

The solid foundation Idaho should build upon

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The Gem State's kids are likely to have what too few children across the United States do not - a stable home headed by two parents.

The latest Idaho Kids Count survey says 74 percent of Idaho children are reared in two-parent homes, ranking Idaho second only to Utah. Compare that to Washington, where 70 percent live in two-parent homes, or the U.S. average of 65 percent.

An Idaho child also has a greater chance of evading desperate poverty. That's defined as blight - neighborhoods with 30 percent poverty or greater.

Kids Count reports only 4 percent of Idaho's youth live under those circumstances, the seventh-best score in the U.S.

What that means is even the poorest Idaho family is likely to live in a diverse environment where access to schools and services hasn't been choked off.

Now for the conundrum.

When it comes to a public commitment toward his education, the typical Idaho child suffers in comparison.

Per pupil expenditures are ranked next to last.

The share of Idaho's personal income devoted to public education has dropped more than 20 percent since the turn of the century.

So it's no surprise when Kids Count shows Idaho reading and math scores stagnating.

For instance, Idaho fourth-graders ranked 19th in reading proficiency in 2005. By 2011, they slipped to 26th. In math, however, Idaho eighth-graders went from 23rd in 2005 to 20th in 2011.

While the state has the ninth-best high school graduation rate, too few students go on to college and obtain a degree.

Most glaring of all is Idaho's failure to launch early childhood education. Kids Count ranks Idaho 46th for the number of young children attending preschool, putting it in the company of Arizona, North Dakota and Nevada. By contrast, Washington is ranked 40th.

Early childhood education is one of the best investments a state can make. Kids who are ready to learn go on to graduate from school and prosper in life. Those who don't often get bogged down in dead-end jobs, have more teenage pregnancies, draw welfare or spend time in jail.

Tracking the results of a Michigan study, researchers found every \$1 invested in quality preschool returned \$16.14 - including \$12.90 in more tax revenues and fewer social costs for society and \$3.24 for the individual through higher earnings.

You'd think a state that is tops in growing its prison population and minimum-wage jobs would leap at this chance.

When it comes to preschool, Idaho doesn't say no. It says Hell no! It's among 10 states that spend absolutely nothing on early childhood education. Head Start relies exclusively on federal support.

Two years ago, the federal government offered \$50 million in a multi-year Race to the Top early childhood grant. Rather than set up state pre-schools, the money would have supported a modest effort to improve the training of people working in private programs.

State schools Superintendent Tom Luna turned thumbs down.

Idaho may get its second chance. The Obama administration wants \$75 billion over the next decade to extend preschool to all 4-year-olds. Idaho's share would come to about \$20 million a year, providing it's willing to kick in about \$2 million of its own money.

Idaho's families are doing their part. To not build on this foundation is to deprive their children of opportunities they deserve. - M.T.