredible programs, and it doesn't matter at all if kids aren't there. It doesn't matter; it seems so obvious. And it makes so much sense and yet, we're not talking about this very often at a policymaker level. You're talking about it here, and I'm grateful that you are doing that. We need to continue to get this word out to our legislature.

As you know, with the school grading issue—and I won't spend any time on that, I need to get to the resolution or the declaration—but I could spend all morning talking about what an abject failure that effort has been. And so in an effort to try to fix that, Tami Pyfer has been working with the governor, myself, to solve this. And the governor's report card that is going to be coming out—a common sense approach to actually getting information to the people that matter—one of the things that will be on that report card is an absenteeism report for every school. And it will be just a gentle reminder to parents and educators and community leaders about the importance of absenteeism. If we don't know, we can't focus on it, and so I think just getting that information out will help. So thank you for what you are doing.

Let me read the declaration from the governor today. They always make these things so long, but I'm glad I learned how to read, even in Sanpete County.

- Whereas, regular school attendance is essential to successful student achievement and graduation, because teaching and learning are hindered when the student is not present in the classroom;
- Whereas, chronic absenteeism, defined as being absent more than 10% of school days, frequently indicates the student's potential to struggle academically, drop out of school, or engage in delinquent behavior, as well as serves as a sign that something may be disrupting the student's life, providing an opportunity to intervene with counseling or other forms of support;
- Whereas, chronic absenteeism affects all students negatively by reducing instruction time, exacerbating the achievement gap between truant students and their peers, and undermining efforts to improve academically struggling schools;
- Whereas, chronic absenteeism may affect low-income and minority students particularly severely because they are more likely to lack academic and technological resources to compensate for lost time in the classroom and are often challenged with systemic barriers to attending school regularly, such as unreliable transportation, lack of access to health care, or unstable housing or homelessness;
- Whereas, chronic absenteeism can be significantly reduced when schools, parents, and communities work together to monitor and promote regular school attendance and address barriers or issues that contribute to the problem; and
- Whereas the State of Utah encourages efforts to increase public awareness of the importance of students' regular school attendance throughout grades K-12 in order to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed academically;
- Now, therefore, I, Gary R. Herbert, Governor of the State of Utah, do hereby declare September 2014 as School Attendance Awareness Month in Utah. Signed, Gary R. Herbert, Governor of the State of Utah.

Ladies and gentlemen, again, thank you for what you are doing here today. Thank you for the great work you do every day. It's a cliché, but it's not an understatement, to say that our future dramatically depends on everything that you're doing and that you're accomplishing. God bless you in this great work, and please let us know where we can help. Thank you.

**[Applause]**