

# Too many Delaware children are living in poverty

Tony Allen and Dan Rich Published 3:52 p.m. ET June 14, 2017 | Updated 7:27 p.m. ET June 15, 2017



(Photo: Shutterstock photo)

Children live in poverty in every part of our state. These children are racially and ethnically diverse. Without thoughtful interventions beginning at birth, most will bear hardships throughout their lives. Those hardships limit life opportunities and translate to costs for our state that increase if we do not invest early and consistently, even when times are hard.

In 2009, the Delaware Child Poverty Task Force recommended actions to reduce child poverty by 50 percent over 10 years.

Instead, the poverty rate among the state's children has grown dramatically.

Wilmington has the highest percentage of children in poverty with an estimated five-year average of 34.7 percent, followed closely by Dover at 32.7 percent. The county with the highest rate of child poverty is Sussex, with an estimated five-year average of 21.6 percent, as compared with 19.7 percent in Kent and 15.4 percent in New Castle (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011–2015 American Community Survey).

There is a significant achievement gap between students qualifying as low-income and their more affluent peers. The pattern is particularly clear in Wilmington, where the high child poverty rate has consistently translated into poor educational outcomes. In 2016, 82 percent of all Wilmington students did not meet the state's math standards, while 73 percent fell short in English language arts. Dropout rates of Wilmington students are more than twice the rate for students statewide.

It is easy for policymakers to forget Delaware's poor children. Children do not vote, they do not lobby and they rely on adults to recognize and act upon their needs. The recent record in Legislative Hall is not encouraging.

Proposed budget cuts include early childhood education, developmental screening, and even KIDS COUNT in Delaware, the program that tracks the condition of our state's children.

To their credit, earlier policymakers acted to help poor kids. KIDS COUNT in Delaware reports that between 2009 and 2016, the State enacted over 200 pieces of legislation to address the challenges facing low-income families and children. As a result, some indicators of poverty improved. The number and rate of children in foster care decreased and accessibility to healthcare increased.

Despite these improvements, child poverty in Delaware has become more acute. Why?

First, state policies are fragmented, inconsistently applied across agencies and not designed to coordinate with community institutions to meet the developmental needs of poor children in a cost-effective manner.

ADVERTISING



Second, the state spends a great deal on poverty-related programs, but it has failed to target resources where they are needed most, particularly for the education of children in poverty statewide.

The action agenda should be clear. We need better alignment of policies and coordination of programs across agencies and sectors.



**Watch Now**  
 (<https://www.usatoday.com/section/global/virtuallythere/>)

We have evidence that will make a difference. In 2011, three state agencies with support from the governor and legislature and a modest additional investment, took action to strengthen the access of low-income children to high-quality early education programs based on the state's own quality rating system, STARS. As a result, the Office of Early Learning reports the number of children with high need enrolled in highly rated programs increased from 5 percent in 2011 to 76 percent in 2016.

Now we need to scale-up that kind of targeted and coordinated effort. Gov. Carney's new cabinet-level Family Services Council is positioned to do precisely that. What needs to be put in place is a comprehensive and integrated approach to state policy that combines the resources of all sectors to meet developmental needs of children in poverty from birth through entry to college and the workforce.

While the state spends a great deal on public education, it does not spend that money in a way that directly addresses the needs of students in poverty. Delaware remains one of about 15 states with no direct state education funding for low-income students, and one of only four states with no state funding for English Language learners. There also is a critical gap in funding for basic special education, K-3.

States making these investments typically have better education outcomes than Delaware. The funds needed are already in the \$1.4 billion that the state spends on public education. In 2008, the bi-partisan Leadership for Education and Achievement in Delaware task force identified \$150 million in the public education budget that could be used for higher priorities. Most of those recommendations never were implemented.

Even with Delaware's budget challenges, the targeted support could be phased-in statewide over several years.

Meeting the needs of Delaware's poor children is not just the right thing to do. It will pay dividends. It will mean a more efficient and cost-effective use of state resources now, and fewer tax burdens in the long run through a reduced need for state services, lower incarceration rates, and decreased unemployment.

Most importantly, it will mean a pathway to a better future for an increasing number of Delaware's children and an opportunity for them to become productive, tax-paying citizens who will contribute to the long-term prosperity of our state.

*Tony Allen is chairman of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission and the incoming executive vice president and provost at Delaware State University. Dan Rich is policy director of the Commission and Professor of Public Policy, University of Delaware.*

Read or Share this story: <http://www.delawareonline.com/story/opinion/contributors/2017/06/14/too-many-delaware-children-living-poverty/397413001/>