

# The Boston Globe

## Mass. tops US in study of children's well-being

Advocates hail rank, push to cut some inequalities

By Claire McNeill GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 22, 2014

Young people have a better chance to thrive in Massachusetts than in any other state, according to a national analysis of children's overall well-being.

Nearly all children in the state, 99 percent, have health insurance. Reading and math proficiency rates exceed the national average. About 1 in 7 children live in poverty, compared with about 1 in 5 nationwide, according to the 25th annual Annie E. Casey Foundation "Kids Count" report, released Tuesday.

While praising the results, Governor Deval Patrick said the state's leaders must do more to address systemic inequalities to ensure that opportunity exists for all children.

"The question before the Commonwealth and the country is not what to do; we know what to do," Patrick said at a press conference that highlighted the study results. "The question, I think, is whether we mean what we say, and that is whether we mean that 'all means all.'"

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He added: "There are still too many kids who have not been shown how to look up, rather than down."

Graphic: State rankings

Several other New England states fared well in the rankings. Vermont placed second, with New Hampshire and Connecticut also in the top 10. Mississippi placed last.

The Granite State, which placed fourth, had been atop the report for the past 10 years.

Massachusetts showed improvement in several areas, according to the study.

The state leads the country in education, with 47 percent of fourth-graders proficient in reading, compared with 34 percent nationwide. And 58 percent of the state's children attend preschool, compared with 46 percent across the country.

Still, lawmakers stressed that too many young people in the state are struggling.

“Persistent poverty is a big issue, and at the root of that poverty is education,” Representative Jeffrey Sánchez, a Democrat from Jamaica Plain, said after the press conference at the Nurtury Learning Lab in his district.

Facilities like Nurtury, a new \$17.1 million learning center in the Bromley-Heath public housing development, are crucial in boosting children to higher levels of success, he said.

“Who invests in the projects these days? That’s the problem before us,” Sánchez said at the press conference. “In this community, there’s a level of isolation for so many things. We fight crime. There’s bullets that are going back and forth. . . . We need those investments.”

The report highlights a national poverty gap along racial lines. It said 40 percent of black children and 34 percent of Hispanic children live in poverty, compared with 14 percent of white children.

“It’s wonderful that you all are number one in the country, but when you look at the numbers, I hope it gives you pause, because there’s a lot more work that needs to be done,” said Jann Jackson, a senior associate at the Casey Foundation, criticizing effects of the wealth gap.

Gaps in early language learning create two paths for children, said Christopher Martes, chief executive of Strategies for Children, a Boston-based nonprofit.

“Public schools cannot do this alone,” Martes, a former superintendent, said at the news conference, urging greater investment in early education.

“Expecting elementary schools to catch up every child is not realistic or possible,” he said. “We all have a role to play in this.”

Patrick said that if lawmakers want fairness for all, they must “do the things we know work.”

That means such initiatives as channelling money into public schools, moving children off waiting lists and into early education, and securing more affordable housing. One in three children, the study found, live in households that struggle to afford housing.

Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz, a Democrat from Jamaica Plain, thanked Massachusetts voters and taxpayers for their help in reaching number one.

“You own those results, and I hope that everyone feels very proud,” she said. “The flip side of that is that we also own it when 53 percent of our fourth-graders are not reading at grade level.”

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