EVERY TEXAN

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28% Chronic Absence Rate, Drop in Test Scores: Texas Ranks 43rd in *2024 KIDS COUNT Data Book* as Every Texan Urges Focus on Equipping Kids to Learn

50-State Data Show Academic Outcomes, Absence are Linked to Poverty, Trauma; Policymakers Must Act to Promote Kids' Future Success, Annie E. Casey Foundation Finds.

AUSTIN, TEXAS — Once again, Texas is among the lowest-ranked states for overall child well-being, ranking 43rd among all states in the nation and 48th for children's health alone, according to the ***2024 KIDS COUNT® Data Book***, a 50-state report of recent data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how kids are faring in post-pandemic America. The data shows Texas 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.

In Texas, the future economic success of the state hinges on the well-being of its children and youth. However, alarming statistics from the 2024 *Data Book* underscore significant barriers hindering their development. Shockingly, 42% of all Texas children experienced one or more adverse childhood experiences during the 2021-2022 school year, with Hispanic or Latino children bearing a disproportionately high burden. These findings reflect a broader trend, with Texas ranking 48th in children's health nationwide, painting a stark picture of the challenges ahead.

"These findings show just how important it is for us to work together at both the state and local levels to address the complex challenges our children face. If we don't act now, the future prosperity of our state is at stake," said Marisa Bono, CEO of Every Texan, which is the state's member of the KIDS COUNT network.

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 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, with children living in poverty especially unable to resume their school day routines on a regular basis.

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 2024 Data Book include:

- Family and Community Factors: Texas ranks 47th. This domain includes data on teen birth rates, neighborhood poverty, households without a high school diploma, and number of children in single parent households.
- Economic well-being context: Texas ranks 41st. This domain considers children living in poverty, children in families where adults don't have a full-time job, and percentage of children in households that spend more than 30% of their income on housing, among other indicators.

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

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.

However, 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. **In Texas, as of March 2024, 15% of statewide ESSER funds remained unspent.** 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.

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.

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 EVERY TEXAN

At Every Texan we believe social justice requires public policy. We strengthen public policy to expand opportunity and equity for Texas of all backgrounds. https://everytexan.org/

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