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Editorial: Minority children falling behind

Utah leaders owe all kids a chance

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Utah is not as homogeneous as it used to be. Fifty years ago Utah was overwhelmingly white, even overwhelmingly western European white. Diversity was a word you didn't often hear. The state was monocultural in its demographics and in residents' everyday habits.

But all that is changing. Between 1960 and 2008, the minority population increased from 1.9 percent to 18.3 percent, and the trend has not diminished.

Unfortunately, some state leaders — and people who influence them — cling to a belief that it's still the mid-20th century. Utah policymakers have a responsibility to act in the best interest of all Utahns, including all minority Utahns.

Children, especially, need help to achieve their potential. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count project provides an annual profile of the challenges children face in each state. This year, the study looks specifically at how well they are faring in terms of poverty, access to health care and education by ethnic group.

And Utah's minority children don't fare as well as white kids in any category. Still, the report paints a worrisome picture for a great many Utah children of all groups.

For instance, more than a third of white Utah children, 223,000, live in families whose income is below \$46,500 for a family of four, or 200 percent of the poverty level.

Half as many Latino children live in poverty, but the number, 106,000, represents 72 percent of all Hispanic or Latino children. Raising the minimum wage would help their parents lift these kids out of poverty.

While about two-thirds of all Utah teenagers, and about 90 percent of white students, graduate from high school, the dropout rate for Latino teens approaches 50 percent.



Trent Nelson | Tribune file photo Pamela Pea leads a Zumba class at the Rose Park Academy in Salt Lake City in February 2014. A new Kids Count study, *Race for Results*, points up disparities in the well-being of children from different racial and ethnic groups.

Gov. Gary Herbert's focus on getting more Utah students interested in STEM fields — science, technology, engineering and math — there is not a similar state emphasis on ensuring a much higher percentage of minority and low-income students earn high school diplomas.

Minority children are more apt to go without adequate health care. Expanding Medicaid to cover those who don't now qualify for Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program or subsidies through the Affordable Care Act would go a long way toward boosting these children's chances to succeed.

Utah's changing demographics means it's no longer enough that white, middle-class kids succeed. The state will fail economically if minority children are left behind.

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