

Letter to the Editor: Why the state's ranking shouldn't get you down

Written by Gallupsun Staff
Friday, 23 June 2023 05:13



National KIDS COUNT data book released June 14

Dear Editor,

Sophocles wrote that “no one loves the messenger who brings bad news.” As the KIDS COUNT organization for New Mexico, we have long had the grim task of sharing that our favorite state ranks poorly against the rest of the nation in the KIDS COUNT index of child well-being. Sadly, this year is no exception as New Mexico again ranks last on this 50-state scale.

Although this is hardly happy news, we're here to point out that, while the KIDS COUNT index and data lift up some crucial areas where the state should invest in children, you shouldn't let the ranking get you down.

The KIDS COUNT rankings are only one small part of the story about child well-being. That's because they don't necessarily tell us about the ways in which any state is prioritizing kids in policy or about any improvement in any indicators of child well-being. Alone, they don't tell us how far we've come, and they can't tell us where we should be going. What they tell us is how well each state is doing *in relation to all the others*.

With 50 states all being judged on 16 indicators of child well-being — all of which are contingent on multiple factors — that's a lot of moving parts. If the KIDS COUNT rankings were to judge each state against itself, it would tell you that New Mexico is moving in the right direction and making progress in most of those indicators of child well-being.

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The fact is, New Mexico has made some extraordinary headway in improving opportunities for kids in recent years. Some of it's made national headlines.

Our investments in child care assistance, voter-approved expansion of early childhood services, and child-focused tax policy improvements all received national accolades. These, along with the creation of a statewide paid sick leave policy for all workers, ending of predatory lending, and expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act all help ensure that New Mexico's families have access to the resources we all need to thrive. And these are just some of the highlights.

NM Voices advocated on behalf of all of the above policies, and we did so because we knew they would improve child well-being. And nowhere is that improvement clearer than in the state-specific data. Since 2010, the state has seen improvements of: 20% in child poverty; 38% in high school students not graduating on time; 45% in children without health insurance; and 64% in teen birth rates.

While these improvements show up in the data, they don't yet show up in the 50-state rankings. The rankings are based on data, but the various factors behind each indicator go beyond policies implemented by states. Childhood outcomes in a state are also intrinsically tied to its geography, history, assets, systemic inequities, and various other factors that contribute to a nuanced picture of child well-being that cannot be accurately represented by any one number or ranking.

This is not to say that there's no room for improvement. In fact, New Mexico's children, families, and communities still face a multitude of challenges, many of which must be mediated with the right state policies.

For example, we must continue our investments in early childhood. We must mandate that our K-12 curriculum reflects and validates our diverse child population. We must ensure that our Legislature has the resources it needs — including salaries and staff — that allow a broader segment of residents to serve in elected office.

We must broaden our revenue base to cushion our budget from oil and gas volatility. We must ensure any new revenue comes from the sectors of our society who can afford to take more

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responsibility for supporting the services and infrastructure our people and businesses all rely upon. And we must ensure a just transition toward a greater reliance on renewable energy sources.

While that may seem like a daunting workload, we believe New Mexico not only has the vision and leadership to accomplish it, but also the gumption and the willingness to stick with it. In short, New Mexico has the potential to be the best place in which to raise a child – no matter how we rank against the other states.

Sincerely,

Amber Wallin, MPA, Executive Director at New Mexico Voices for Children