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Massachusetts kids lead nation in well-being, but even here far too many live in poverty

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Children have a greater opportunity to thrive and succeed in Massachusetts than in any other state, according to the 50-state ranking announced today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT project. Because of our Commonwealth's long record of making effective investments in the education and health of our children, they lead the nation in educational achievement and are less likely to be without health insurance than children in any other state.

Nonetheless, one in seven Massachusetts children lives in poverty. While that's better than the national rate of about one in five, it's not a number to be proud of, and we have much work to do to provide every child with a real opportunity to succeed.

"The investments we have made in our children have helped them to be better prepared to succeed than children anywhere else in America," said **Noah Berger, President of MassBudget, the Massachusetts KIDS COUNT group**. "Yet, far too many of our children are still being left behind. Working together, through our government, we can make sure that all of our kids have access, from their earliest days, to the basic supports they need to thrive."

The report highlights progress we have made in Massachusetts, but also the work still to be done:

- A nation-leading 47 percent of our fourth graders are proficient readers. Unfortunately, that means 53 percent are not. We can give those students a much greater opportunity to succeed by expanding access to high quality early education and strengthening the capacity of our schools in every community.
- Nearly all of our children -- 99 percent -- have access to health insurance. But health challenges remain. For example, our children are about as likely to abuse drugs and alcohol as kids everywhere.
- We have one of the lowest child poverty rates in the country. At the same time, many of our families struggle to pay for basic necessities. Over one-third of our children live in households that struggle to afford housing.

Dismantling the barriers to success that are holding back too many of our children will not be easy. It requires improving our schools and the array of supports our kids need to be ready to thrive in school. It also requires strengthening our systems for supporting the most vulnerable children in the Commonwealth, especially those at risk of abuse and neglect and those involved in our juvenile justice system.

"We can also pursue economic policies that help low-income families earn decent wages and have incomes that let them provide a better life for their children," Berger said. "In the long run, expanding economic opportunity for all of our kids and families is likely the most effective way to build a strong economy that works for everyone."

****SEE FOLLOWING PAGES FOR QUOTES FROM OTHER LEADERS AND EXPERTS****

“Here in the Commonwealth, we have made a strong commitment to the well-being of our children, and this is largely due to our emphasis on education and healthcare. This report shows that these investments have paid off and we remain national leaders in child achievement standards. However, we also have a responsibility to continue finding ways to improve the lives of children and to recognize that their success is absolutely essential for Massachusetts’ success as a whole.”

-Senate President Therese Murray

“Massachusetts has a steadfast tradition of investing in education and health care to ensure that children can grow up to lead fulfilling lives. As we celebrate this distinct honor, we must refocus our attention so that we can continue to improve the circumstances of children and families across the Commonwealth.”

-House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo

"Celebrating what's going right in Massachusetts helps reinforce the importance of making sure these best practices and high achievement rates reach all children and all sectors in our state. The Nurtury is a great example of the good work happening in the Second Suffolk District to invest in children. Many actors have roles to play in further improving the lives of Massachusetts' children. As a legislator, investment in the well-being of children and their families is in the fore of my mind as I have been fighting for priorities like a higher minimum wage, increased funding for early education, asset development programs for parents, and progressive revenue reform."

-State Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz, Co-Chair, Joint Committee on Education

"Being the number one state in education in America is a tremendous accomplishment and cause for much celebration for a job well done but we *can* do better. We can start by investing in early education and care for zero to 5 year olds where it will make the difference between a child being ready to learn or being trapped in the achievement gap before they even start kindergarten."

-Jane Tewksbury, Executive Director, Thrive in 5

“Despite Massachusetts’ number one ranking in education and overall child well-being in the latest Kids Count Data Book, we still have persistent achievement gaps that take root in the early childhood years. We must continue to invest significant resources in high-quality early education if we hope to close the achievement gap and give children in every community the strong start they deserve.”

-Christopher Martes, President and CEO, Strategies for Children

"The Commonwealth's focus and forward-thinking financial investments are paying off for our children. Covering 99% of our children with health insurance as part of our commitment to providing comprehensive, affordable, accessible high quality care for all is unprecedented and unparalleled in the country," said Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Executive Director of Health Care For All. "Yet the Kids Count report also highlights the work yet to do. We must close the gaps for non-English speaking children and for immigrant communities across the Commonwealth. We must uproot the entrenched causes of poverty that make being born in certain zip-codes a health hazard. We must continue to push so that our world class health delivery system to which nearly every child in Massachusetts has access, translates into having the healthiest children in our nation."

-Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Executive Director, Health Care for All

“The continued decline in the teen birth rate in Massachusetts is a testament to the potential of youth, the strength of communities, and the positive investments in teen pregnancy prevention by policymakers. However, the state wide average ignores the inequities in health outcomes for

underprivileged groups in our state. We have a responsibility as a state to structure resources so that they more equitably serve communities and racial/ethnic minorities with teen birth rates well above the state average.”

-Elizabeth Peck, Public Policy Director, Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy

“Reliable access to healthcare helped raise us to first place. In order to stay there, we also need free and universal early childhood education.”

-Philip Edmundson, Chair, Alliance for Business Leadership

"It's wonderful that Massachusetts is doing great things for many of our kids -- now we have to make sure that our outstanding educational and health care systems are available to all the youth in our Commonwealth equally. A large number of the young people who enter our juvenile justice system have unmet educational needs or unaddressed trauma. We need to make investments in these and our other most vulnerable children so that they can reach their potential."

-Naoka Carey, Citizens for Juvenile Justice

“The good news in the Kids Count Data Book is that, in the aggregate, Massachusetts does well by children because we have invested in education and health care. The bad news is that an opportunity gap exists for poor children and children of color—they need early education, small class sizes through the third grade, and learning experiences that support the needs of the whole child. This report demonstrates that government investment of our taxes in children produces results—now is the time to expand that investment to include those who have been left behind.”

-Ann O’Halloran, President, Citizens for Public Schools