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Alabama's National Ranking for Child Well-Being Improves, But is Only Part of the Story

50-State Data Show Child Poverty and Academic Outcomes Reflect Need for Continued Attention and Investments, Annie E. Casey Foundation Finds

Montgomery, Ala. — Alabama's overall child well-being ranking climbed to 39th from 45th compared to last year, according to the **2024 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**. The state's scores improved in each of the report's four domains, but increasing child poverty, low math scores and stagnant reading scores show a continued need for improvement.

The *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* is a 50-state report of recent data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how kids are faring in post-pandemic America. Data from 16 indicators across four domains – economic well-being, education, health and family and community factors – ranks the state by comparing the data produced annually.

[VOICES for Alabama's Children](#) proudly partners with the Annie E. Casey Foundation as its KIDS COUNT grantee in the state.

“The *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* tells two stories regarding Alabama: how the state compares to others and how Alabama compares with itself in year-over-year data and trends,” said [Rhonda Mann, VOICES' executive director](#). “Looking through a national lens, Alabama's rankings are climbing, yet the state's child well-being outcomes still need attention.”

In its 35th year of publication, the *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* focuses on students' lack of basic reading and math skills, a problem that was decades in the making but brought to light by the focus on learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unprecedented drops in learning from 2019 to 2022 amounted to decades of lost progress. Chronic absence has soared, especially with children living in poverty many of whom are unable to resume their school day routines on a regular basis.

Key findings for Alabama from the *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* include:

- **Child poverty increased by 5% from 2019 to 2022, with the state ranking 45th in the nation at 22%.**
- **In 2022, only 19% of Alabama eighth graders scored at or above proficient in math, declining by 3% between 2019 and 2022.**
- **Reading remained the same at 28% for fourth graders scoring at or above proficient in the same time frame, however, Alabama's ranking improved from 47th to 41st. Although Alabama's ranking reflected improvement, it remained steady compared to other states that worsened.**

- **In 2022, 29% of children, a 6% decrease since 2019, lived in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment.**
- **At 3%, Alabama ranked third in the nation in the percentage of children without health insurance coverage.**
- **Alabama improved in all four Family and Community domain indicators, with the largest improvement, a 27% decrease, in children living in high-poverty areas defined as census tracts where the poverty rates of the total population are 30% or more.**

While Alabama’s students, like those in other states, experienced learning loss during the pandemic, Alabama has been recognized as the only state for exceeding pre-pandemic levels of achievement. State education policymakers credit investments in early literacy and numeracy and anticipate that policies including the 2019 Alabama Literacy Act and the 2022 Alabama Numeracy Act will contribute to students’ continued learning improvement. The acts provide local school systems and teachers with additional resources and training to help students struggling to improve math and reading learning. The state must continue investing in these programs to see continued improvement in learning and test scores statewide.

“We are cautiously optimistic about the gains we are seeing in Alabama’s child well-being data. While we cannot deny that many children and families face significant challenges in our state, we know that with investments in effective programs and family supports and resources, the areas needing attention can also improve,” Mann said.

The Casey Foundation report contends that the pandemic is not the sole cause of lower test scores: Educators, researchers, policymakers and employers who track students’ academic readiness have been ringing alarm bells for a long time. U.S. scores in reading and math have barely budged in decades. Compared to peer nations, the United States is not equipping its children with the high-level reading, math and digital problem-solving skills needed for many of today’s fastest-growing occupations in a highly competitive global economy.

This lack of readiness will result in major harm to the nation’s economy and to our youth as they join the workforce. [Up to \\$31 trillion](#) in U.S. economic activity hinges on helping young people overcome learning loss caused by the pandemic. Students who don’t advance beyond lower levels of math are more likely to be [unemployed after high school](#). One analysis calculates the drop in math scores between 2019 and 2022 will [reduce lifetime earnings](#) by 1.6% for 48 million pandemic-era students, for a total of \$900 billion in lost income.

Some states have [delayed spending their share of the \\$190 billion critical federal pandemic funding](#) (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief, or ESSER) that could help boost achievement. The deadline to allocate – not spend – this funding is September 30, 2024. Tens of billions of dollars set aside for schools will vanish forever if states do not act immediately. However, Alabama has invested nearly all its available ESSER funds in programs that provide additional learning opportunities for students, particularly in reading and math. The Alabama State Department of Education has allocated the state’s remaining ESSER funds to support the Summer Reading and Math Camps created by the Literacy and Numeracy Acts mentioned previously.

The Foundation recommends the following:

- **To get kids back on track, we must make sure they arrive at the classroom ready to learn by ensuring access to low- or no-cost meals, a reliable internet connection, a place to study and time with friends, teachers and counselors.**

- **Expand access to intensive tutoring** for students who are behind in their classes and missing academic milestones. Research has shown the [most effective tutoring](#) is in person, high dosage and tied directly to the school.
- **States should take advantage of all their allocated pandemic relief funding to prioritize the social, emotional, academic and physical well-being of students.** As long as funds are obligated by the Sept. 30 deadline, states should have [two more full years to spend them](#).
- **States and school systems should address chronic absence, so more students return to learn.** While few states gather and report chronic absence data by grade, [all of them should](#). Improving attendance tracking and data will inform future decision-making. Lawmakers should embrace [positive approaches](#) rather than criminalizing students or parents due to attendance challenges, because they may not understand the consequences of even a few days missed.
- **Policymakers should invest in community schools**, public schools that provide wraparound support to kids and families. Natural homes for tutoring, mental health support, nutritional aid and other services, community schools use innovative and creative programs to [support young learners](#) and encourage parent engagement, which leads to [better outcomes for kids](#).

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RELEASE INFORMATION

The *2024 KIDS COUNT® Data Book* will be available at www.aecf.org. Additional information is available at www.aecf.org/databook. Journalists interested in creating maps, graphs and rankings in stories about the *Data Book* can use the KIDS COUNT Data Center at datacenter.aecf.org.

ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's young people by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit www.aecf.org. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The data show Alabama leaders must do more to prepare children to learn so they are ready to earn when they reach adulthood. At stake nationally: hundreds of billions of dollars in future earnings and trillions of dollars in lost economic activity.

Moreover, state averages mask disparities that affect students of color, kids in immigrant families and children from low-income families or attending low-income schools.