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2024 KIDS COUNT Data Book State Press Release

Voices for Utah Children

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Utah Ranks 3rd in the Nation for Child Well-Being According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation 2024 KIDS COUNT Data Book

New data reveal Utah children struggle to attend and achieve at school while living in households with high housing cost burdens.

SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH — Utah ranks third in child well-being, 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. Despite this ranking, the data show our leaders must do more to support Utah children's education for their future success, as well as the future economic success of the state.

In its 35th year of publication, the *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* focuses on students' lack of essential reading and math skills, a problem decade 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 regularly.

Each year, the *Data Book* ranks each state in terms of child well-being based on 16 indicators in four domains: economic well-being, education, health, and family and community factors.

Utah's high overall ranking reflects the dedication of our state educators, administrators, advocates, and parents; these supportive adults believe in Utah children. However, state policymakers and leaders should be concerned with the education markers in this year's National Data Book. In 2022, 63% of Utah's fourth graders were not proficient in reading, an increase from 60% in 2019. The numbers similarly discourage math proficiency: in 2022, 65% of eighth graders were not proficient in math, an increase from 63 % in 2019.

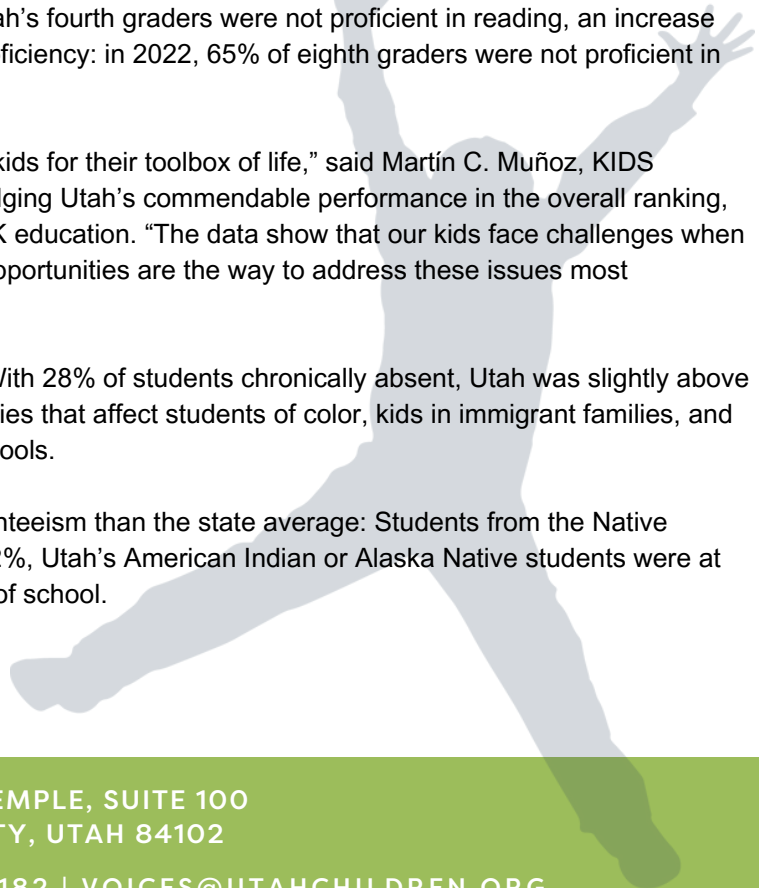
"A quality education is one of the most vital tools we can give kids for their toolbox of life," said Martín C. Muñoz, KIDS COUNT Director at Voices for Utah Children. While acknowledging Utah's commendable performance in the overall ranking, Muñoz emphasized the need for increased investment in pre-K education. "The data show that our kids face challenges when it comes to education attainment; enhanced early education opportunities are the way to address these issues most effectively."

The report also focuses on chronic absenteeism in 2021-22. With 28% of students chronically absent, Utah was slightly above the national average of 30%. But state averages mask disparities that affect students of color, kids in immigrant families, and children from low-income families or attending low-income schools.

Utah's minority youth saw higher percentages of chronic absenteeism than the state average: Students from the Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander communities averaged 52%, Utah's American Indian or Alaska Native students were at 49%, and Latino students at 37%, missing 10% or more days of school.

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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 significantly harm the nation's economy and 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 that 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.

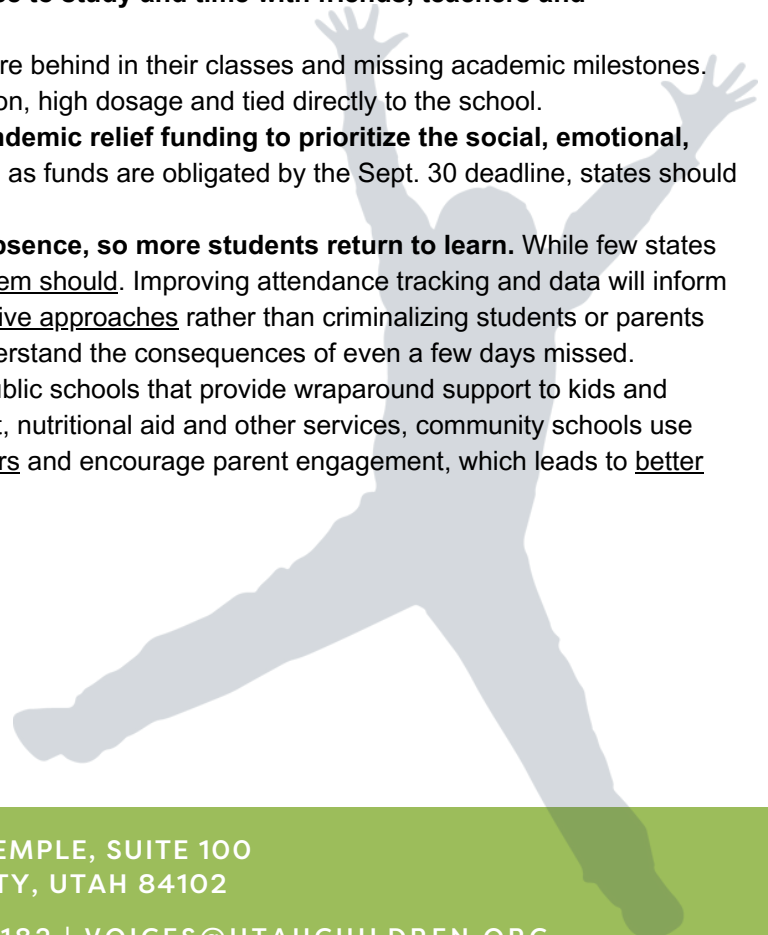
However, some states have delayed spending their share of the \$190 billion critical federal pandemic funding (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief, or ESSER) that could help boost achievement. The deadline to allocate – not spend – this funding is September 30, 2024. Tens of billions of dollars set aside for schools will vanish forever if states do not act immediately. According to the U.S. Department of Education website and FutureEd, Utah was awarded nearly a billion dollars. As of the end of the first quarter of the 2024 calendar year, Utah had spent 77.5% of the funds- this means there is around \$20 million left to be used by September.

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 Voices for Utah Children

Voices for Utah Children advocates and advances policies and practices that are good for all of Utah's children. At Voices for Utah Children, we believe every child deserves the opportunity to reach their full potential. And to achieve this vision, we ensure all kids are ready to learn, and their families are healthy and economically secure. For more information, visit www.utahchildren.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.



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