



UNDER EMBARGO Until June 10, 2024 at 12:01 a.m. ET

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68% of Fourth Graders Scored Below Proficient Reading Level, Drop in Economic Well-Being: Virginia Ranks 16th in 2024 KIDS COUNT Data Book as Voices for Virginia's Children Urges Focus on Equipping Youth to Learn

50-State Data Show Continued Academic Challenges and Startling Drops in Economic Well-Being; Policymakers Must Act to Promote Kids' Future Success, Annie E. Casey Foundation Finds

RICHMOND, VIRGINIA — Virginia ranks 21st in the nation in the percentage of fourth graders below a proficient reading level, 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 Virginia leaders must do more to prepare children to learn so they can thrive on their journey to and in adulthood academically and economically. At stake nationally: hundreds of billions of dollars in future earnings and trillions of dollars in lost economic activity.

Fourth-grade reading proficiency dropped by 10 percent since the pandemic, while eighth-grade math proficiency dropped by 11 percent. According to the **2024 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, 69% of Virginia eighth graders scored below a proficient level in math, an 11 percent drop since before the pandemic. Families across Virginia are also struggling financially: 28% of Virginia's children living in households with a high housing cost burden in 2022.

"Virginia is known as a top state for business, yet we are slipping in our national ranking for the economic well-being of children," said Rachael Deane, Chief Executive Officer of Voices for Virginia's Children, Virginia's member of the KIDS COUNT network. "We know that academic achievement is closely correlated with poverty, and it is troubling to see a decline in academic indicators alongside a decline in indicators of family economic security. Ensuring that all children have the resources to thrive socially and academically must be a paramount concern for Virginia's policymakers."

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:

- 20 percent of all Virginia students were chronically absent (missed 10% or more school days)
- 36 percent of Virginia children had experienced one or more adverse childhood experiences, or ACES

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.

“Kids of all ages and grades must have what they need to learn each day, such as enough food and sleep and a safe way to get to school, as well as the additional resources they might need to perform at their highest potential and thrive, like tutoring and mental health services,” said **Lisa Hamilton, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation**. “Our policies and priorities have not focused on these factors in preparing young people for the economy, short-changing a whole generation.”

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. Nearly a quarter of Virginia’s ESSER funds [were still unspent in April 2024](#). 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](#).

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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 Virginia's Children

[Voices for Virginia's Children](#) is the commonwealth's only independent, multi-issue child policy and advocacy organization. We champion public policies and legislation that achieve positive and equitable outcomes for young people. Learn more at vakids.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.