

Report: Washington, Idaho struggle with early education

Preschool, middle school math and late graduation noted as challenges

- By Shanon Quinn, Daily News staff writer

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Young children not attending preschool, a lack of middle school mathematics proficiency and high school students not graduating on time still top the list of primary education concerns in Washington and Idaho, according to a report released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The 2017 Kids Count Data Report compares issues in economic well-being, education, health and family and community by state and national numbers.

According to the report, Idaho ranks 43rd nationally in quality of education, while Washington sits at 28th.

Regardless of the ranking differences, the states share similar educational challenges.

In 2015 - the most recent year recorded and the basis for the report - 69 percent of preschool age children in Idaho were not receiving early childhood education, up from 64 percent in the academic years 2005-11. In Washington, the incidence of children not

attending early childhood education programs has also risen - 1 percentage point since 2009-11 - to 60 percent.

The national average has also risen, with 53 percent of children nationwide not attending preschool or similar programs, up from 52 percent in 2009-11.

Idaho Voices for Children, which released the state-focused section of the report, called the phenomenon "disappointing" and a "particular area for concern."

"While many states are making prudent investments in early learning, in Idaho we're missing an opportunity to ensure our kids have a strong foundation for future success," IVC director Lauren Necochea said in a statement.

Idaho remains one of seven states - along with Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming - which do not fund preschool, according to the recently released "State of Preschool" report, developed by the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University.

Washington provides state preschool funding but serves 0-10 percent of its preschool age children, according to the NIEEC report.

In Latah County, more than 40 percent of children of preschool age attend early childhood education programs, according to Alejandra Cerna, a policy analyst with the Idaho Center for Fiscal Policy.

Moscow School District Superintendent Greg Bailey agreed with Necochea, saying the state needs to invest more in the education of its children - but not only preschool.

"We're not even taking care of what we already have," he said. "First, the state needs to fund all-day kindergarten and then it can start looking at preschool programs."

MSD already funds all-day kindergarten out of its own budget.

Bailey said he's been impressed with how legislators have worked toward education solutions this year, and appreciates that, but there is more to do.

"Idaho needs to invest in the future," he said.

In the meantime, for parents who are unable to send their children to tuition-based preschools - unless the children have special needs and are therefore eligible for no-cost early education programs through schools - Bailey recommends a three step process for parents who want to give their children that extra leg up.

"The first thing you need to do is read to them," he said.

That's also the second and third things parents should do, Bailey said.

Both states are just slightly better than the national average for eighth-grade proficiency in mathematics. In Idaho, 66 percent, and in Washington, 60 percent of eighth-grade students are not proficient in mathematics. Nationally, 68 percent of eighth-grade students fall short in this area.

According to the report, competence in math is integral to workplace success, with math proficiency leading to increased likelihood of high school graduation, and employability - even for those students who do not go on to earn a higher education degree.

"Ensuring that children have early access to high-quality mathematics education is critical for their success in school and life," according to the report.

According to state-issued school report cards, Moscow is one of many Idaho schools that outperform the state average, with 43 percent of eighth-grade students testing proficient or advanced in math in 2015 and 54.9 percent in the same category in 2015-16.

In Washington, Pullman eighth-graders tested higher than 52 percent proficient in 2016.

Both states continue to wrestle with timely graduation, according to the report, with 21 percent of Idaho students and 22 percent of Washington students not graduating on time, compared to 17 percent nationwide.

Bailey said the question of on-time graduation is not one he agrees with.

No one seems to blink at students spending five or even six years earning a bachelor's degree in college, but it's a different story in high school, he said, noting spending more than four years in high school can negatively affect students' self esteem due to the attitudes about "late" graduation.

"We try to put them all in one mold," he said.

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