

Drugs, health and families: 6 new stats show how children are faring in Idaho

TWIN FALLS — A new national report shows more Idaho children have access to health care, but early childhood education continues to lag.

Overall, Idaho ranks 20th in the nation for how children are faring. That's according to the 2017 KIDS COUNT Data Book, released Tuesday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Here in Idaho, the data is used to monitor progress and areas that need improvement, and to share with state legislators who are making policy decisions that affect children. And it's useful for school districts.

"This kind of data is always helpful for us to have a better understanding of what life is like for our students" and how to better assist them, said Twin Falls School District spokeswoman Eva Craner.

The national report ranks Idaho 11th in the nation for family and community indicators, 14th for economic well-being, 24th for health and 43rd for education.

"Two areas where Idaho does well is family and community, and economic well-being," said Alejandra Cerna Rios, policy analyst for Idaho Voices for Children. "We're sort of middle of the pack in health and we rank 43rd in the nation for education."

Here are six statistics about Idaho children to take away from the report:

Education: Young children not in school

In total, 69 percent of Idaho's 3-and-4-year-olds weren't in preschool from 2013-15 — a much higher rate than the 53 percent nationwide average.

Numbers are getting worse in the Gem State, too: 5 percent more young children aren't in preschool, compared with 2009-10.

One reason for the poor ranking: Idaho is among six U.S. states that don't offer public preschool programs.

"The bottom line is that most other states invest in early education," Cerna said. "Idaho is in a handful of states that don't. We can see the effect of that clearly in the numbers."

Early childhood education advocates say the lack of state-funded preschool is holding Idaho children back. But opponents say it's the responsibility of parents, not the government, to prepare children for school.

State legislators have expressed concerns about the large price tag of implementing a program, and the impact on school facilities and the already-existing teacher shortage.

Across the Gem State, access to quality preschool programs is “quite varied,” Cerna said, and there’s a “ZIP code syndrome” in terms of access, meaning it matters where a child lives.

“There are very good reasons for why early learning investments are critical,” she said. “We know that a child’s brain develops most rapidly between birth and age 5.”

Plus, “we know that early investments provide the most bang for the buck,” Cerna said.

Some research studies show a \$1 investment in early learning can save taxpayers between \$7 and \$13 down the road, she said.

Idaho’s high rate of children not attending preschool isn’t surprising, Craner said, since programs aren’t publicly funded.

The Twin Falls School District offers a couple of preschool programs: a severe needs preschool at Harrison and Pillar Falls elementary schools, and a federally-funded preschool at Oregon Trail Elementary School for migrant students.

And some schools across south-central Idaho — such as Murtaugh — have found ways to pay for a preschool program open to more of their students. But the Twin Falls district would rather see state funding for all-day kindergarten first, Craner said.

Economic well-being: Children living in households with a high housing cost burden

Idaho’s rate was 25 percent in 2015 — a big improvement over its 36 percent rate in 2010. And it’s lower than the current nationwide rate of 33 percent.

“The economic well-being is related a lot to the state coming out of the recession,” Cerna said. “Idaho’s economy has been particularly strong in this area.”

The impact of higher wages and household income, she added, is driving improvements in economic well-being.

Education: High school students not graduating on time

About 21 percent of Idaho’s high school students didn’t graduate on time from 2014-15 — worse than the 17 percent nationwide average.

The statistic is concerning, Craner said. Twin Falls and Canyon Ridge high schools have seen graduation rates between 83 and 95 percent for the past few years.

But the school district’s graduation rate is probably close to the nationwide average if Magic Valley High School, an alternative school, is factored in, Craner said.

“Our high schools work really diligently to keep kids on track throughout their high school year,” she said. Plus, there are “lots of opportunities to get caught up if they fall behind.”

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Times-News

Twin Falls, Idaho

Friday June 16, 2017

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Health: Children without health insurance

Six percent of Idaho children weren't covered by health insurance in 2015 — an improvement compared with 11 percent in 2010.

But the rate is slightly worse than the nationwide average of 5 percent.

“As a state, we made some gains in health care coverage for children,” Cerna said, but added rates vary across different Idaho counties.

“Medicaid has always been a huge asset in covering kids,” she said, noting the Affordable Care Act has made an impact in covering adults. But proposed cuts to Medicaid at the federal level could “threaten the progress we’ve made on insurance for children.”

Health: Teens who abuse alcohol or drugs

There's good news about Idaho teens: the rate who were abusing alcohol or drugs dropped from 8 percent in 2009-10 to 6 percent in 2013-14.

It's only slightly higher than the nationwide average.

Family and community: Children in single-parent families

Idaho's rate of children in a single-parent family — 25 percent — was unchanged in 2015 compared with 2010. And it's significantly lower than the nationwide average of 35 percent.

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