



PRESS-REGISTER

Some good news in the numbers

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By **LINDA TILLY**

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It sounds like old news, but look again.

Recently, 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 focused on the state's overall ranking as compared with other states.

These headlines are familiar. Throughout its 19-year history, the "KIDS COUNT Data Book" has tracked the status of children in the United States, measuring the educational, social and Economic, and physical well-being state by state.

Alabama's ranking has always hovered in 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.

However, Alabama is undertaking programs in early learning and juvenile justice which, when fully implemented, will improve these rankings in future years.

Research shows that high-quality pre-kindergarten 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 their 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, as it is known, is working to make pre-K available to all families who want it, and thus help close achievement gaps.

Three separate state juvenile justice initiatives will also make their mark on future "KIDS COUNT" numbers.

During the regular session of the Legislature, lawmakers passed the Juvenile Justice Act of 2008 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 the youth 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 the Casey Foundation'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 youth in detention, from 110 per day to 40.

The Casey Foundation's involvement has also 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 non-violent children and divert it to more effective community based resources, such as outpatient drug treatment, mentoring and functional family therapy, according to Judge Huff.

The Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative is focused on ensuring that the right youth — but only the right youth — 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 pre-trial initiative and post-trial disposition.

Judge Huff says that if you remove a child from a bad family environment and incarcerate him without addressing the family, once he gets out and returns home 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. Interventions, system reforms and more appropriate treatments promise improved outcomes for older children who make mistakes.

Both work toward our overall goal: improved child-well being that will be the newspaper headlines of the future.

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