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Things looking up for state children

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It sounds like old news, but look again.

Last week, newspaper headlines across the state read: "Alabama ranks 47th in child well-being." Citing evidence in the "2008 Kids Count Data Book," published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the articles focus on the state's overall ranking as compared with other states.

These headlines are familiar. Throughout its 19-year history, Kids Count has tracked the status of children in the U.S. measuring the educational, social and economic and physical well-being, state by state. Alabama's ranking has always hovered in or near the bottom five.

But there is good news. Despite the numbers, Alabama improved or stayed the same in a majority of the 10 indicators making up the ranking. The state grew worse in four areas that also deteriorated nationally. Furthermore, Alabama is undertaking programs in early learning and juvenile justice that, when fully implemented, will improve these rankings in future years.

Research shows high-quality prekindergarten yields academic benefits for children and economic savings for communities. We know that children who have quality early learning experiences are less likely to need special-education placements, grade retention or remedial services. In May, the Office of School Readiness, which oversees Alabama's pre-K program, received an additional \$6.4 million to expand its top-rated pre-K program and reach more children.

Alabama's pre-K program is recognized by the National Institute for Early Education Research as one of only two state pre-K programs in the country meeting all 10 of its quality benchmarks.

To support the work of the Office of School Readiness and expand the quality pre-K programs in Alabama, a group of key individuals and organizations including VOICES for Alabama's Children, has formed a collaborative partnership called the Alabama

School Readiness Alliance. ASRA is working to make pre-K available to all families that want it and to close achievement gaps.

Three separate state juvenile justice initiatives also will make their mark on future Kids Count numbers.

During the regular session of the Alabama Legislature, the Alabama Juvenile Justice Act of 2008 was passed with the intent of providing more appropriate solutions to wholesale, indiscriminate incarceration of juveniles. The new law is designed to reduce the number of children behind bars in Alabama and redirect them to community-based programs. Locking up a young person is an easy, quick fix. Examining undiagnosed mental health issues, family dynamics or abuse takes more time, but in the long run is more beneficial for youths and the state.

In addition to legislative reforms, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is funding significant research-based work in the Jefferson County Family Court and at the Department of Youth Services.

Jefferson County is one of four pilot sites for Casey's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative. With the full endorsement and support of presiding Judge Brian Huff at the Jefferson County Family Court, the initiative has drastically reduced the average daily population of youths in detention from 110 per day to 40. Casey's involvement also has led to an all-encompassing juvenile justice reform project in Jefferson County called Reclaiming Our Youth. Through these reforms, the county has cut by nearly half the number of kids sent to the Department of Youth Services from 48 per month in 2006 to 25 in 2008.

One goal of the reform is to take the money saved from ending the inappropriate incarceration of nonviolent children and divert it to more effective community-based resources, such as outpatient drug treatment, mentoring and functional family therapy, according to Huff.

The Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative is focused on ensuring that the right youths, but only the right youths, are detained, and only for as long as needed. Public safety is the overriding priority, but finding more cost-effective and productive ways to supervise young people is the objective of the pretrial initiative and posttrial disposition.

If you remove a child from a bad family environment and incarcerate him without addressing the family, once he gets out and returns home, Huff says, his delinquent behavior is likely to continue. The only solution is to work with the entire family. The newly released "Kids Count Data Book" challenges all of us to look beyond the often disappointing numbers and reach for new approaches to old problems.

Preparing more 4-year-olds to take on the challenges of elementary school is a proven approach for young children. For older children, interventions, system reforms and more appropriate treatment promise improved outcomes for youths who make mistakes.

Both work toward our overall goal - improved child well-being that will be the newspaper headlines of the future. Linda Tilly is the executive director of VOICES for Alabama's Children. VOICES is a nonprofit, multi-issue child advocacy organization that works on behalf of children across Alabama. VOICES Web site: www.alavoices.org. Annie E. Casey Foundation Web site: www.aecf.org.

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