



## State's ranking on children's well-being rises

Thursday, June 12, 2003

**BY JAN MURPHY**  
Of The Patriot-News

Pennsylvania's ranking in a national report on children's well-being has improved over the past 10 years. Advocates attribute the jump -- to 13th -- to strides made in providing health coverage.

They maintain the state's ranking, up from 16th a decade ago, would jump higher if it invests in preschool, full-day kindergarten and reducing the gap between what districts spend to educate students.

As proof, Pennsylvania Partnership for Children president and CEO Joan Benso points to New Jersey's move from No. 11 in 1990 to No. 4 in 2000.

"In our neighboring state of New Jersey, over \$400 million a year is being spent today to be sure children have high-quality prekindergarten, full-day kindergarten," Benso said at a Capitol news conference yesterday. "Their education equity is much better than ours."

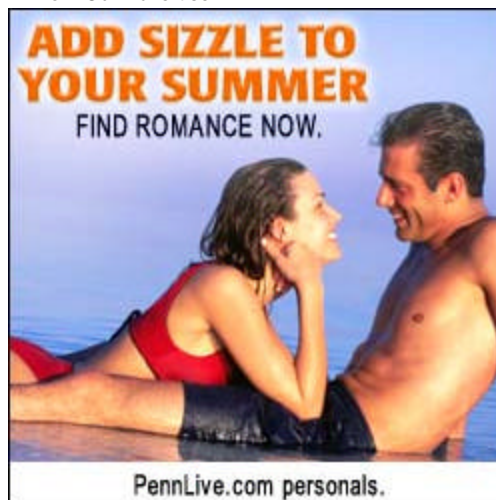
The annual Kids Count report by the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation shows Pennsylvania improved in seven of 10 categories used to measure children's well being. Its percentage of low-birth-weight babies increased as did the percentage of single-parent families. It showed the percentage of high school dropouts was unchanged.

"The truth of the matter is there's false news in the fact that Pennsylvania's ranking" rose, Benso said. "All we really see a dramatic change in is the way our children receive health coverage. It put us on top of the heap when it comes to health coverage, but everywhere else ... our kids are at the bottom of the pack."

The report shows only 7 percent of the state's children are without health insurance, as compared to 12 percent nationally. Patricia Stromberg, deputy insurance commissioner for the Children's Health Insurance Program and Adult Basic Coverage, said the state's high ranking on this indicator comes as no surprise given the public awareness efforts the state has undertaken.

This year, more than 916,000 Pennsylvania children were insured through CHIP or Medicaid, compared to about 767,500 in 1999.

▼ From Our Advertiser



"We're really pushing the heck out of it and seeing the fruits of all that," Stromberg said.

Benso, a longtime proponent of preschool, is hoping the push by her group, Pennsylvania State Education Association, Gov. Ed Rendell and others will bear just as much fruit.

Rendell attended the news conference to promote his preschool plan that carries a \$267 million price tag over three years. It would give money to poorer school districts to offer preschool either through district-run programs or community providers that meet high standards and employ certified teachers.

"If we help our children reach their full potential ..., they will be part of a qualified work force that will allow Pennsylvania to compete in the 21st century and it all begins at the beginning. It all begins in prekindergarten education," Rendell said.

He criticized a rival plan being advanced in the Legislature that would provide vouchers to low-income parents to send children to preschool. No cost estimate is available for that plan.

"There are no guarantees that those children get quality education programs," Rendell said. "They'll get child care, yes, but no standards to make sure that their minds are stretched."

Charles Kolb, president of the Committee for Economic Development, a Washington, D.C., think tank, echoed the governor's remarks about the importance of preschool. He called it "one of the most important investments that one can make in the future of our country and certainly in the future of our children."

JAN MURPHY: 787-3061 or [jmurphy@patriot-news.com](mailto:jmurphy@patriot-news.com)

Copyright 2003 PennLive.com. All Rights Reserved.