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NEW DATA SHOWS CRITICAL NEED TO INVEST IN CHILDREN'S EARLY YEARS
Gaps in educational opportunity can be closed

SEATTLE – New national data shows that state and federal policies fail to connect thousands of Washington children to the opportunities they need for success in school and in life.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's latest KIDS COUNT® policy report, "The First Eight Years: Giving Kids a Foundation for Lifetime Success," presents a strong case for investing in the early years of a child's life. Decades of brain and child development research show that kids who enter kindergarten with below-average language and cognitive skills can catch up — but only if they are physically healthy and have strong social and emotional skills.

The report details how a child's early development across critical areas of well-being is essential to make the effective transition into elementary school and for long-term school success. According to a newly released analysis of the nationwide Early Childhood Longitudinal study that began to track 13,000 children who were in kindergarten in 1998-99, by third grade, only 36 percent of children were on track in cognitive knowledge and skills, 56 percent in their physical well-being, 70 percent in their social and emotional growth and 74 percent in their level of school engagement.

The analysis shows that just 19 percent of third-graders in families with income below 200 percent of the poverty level and 50 percent of those in families with incomes above that level had developed age-appropriate cognitive skills. This picture is particularly troubling for children of color, with 14 percent of Black children and 19 percent of Latino children on track in cognitive development. Children who don't meet these key developmental milestones often struggle to catch up in school and graduate on time and are less likely to achieve the kind of economic success and stability necessary to support a family themselves.

Washington's student achievement test reveals state-level disparities in academic progress. More than one in three Pacific Islander students (37 percent) were not meeting third-grade reading standards in the 2012-2013 school year, as were 41-47 percent of Black, Latino and American Indian / Alaska Native children. Overall, 27 percent of third-graders scored below reading standards.

Spokane Valley child care provider Nancy Gerber says the early-learning environment a child experiences – whether at home, in a child care setting, or with members of the family – can have a profound effect on the child as well as his or her family and community.

“When kids are prepared to achieve success, everyone benefits,” says Gerber, who currently hosts 12 children in her home-based child care center. “A good, solid early learning foundation needs to be built under every child in the state.”

There are ways to achieve this, by connecting more children to quality early-learning opportunities. Washington’s early learning policy advocates propose:

- Expanding both access to and quality of early learning programs;
- New revenue to fund a continuum of early learning services and programs for children birth to age five;
- Fostering strong partnerships between licensed child care centers, family child care homes and pre-K centers to create more comprehensive, high-quality, culturally competent program options for families; and
- Integrating early learning funding streams through Early Start, a single point-of-entry to our state’s high-quality continuum of early learning services for children from birth to age five.

“The First Eight Years: Giving Kids a Foundation for Lifetime Success” includes data on early childhood development for every state, the District of Columbia and the nation. The report will be available Nov. 4 at 12:01 a.m. EST at www.aecf.org. Additional information is available in the KIDS COUNT Data Center, which also contains the most recent national, state and local data on hundreds of indicators of child well-being. The Data Center allows users to create rankings, maps and graphs for use in publications and on websites, and to view real-time information on mobile devices.

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KIDS COUNT in Washington (www.kidscountwa.org) is a joint effort of the Children's Alliance (www.childrensalliance.org) and the Washington State Budget & Policy Center (www.budgetandpolicy.org), which are working together to pursue measurable improvements in kids’ lives in Washington state.