Alabama moves out of the bottom five in annual KIDS COUNT report on child well-being

MONTGOMERY – We’re not number one, but for the first time since the Annie E. Casey Foundation began publishing the annual KIDS COUNT Data Book over two decades ago, Alabama is not among the bottom five states in overall child well-being. With improvements in health and education, the state has begun to gain momentum that child advocates and industrial recruiters can say point to a better future for the state. The 2013 KIDS COUNT Data Book reports that Alabama now ranks 44th among the 50 states in overall child well-being.

“In the more than 20 editions of the KIDS COUNT Data Book, Alabama has ranked 48th, 47th and 46th several times. While Alabama was making strides to improve child well-being through both policy and programs, other states were as well,” said Linda Tilly, Executive Director of VOICES for Alabama’s Children. “We have made up the ground that had us lagging behind and new momentum is moving us ahead. Child advocates, business leaders, community volunteers and policy makers must all continue to support efforts to sustain that momentum.”

The Data Book looks at four domains of well-being – Health, Education, Economic Well-Being, and Family & Community. Each domain contains four specific measures. Alabama children showed the greatest improvement in the areas of Health and Education.

All four measures of education for the period 2005-2011 indicated progress for Alabama students. Improvements were made in the percentage of 4th graders not proficient in reading, 8th graders not proficient in math, children not attending preschool, and high school students not graduating on time all moved in a positive direction. Alabama virtually equaled the national average on the 4th grade reading measure. That progress is cause for celebration, as research shows that grade-level reading proficiency by at least the end of third grade is critical to comprehending content in all subjects from that point forward. The state also saw a significant increase in the percent of students graduating from high school in four years.

In the health arena, the number of child and teen deaths decreased, likely reflecting efforts by advocates over the last ten years to establish a statewide child death review system, and to implement and strengthen the state’s child passenger safety and graduated teen drivers laws. The number of children without health insurance declined by 38 percent, thanks in great part to outreach efforts by AllKids and Medicaid. The percentage of low birth weight babies also declined. Finally, there was a positive change in the percentage of young people age 12 to 17 that used drugs or alcohol in the past year.

Alabama children continue to progress in education and health but have not fared as well in the measures the Data Book examined in the area of Family & Community. The percentage of children living in high poverty areas increased, often presenting those children with special challenges. Alabama also mirrored the nation in seeing an increase in children in single-parent families.
The economic security of Alabama’s children has fallen short of where it stood before the recession. From roughly 2005 to 2011, the number of children living in poverty increased from 25 percent to 28 percent with 40,000 more children feeling its effects. Research shows that the adverse conditions often experienced from poverty have the greatest effect on young children. The new research and the numbers for the Data Book indicate a need for more programs for poor families with very young children in Alabama. Nationally the teen birth rate dropped by 15 percent to a historic low. In Alabama it declined by 12 percent – good news as each teen birth represents challenges for two children – the mother and the child.

The KIDS COUNT Data Book features the latest data on child well-being for every state, the District of Columbia and the nation. This information is available in the newly redesigned KIDS COUNT Data Center, which also contains the most recent national, state and local data on hundreds of measures of child well-being. Data Center users can create rankings, maps and graphs for use in publications and on websites, and view real-time information on mobile devices.

The Data Book released today reports child well-being for the 50 states. VOICES for Alabama’s Children will release the 2013 Alabama Kids Count Data Book in September with data on child well-being in each of our state’s 67 counties.

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