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SID SALTER: 'Kids Count' research stirs interest on both sides

by Sid Salter

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STARKVILLE – This week's unveiling of the annual "Kids Count" Data Book for Mississippi will – as always – stir interest on both sides of the state's legislative aisle as Democrats and Republicans alike confront reliable statistics from the leading resource for comprehensive research and information on the Mississippi's children.

With state leaders engaged in substantive debates over contentious issues like charter schools, school district consolidation, Medicaid expansion and health insurance exchanges, and the annual struggles to fund public education at all levels and public health care in the poorest state in the union, the "Kids Count" data focuses on information vital to proponents and opponents of those issues alike.

The data produced is often jarring and uncomfortable to confront. The latest edition documents the fact that while 22.4 percent of all Mississippians live in poverty, the poverty rate for Mississippi children under age 5 is 37.5 percent while 30.2 percent of children age 5-17 live in poverty.

Madison County has a per capita income of \$31,517 while neighboring Holmes County has a per capita income of \$11,585. Those numbers belie the more disturbing statistic that finds 15 percent of Mississippi children – the highest percentage in the nation – live in extreme poverty.

Most appalling, as cited recently by Gov. Phil Bryant, is the fact that Mississippi teens are giving birth at the highest rate in the nation and at a rate 39 percent higher than the national average.

What separates the "Kids Count" work from other public advocacy groups that focus solely on the litany of depressing economic indices in which Mississippi is rated at or near last is the fact that the group actively seeks out and recognizes Mississippi groups and programs that are making a positive difference in changing those dismal outcomes.

The 2013 "Kids Count" Data Book reviews research on health, safety, economic well-being and education. The 2013 "Kids Count" Summit will be held Friday, Feb. 22 at 8 a.m. at Christ United Methodist Church in Jackson. The plenary speaker is youth advocate and U.S. Army veteran Wes Moore, the author of the bestselling book "The Other Wes Moore." During the event, the group will honor the Jackson Medical Mall Foundation's Childhood Obesity Project, Biloxi's Moore Community House, and the Starkville School District's Emerson Family Centered Programs as "Kids Count" Success Story award recipients.

The innovative Mississippi Children's Museum in Jackson earned recognition as the

group's 2013 "Program of Promise."

The research is conducted by the Family and Children Research Unit at Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center, but is funded in by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and MSU's Division of Agriculture, Forestry and Veterinary Medicine. The organization is influenced by a diverse advisory board with representatives from public and private agencies including the state Department of Health, state Department of Mental Health, the state Attorney General's office, North Mississippi Health Services, the CREATE Foundation, the University of Mississippi Medical Center, the 4-H Foundation, Alcorn State University and Southern Ag Credit.

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