

# Another year, another failing grade for Idaho

## Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

If Idaho's children are doing a little better, extend the credit to their parents, their communities and the economy.

But as far as public education goes - particularly when it involves the state's youngest children - you can't take much comfort in the latest Idaho KidsCount scores.

That's been a consistent pattern in the yearly surveys the Annie E. Casey Foundation compiles.

Idaho's kids benefit from living in a state where more children are raised in households headed by two parents who are employed. That takes a lot of pressure off an underfunded public school system.

For instance, KidsCount ranked Idaho 14th best for economic well-being - due largely to more parents working.

It also ranked Idaho 13th best for family and community.

Public education? Idaho came in 37th. It gained a little ground on reading scores, held its own on math scores and progressed on high school graduation rates.

To be fair, the survey caught Idaho at its nadir. It looked at 2014, the year before Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter and the Legislature pushed to restore budget cuts they imposed on public education during the Great Recession.

But Otter and lawmakers have done nothing to address the most troubling nugget of news in the KidsCount report - 69 percent of Idaho's 3- and 4-year-olds are not in school. Not only is that far more than the national average of 53 percent, but it shows the state is falling behind. Five years ago, KidsCount noted 66 percent of this age group was not in some kind of educational setting.

There's a perfect storm at work: More children are sinking into poverty. Idaho already is a low-wage state. As such, more Idaho parents are finding the costs of child care stretching beyond their reach.

In fact, the average Idaho family now spends about \$902 a month caring for their kids outside the home, far more than housing, food, transportation or health care.

In other words, while their parents work, more children are staying with relatives, neighbors or older siblings.

Of course, being placed in a child care setting does not equate with early childhood education. Idaho's child care regulations are among the weakest in the country. You have no way of knowing how many are learning colors and letters, and who is being parked in front of a television set.

But the results are clear enough: Roughly half of the children arrive in kindergarten unprepared. Remedying that is expensive. The consequences of failure are even costlier - a cycle of poverty, social dependence and even crime.

All of which explains a steady movement toward investing in quality pre-K programs across the states. Early childhood education advocates maintain every dollar spent on pre-K today can save as much as \$7 in deferred social costs later.

Even states as conservative as Utah and Mississippi have joined up.

But Idaho?

Among only four others - Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota and Wyoming - the Gem State refuses to make any investment at all in early childhood education.

Idaho's resistance goes so far as to turn away a helping hand. Former state schools Superintendent Tom Luna as well as Otter declined a share of federal money that would have helped improve private child care programs, expand Head Start and determine where Idaho's pre-schoolers are being placed.

A year ago at a seminar sponsored by the James A. and Louise McClure Center for Public Policy and the Andrus Center for Public Policy, some state leaders expressed a hope that this would be the year for change. But the legislative session came and went without much progress at all.

You can bank on this much: Next year's Idaho KidsCount report may be equally as grim. - M.T.