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NJ Ranks First in Education, 6th Overall in 2026 KIDS COUNT Data Book But More Work Needed on Economic Well-Being

NEWARK, NJ — New Jersey leads the nation in education, ranking first for two consecutive years, according to the **2026 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, a 50-state report of recent data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how kids are faring nationwide. But beneath the high overall ranking lies a sobering reality: the state's children are still falling short of grade-level benchmarks in reading and math and fewer high school students are graduating on time.

For the first time this year, states receive a comprehensive score (from 0 to 1,000) in the *Data Book*, not just a ranking. The scores track 16 indicators in four domains — economic well-being, education, health, and family and community factors — over a five-year period from 2019 to 2024. The new scoring system shows whether policies and public investment are actually improving children's lives, not merely how states compare to each other. **New Jersey** received a score of **715, above** the national score of 547, with high score in health at 776, education at 731, and family and community at 724 and lowest in economic well-being at 629.

The education data reveal a gap between ranking and reality. In 2024, 62% of New Jersey fourth graders were not reading at grade level — a rate unchanged from 2022, and up from 58% in 2019. And although there is marked improvement from the previous year at 67%, 63% of eighth graders scored below proficiency in math. Another concern is the high school graduation rate: 12% of NJ students did not graduate on time in the 2023–2024 school year, compared to 9% in 2018–2019. New Jersey's graduation ranking has dropped from 3rd in the nation to 18th in just five years.

The Garden State ranks 6th overall in child well-being, much higher than its neighboring states of Delaware (#31), New York (#30) and Pennsylvania (#18). However, a closer look also shows that New Jersey is near bottom in the nation at 43rd for housing cost burden with 33% – or 675,000 – children in households that spend more than 30% of their income on housing.

"On the surface, New Jersey children are ahead of many of their peers and ranking first in education is something our state should be proud of. Except a top ranking is only meaningful if it reflects real progress for every child. When nearly two-thirds of our fourth graders cannot read at grade level, and fewer students are finishing high school on time, the number alone is not enough," said Mary Coogan, president and CEO of Advocates for Children of New Jersey, the state's grantee member of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT network. "All children deserve to have their basic needs met and policymakers are accountable for making smart and fair policy choices to ensure they are. If we fail to

provide for our children today, the consequences will ripple for generations — weakening our workforce, driving up public costs, and compromising our shared future."

In its 37th year of publication, the *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* provides reliable statewide numbers to help leaders see where progress is being made, where greater support is needed and which strategies are making a difference. ACNJ encourages lawmakers and officials in New Jersey to use this detailed information to unite across party lines and respond with initiatives that invest in young people. By offering a local road map, the *Data Book* equips policymakers, advocates and communities with the information they need to make decisions that help kids and young people thrive.

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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 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.