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Oregon's Children are 12th Nationally in Health, but 43d in Education

Annie E Casey's 2024 KIDS COUNT Data Book Reveals Urgent Need for Lawmakers to Bridge the Gap and Ensure Equitable Opportunities for All Oregon Children

Portland, Oregon — Oregon ranks 26th in overall child well-being, according to the *2024 KIDS COUNT® Data Book*, a 50-state data report developed by Annie E. Casey Foundation. The Data Book measures how children and youth are faring from year to year. The 2024 data show that while Oregon performs well in Health (12th) and Family and Community (16th) indicators, the state falls short in Education (43rd) and Economic Well-Being (29th). This is a major opportunity for Oregon leaders to prioritize addressing the significant gaps in educational outcomes and ensure Oregon's children are prepared to learn and succeed when they reach adulthood. At stake nationally are hundreds of billions of dollars in future earnings and trillions of dollars in lost economic activity.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated Oregon's educational challenges, with absenteeism rates rising by 10% since the pandemic began in 2020. In the 2022 school year, a staggering 42% of Oregon students were chronically absent. This number is even higher for students from underserved communities of color, at 45%. The high rates of absenteeism in Oregon are a result of the shortfalls in the state's education system and the lack of support for families facing significant barriers to their children's regular attendance at school. These challenges include a lack of access to reliable transportation, unstable housing, food insecurity, overcrowded classes, and the lack of updated school infrastructure. Addressing these systemic issues is crucial to improving educational outcomes and ensuring that all Oregon children have the opportunity to thrive. As the data from the *2024 KIDS COUNT® Data Book* makes clear, Oregon leaders must do more to support families and remove barriers to education, or risk hundreds of billions of dollars in future earnings and trillions of dollars in lost economic activity.

"Oregon's rankings in the 2024 KIDS COUNT® Data Book underscore the urgent need for our state to prioritize education and ensure equitable opportunities for all children," said Ivy Major-McDowall, Director, Policy and Advocacy of Our Children Oregon, Oregon's member of the KIDS COUNT network. "While we celebrate the strong performance in health and family and community indicators, we can't ignore the glaring disparities in educational outcomes. We call on state leaders to invest in the policies and programs that will bridge these gaps and provide every Oregon child with the opportunity to thrive in school and beyond."

In its 35th year of publication, the *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* focuses on students' lack of basic reading and math skills, a problem decades in the making but brought to light by the focus on the learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Unprecedented drops in learning from 2019 to 2022 amounted to decades of lost progress.

Each year, the *Data Book* presents national and state data from 16 indicators in four domains — economic well-being, education, health, and family and community factors — and ranks the states according to how children are faring overall.

Key findings from the 2021-2022 school year include:

- A staggering 72% of Oregon fourth-graders were reading below proficiency in 2022, a notable

increase from 66% in 2019.

- 78% of Oregon eighth-graders scored below proficiency in math in 2022, a worrisome jump from 69% in 2019.

Beyond academic performance, Oregon children face challenges that impact their ability to succeed in school:

- 40% of children experienced one or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) from 2021-2022. ACEs, such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, which can have long-lasting effects on a child's mental health, behavior, and learning.
- 42% of children were chronically absent from school during the 2021-2022 school year. Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of school days, is a key predictor of academic struggles and dropout rates.

The figures paint a troubling picture of the state of education and child well-being in Oregon. The COVID-19 pandemic has likely expanded these challenges, but the trends suggest that Oregon's children were facing significant barriers to success even before the pandemic disrupted lives and learning.

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. While specific data on these disparities in Oregon is not currently available, national trends suggest that these student populations often face even greater obstacles to educational success and are more likely to experience ACEs often resulting in chronic absenteeism.

"It's important to remember that these numbers reflect the real lives and real experiences of our children and youth. Oregon's education system is faltering and our kids are bearing the weight of a system in need of radical transparency, statewide accountability metrics, and modernized funding distribution formulas. We are calling on the Oregon Department of Education to act with urgency, and with resolve, to address these critical systemic issues. At Our Children Oregon we know that when Oregonians decide to lean in to improve the lives of kids—we can and we must!"

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.

The Federal government infused \$1.6 billion dollars of (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief, or ESSER) to help boost achievement in Oregon as they did across the nation. However with little more than 6 months left to use this resource, most of it has been spent in Oregon, with very few results. This disheartening fact ties to Oregon's overall lack of oversight and accountability for data driven results in how the 197 school districts chose to utilize this vital resource.¹

The Annie E Casey 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.

¹ Source article:

<https://www.oregonlive.com/education/2024/02/students-nationwide-have-rebounded-after-pandemic-but-not-in-oregon-consequences-could-be-severe.html>