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Until 12:01 a.m. EDT, July 27, 2010

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New National KIDS COUNT Study Shows Georgia Still Unable to Climb out of the Bottom 10 in Child Well-Being

State plateaued prior to recession, but dropout rate is down by half

ATLANTA—Georgia has hit a plateau when it comes to the health, education, and economic security of its children and their families. Unable to climb out of the bottom 10 states, Georgia maintained its national ranking of 42nd in the 2010 *KIDS COUNT Data Book* released today by The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

While trends from 2000 through 2008 show that Georgia improved on five of 10 critical measures that affect child well-being, the state lags behind the national average on all measures and is among the bottom 10 states on three—teens not in school and not working (45th), children living in single-parent families (43rd), and infant mortality rate (42nd).

“We can’t blame these results on the recession,” said Taifa Butler, director of Policy and Communications for Georgia Family Connection Partnership (GaFCP), the Georgia KIDS COUNT grantee. “The rankings in this report do not reflect the current economic recession, which began in late 2008. Failure to execute strategies has stalled progress in the state.”

Georgia remains challenged by mounting unemployment and poverty despite efforts to strengthen the technical college system, adult basic education, and work-ready programs. Although the rate of Georgia’s children living in poverty remained stable, their numbers increased. The poverty rate is expected to climb later this year when the Census Bureau releases more up-to-date statistics that will begin to show the impact of the economic recession and state budget crises’ effect on children.

Another concern in Georgia is a rise in teen deaths. The state’s teen death rate is well above the nation’s rate, slipping in rank from 28th to 33rd on this measure. Virtually all these deaths are preventable. Engaging in risky behavior often plays a role in teen deaths. Motor vehicle accidents are a leading cause of violent teen death.

Georgia continues to fall short in caring for its youngest citizens, trailing the nation in the percentage of low-birthweight (LBW) babies. A long-term increase in LBW reversed in 2007, pushing Georgia from the bottom 10 to 38th.

“We can’t afford to let any of these indicators drop from our radar screen,” said GaFCP Executive Director Gaye Smith. “We’re seeing some of our gains slip away. After a long-term decline, the teen birth rate is on the rise. Teen childbearing is strongly associated with poverty, low birthweight, infant mortality, poor health, and school dropout.”

The good news in Georgia is that more teens have earned a high-school diploma or equivalency. Between 2000 and 2008, Georgia's dropout rate decreased by half for teens ages 16–19.

“The question remains whether Georgia can sustain these improvements with diminishing state revenues and continuing state budget cuts,” said Butler. “Our state's long-term economic growth and development depend on students graduating from high school with the knowledge and skills necessary to enter the workforce and compete in a global economy.”

Though still worse than the national average, Georgia jumped to 36th in the nation on this measure. According to Butler, Georgia is beginning to see a payoff from its investments in improving education outcomes. Georgia is recognized as a leader in implementing a universal quality pre-k program for 4-year-olds, improving standards and curriculum across grades, funding graduation coaches to assist middle and high-school students at risk of academic failure, and forming community school-based initiatives.

“The key to success, sustainability, and moving forward with our gains—even in times of diminishing state revenues and budget cuts,” said Dr. Garry McGiboney, associate superintendent of Innovative Instruction, Georgia Dept. of Education, “is through a comprehensive, collaborative approach where we partner with communities, build a sense of being in this together in good and bad times, direct our passions toward a common goal, pool our resources, and track our progress in moving toward results.”

According to Smith, the recipe for success—even in an economic downturn, is clear. “Effective leadership provides the passion and vision for positive change,” she said. “Collaboration drives the motivation and focus to work in partnership to achieve our common purpose of moving Georgia's children to a brighter future. Our progress depends on our state's ability to create, invest in—and sustain—opportunities for all children to succeed.”

The national 2010 *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, now in its 21st year, is available at: kidscount.org/datacenter/databook.jsp. For interactive statewide Georgia KIDS COUNT data, visit www.gafcp.org/kidscount.

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Georgia Family Connection Partnership (GaFCP) is a public/private partnership created by the State of Georgia and funders from the private sector to assist communities in addressing the serious challenges facing children and families. GaFCP also serves as a resource to state agencies across Georgia that work to improve the conditions of children and families. Georgia KIDS COUNT provides policymakers and citizens with current data they need to make informed decisions regarding priorities, services, and resources that impact Georgia's children, youth, families, and communities. Georgia KIDS COUNT is funded, in part, through a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States.