



UNDER EMBARGO Until June 8, 2026 at 12:01 a.m. ET

Contact: Kristen Kinchla, Research Associate | kkinchla@mekids.org | 508-983-4846

Despite Economic Gains, Maine Children's Education Outcomes Have Declined Sharply Since 2019 — Among the Steepest Drops in the Nation

AUGUSTA, MAINE — Maine families are more economically secure than they were five years ago. Fewer children are living in poverty, more parents have stable employment, and housing costs — while still a burden — have improved relative to other states. But beneath that progress, something troubling is happening: Maine children are less prepared for school and scoring worse on nearly every measure of educational achievement than before the pandemic.

That is the central finding for Maine in the **2026 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, an annual 50-state report released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Maine ranks **21st overall**, above the national average. For the first time, this year's *Data Book* assigns each state a comprehensive score from 0 to 1,000, anchored to 2019 as a pre-pandemic baseline. Unlike rankings, which only show how states compare to each other each year, scores reveal whether outcomes are improving or declining over time — and by how much.

Maine's overall score of 613 sits above the national average of 547, but has **dropped 88 points since 2019**, and two of its four domain scores rank among the largest declines of any state in the country. **The trajectory matters as much as the number: a drop of 88 points in five years is a warning signal.**

"Maine's children deserve to grow up with every advantage — stable homes, strong schools, nutritious food, and adults who are invested in their success," said Kristen Kinchla, Research Associate at Maine Children's Alliance, Maine's member of the Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT network. "This data gives us an idea of where we're succeeding and where we are falling short. Our education results are a call to action. We know how to improve reading outcomes and expand access to early learning — we need a clear policy response and the will to follow through."

Education is Maine's most urgent story. Maine's Education domain score fell **by 224 points since 2019** — the second-largest decline in the country. The data show:

- **74%** of Maine 4th graders scored below proficient in reading — ranking Maine **43rd** nationally in 2024, down from 16th in 2019.
 - In 2019, 64% of 4th graders scored below proficient in reading, better than the national average of 66%. Now, in 2024, this number is 74%, worse than the national average of 70%.

- **75%** of Maine 8th graders scored below proficient in math — ranking **29th** in 2024, falling from **22nd** in 2019
 - In 2019, 66% of 8th graders scored below proficient in math, just better than the national average of 67%. Now, in 2024, this number is 75%, worse than the national average of 73%.
- **60%** of Maine 3- and 4-year-olds are not attending any preschool in 2020–24 — ranking **36th**, and up **7%** since 2015–19
- **12%** of Maine high schoolers are not graduating on time — though this is one bright spot, ranking Maine **18th** and showing an **8% improvement** since 2019

These are not abstract statistics. A child who misses preschool enters kindergarten already behind. A child who cannot read by the end of the 3rd grade is four times more likely to drop out of high school. The scale of Maine's reading and math gaps puts more Maine children at risk of not graduating on time.

Maine's strongest domain is **Family and Community**, where the state ranks **6th** with a score of 833. Key indicators include:

- Only **2%** of Maine children live in high-poverty areas (ranked 6th), down **33%** since 2015–2019
- Only **6%** of children live in households where the head of household lacks a high school diploma (ranked 5th), improved **50%** since 2019
- Maine's teen birth rate is **8 per 1,000** females ages 15–19 (ranked 7th), down **11%** since 2019

These gains are real and meaningful — and they reflect investments in programs that support family stability. But they also underscore a troubling paradox: Maine families are more stable than they were five years ago, yet their children's educational outcomes have moved sharply in the wrong direction.

Maine Children's Alliance urges state lawmakers to treat this data as the call to action it is, and to act across all four areas that shape whether Maine children can thrive:

Education: Early learning is essential public infrastructure — and Maine's 41st-place education ranking shows what happens when it is underfunded and inaccessible.

- **Expand access to high-quality infant and toddler care and universal public pre-K** to ensure more three- and four-year-olds are school-ready by kindergarten
- **Invest in literacy and math supports** through specific programs — e.g., reading coaches, after-school tutoring, evidence-based curricula

Family & Community: Safe, supported families are the foundation of child well-being.

- **Strengthen community-based prevention and family supports** that reduce the need for costly downstream interventions
- **Expand access to mental health and substance use services** for children, youth, and caregivers
- **Adopt policies that decouple poverty from child welfare involvement** — ensuring families get help, not punishment, when they are struggling financially

Health: Too many Maine families — particularly in rural communities and those with children with complex needs — face barriers to preventive, behavioral, oral, and specialty health care.

- **Protect children's health coverage** amid federal funding pressure
- **Reduce administrative barriers** to Medicaid services
- **Strengthen pediatric preventive care**
- **Expand evidence-based mental health and substance use prevention and treatment** for youth

Economic Well-Being: Rising costs for housing, food, childcare, and transportation are pushing stability out of reach for too many Maine families — and economic insecurity is one of the strongest predictors of poor child outcomes.

- **Reduce child poverty** through coordinated statewide action
- **Protect programs** that help families weather hardship
- **Address housing insecurity** through both immediate supports and long-term supply solutions
- **Ensure fair, adequate public revenue** to sustain the systems that children and families rely on

"We know what kids need to grow up healthy and connected so they can thrive as adults: stable homes, strong schools, nutritious food, meaningful relationships, and opportunities to learn, play, and grow," said Ashleigh Barker, Executive Director at the Maine Children's Alliance. "Programs that meet these needs are smart investments — they foster long-term gains, including higher employment, stronger communities, and economic growth for everyone. This data shows where we are falling short. Now we need the political will to respond."

In its **37th year of publication**, the KIDS COUNT Data Book provides reliable statewide data to help leaders see where progress is being made, where greater support is needed, and which strategies are making a difference. Maine Children's Alliance encourages lawmakers and officials to use this information to unite across party lines and respond with meaningful investments in Maine's children.

RELEASE INFORMATION

The *2026 KIDS COUNT Data Book* will be 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 MAINE CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

Maine Children's Alliance is Maine's member of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT network, working to improve the lives of Maine's children and families through research, policy analysis, and advocacy. Learn more at mekids.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.