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# State Kids' Ranking Inches Up

## Decrease in Teen Dropout, Infant Mortality Rates Helps

**BY JUAN CARLOS RODRIGUEZ**

*Journal Staff Writer*

New Mexico rose in the rankings of a national study measuring child well-being, thanks to a decrease in the teen dropout and infant mortality rates.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's annual Kids Count report measures states' performance in 10 categories, including low birth weight, teen death rate and the percentage of children in poverty.

The report said New Mexico is No. 43 in the country, up from a ranking of No. 48 last year. It was New Mexico's highest ranking since 1996, when the state placed 42nd.

The data in this year's report comes from 2006 and 2007.

The category in which New Mexico showed the most improvement was the percentage of high school dropouts, dropping from 16 percent in 2000 to 8 percent in 2007. The Casey Foundation calculates that number by using U.S. census data on how many people ages 16 to 19 are not enrolled in school and have not graduated from high school.

The state Public Education Department cal-

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# N.M.'s 'Kids Count' Ranking Inches Up

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culates the dropout rate differently, based on grade level. The state's 2007 figure for students in grades 9-12 was 5.8 percent. It's most recent figure, for 2008, is 4.9 percent.

But pinning down the state's dropout and graduation rates is a difficult task. The way the rates have been computed over the years varies depends on who's doing the study.

A 2008 report from Education Week, for example, placed the state's graduation rate at 54.1 percent for the class of 2005. A report issued by the national Center for Education Statistics, meanwhile, states that New Mexico's four-year graduation rate for the class of 2005 is 65.4 percent.

The dropout rate is open to interpretation, said state Sen. Eric Griego, D-Albuquerque, executive director of New Mexico Voices for Children, which helps the Casey Foundation with the report.

"It's useful, but I don't think it's the last word on dropout rates," Griego said.

Public Education Secretary Veronica Garcia said while the report is encouraging, there is more work to be done.

"Overall, it persists as a problem and we should not let up on our efforts to do better," Garcia said.

New Mexico's infant mortality rate also declined, and has done so consistently since 2000.

Areas in which New Mexico has been traditionally near the bottom, such as the percentage of children in poverty and teen birth rate, are still weak spots.

The state has fallen further down the list for teen birth rate, from No. 46 in 2000 to

No. 49 in 2007. With 25 percent of children in poverty, New Mexico remains No. 47 in that category.

Griego said the way to improve those numbers is to invest heavily in early childhood education.

"We, as a state, have to really start looking at the first four years," he said.

Griego said states like Illinois and Iowa have increased the amount of spending on early childhood education. He said in New Mexico, where there are about 140,000 children in that age range, the cost of fully funded early childhood services would be \$300 million to \$400 million per year.

He said the state spends about 2 percent, or \$120 million, of its budget on early childhood services, compared with 45 percent, about \$2.8 billion, for K-12 education.

## Good News

- The percentage of teens who are high school dropouts dropped from 16 percent in 2000 to 8 percent in 2007.
- In 2000, the infant mortality rate was 6.6 deaths per 100,000 live births. In 2006, the figure was 5.8.
- The percentage of teens not attending school and not working dropped from 11 percent in 2000 to 8 percent in 2007.
- The teen death rate dropped from 99 deaths per 100,000 teens ages 15-19 in 2000 to 84 in 2006.

## Bad News

- The percentage of children in single-parent homes rose from 33 percent in 2000 to 39 percent in 2007.

- The percentage of low birth weight babies rose from 8 percent in 2000 to 8.9 percent in 2006.

- The child death rate rose from 20 deaths per 100,000 children ages 1-14 in 2000 to 22 in 2006.

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation's annual *Kids Count* report

"It's dismal. It's underfunded," Griego said.

The programs New Mexico does have in place have come under fire from the Legislative Finance Committee, which released a report saying they are poorly coordinated and spend too much on administrative costs.

Seven major preschool programs are available in New Mexico, including federal Head Start, state Head Start and NM Pre-K, the report said.

Those programs cost around \$81.4 million in 2007-08, but about \$4.2 million could have been saved had the state reduced duplicated services and administrative costs, the report said.

It said the Children, Youth and Families and Public Education departments had spent nearly twice as much as they should have on administrative expenses. By law, administrative costs should not exceed 10 percent of a program's budget.

