

## 2024 KIDS COUNT Data Book

### State Press Release



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### **Significant Academic Proficiency Gaps Persist Among Economically Disadvantaged Students in Puerto Rico**

*Chronic absenteeism is also higher on low-income students, proving that we must ensure kids arrive at the schoolhouse door equipped to learn – because children’s academic success depends on more than what happens in the classroom.*

**San Juan, Puerto Rico** — The latest results from the standardized tests META 2022-2023 highlight substantial academic proficiency gaps between students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers in Puerto Rico. The data reveals troubling disparities across all the tested subjects, underscoring the urgent need to address these disparities immediately.

In the subject of Spanish, only 34% of students with an economically disadvantaged background achieved proficiency, compared to 49% of their peers with a more affluent background. This pattern goes along for Math with 22% and 28%. The gap widens further in English, where only 30% of the low-income students achieved proficiency, in stark contrast to 50% of students with a higher income above poverty levels. While in sciences, under half the students on both income levels reached the level of proficiency, 36% of students with low income and 48% of the students above.

Furthermore, Puerto Rico remains in the lowest position nationwide for math proficiency, as <.5% of 4th graders achieved proficient or advanced levels in this test. This percentage reflects the results from a sample of public-school students within the Puerto Rico Department of Education who participated in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests.

"Children in Puerto Rico are facing terrible odds for economic upward mobility. Six out of ten live in poverty, 39% are not enrolled in pre-school, and <.5% of students in 4th grade achieve a proficient or advanced academic level in math. The future success of Puerto Rico rests on these children, a group that has reduced in population size by almost half since the 2000s. The data shows that we are not doing enough to open opportunities for these children and their families," said Brayan L. Rosa-Rodríguez, Executive Director of the Instituto del Desarrollo de la Juventud and a member of the Kids Count Network in Puerto Rico.

Rosa-Rodríguez added that the "data collected by the IDJ, as the Puerto Rico Kids Count Partner, is crucial to develop a strategy that addresses the most pressing issues impacting children and their families. Our call is for elected officials, government leaders and the private sector to make the smart choice: invest in families with children. We cannot construct an economic future without guaranteeing the success of these children and the

moment to act is now. We are available to help to lay out a policy agenda that provides concrete steps that can reduce child poverty, increase opportunities for economic mobility, and foster the creation of good jobs.”

Key findings from the most recent school year include:

- The percentage of children aged 3 through 4 who are not enrolled in pre-school education has increased in the last ten years. Even though a decrease of 13 percentage points is observed from 2021 to 2022, this indicator increased 3 percentage points from 38% to 41% in the last ten years. Despite this, Puerto Rico is in better condition when compared to other jurisdictions. The District of Columbia ranked best in this with 22% while in North Dakota a staggering 70% of the young children are not enrolled in pre-school education.
- In the 2023 and 2022 school years, 48% or 255,000 students enrolled in public school experienced chronic absenteeism. 51% and 67% with economic disadvantage and 34% and 54% without economic disadvantage respectively.
- Puerto Rico fourth grade students ranked the worst position in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments in mathematics, compared with the national average and other jurisdictions, where <0.5% students at or above the level of proficiency. The average score of fourth grade students in Puerto Rico was 57 points lower than the national average with 178.

This lack of readiness and the constant threats experienced by our children in the last few years can persist into adulthood, representing a major harm to our youth as they join the workforce and to our overall well-being. Students who do not 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.

**Taking into consideration these facts, the Instituto del Desarrollo de la Juventud recommends acting towards to:**

- Ensure access to preschool development and education programs.
  - In collaboration with The Administration for the Care and Comprehensive Development of Children (ACUDEN) we are exploring deserted areas of preschool and childcare services. This analysis aims to identify the areas most needed and potential barriers to access.
- Analyze the impact of the extended-hour programs in public schools.
  - The Extended Academic Reinforcement (RAE) program is in over 600 schools and 78,000 or 31% of students participate in the program. Nonetheless, there’s no public information on this program’s progress or whether it has reached its participation goals.
  - We recommend detailing impact indicators on participation and academic performance, to analyze barriers and challenges that allow optimizing the service model. Finally, we recommend a planning process to identify recurring funds and possible partnerships with non-profit organizations to ensure continuity, quality, and to widen its reach.
- Implement a two generational approach in public school’s services.
  - These models impact the whole family. Many families face multiple barriers to employment, such as lack of transportation, childcare, or post-secondary education, which affect children. Puerto Rico’s public schools are an ideal environment for implementing bi-generational models because 80% of the students they serve come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, making the school community conducive to functioning as the epicenter of service provision.
  - In collaboration with the Department of Education, we’ve presented a diagnosis for implementing a pilot program in five schools through the Family Support Centers.

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**About the Instituto del Desarrollo de la Juventud**

The IDJ promotes research and public policies to strengthen the economic security of families with children and youth to reduce child poverty in Puerto Rico. IDJ boosts change by developing evidence-based public policy recommendations, empowering those affected to participate in the decision-making process, and fostering alliances. Also, by conducting research that deepens understanding of the problem to forge solutions and disseminating data to increase general knowledge about the challenges children and youth in poverty face in Puerto Rico.

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