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**Texas Needs to Rank Kids No. 1 on its List of Priorities:
Austin American-Statesman**

The University of Texas football team is gearing up for the 2007-08 season. One preliminary poll ranks the team as high as third in the nation, much to the delight of Longhorns fans across the state.

Another set of rankings, released earlier this week, paints a much more dismal portrait of Texas—Texas kids, that is. According to the *2007 KIDS COUNT Databook*, Texas ranks 37th—just 13 from the bottom—in overall child well being.

If UT were consistently ranked near or at the bottom of Division I football on offense, defense, and in the overall rankings, the state would be up in arms. Could you imagine the outcry if football rivals Ohio, Michigan, Nebraska, and Iowa were always better than us?

In the case of children, this really is the case.

According to the KIDS COUNT report, Texas ranks last in the nation with the highest rate of children without health care. In fact, Texas has been at or near the bottom of the health care rankings since 1998. By contrast, Michigan and Nebraska are tied for #2—with the second highest rate of kids *with* health insurance. Iowa is at #8 and Ohio ranks #14. Having a high number of uninsured kids doesn't just sound bad, it *is* bad—for the state's economy and our children's futures.

Uninsured kids often turn to high-cost emergency rooms for treatment, or delay care until medical conditions are more serious—and expensive. These charges are passed on to the community through higher hospital charges, higher private health insurance premiums, and higher local taxes.

Imagine if we were as committed to ensuring the health of our youngest and most vulnerable as we are the health of our offensive and defensive lines.

Texas also ranks at the bottom on births to teens, with the highest rate of babies born to teens (ages 15-19) in the country. Iowa ranks #13, Michigan is at #17, and Nebraska ranks #20. Babies born to teen mothers are more likely to live in poverty, drop out of school, have a child while in their teens, and rely on public assistance.

Imagine if we were as committed to preventing pregnancy as we are turnovers.

The report also finds that when it comes to high school dropouts, Texas ranks #27, with the 27th worst dropout rate in the nation. Iowa and Nebraska are tied for #4, Ohio ranks #9, and Michigan is at #16.

Dropouts cost Texas millions of dollars. If every 16-19 year old who is not in school and does not have a high school diploma simply graduated, Texas' combined earnings could increase by \$3 billion in income in just four years. Not only that, but study after study shows that an educated workforce is the primary reason why businesses relocate to states and expand current facilities.

Dropouts also have a greater need for government assistance. According to a national study by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 40% of 16-24 year olds lacking a high school diploma received some type of government assistance in 2001. In addition, a dropout is more than eight times as likely to be incarcerated as a high school graduate.

Imagine if we were as committed to scoring high graduation rates as we are points per game.

Forget being #1; it's like we don't even play in a bowl game when it comes to our children.

Children are 27% of our state but 100% of our future. Yet we market our college players to win national awards and be top NFL draft picks but consistently let a potential group of All-Americans go without medical care or a quality education.

Come on, Texas. We can do better!

Lynsey Kluever is the Communications Director of the Austin-based Center for Public Policy Priorities (CPPP), which is home to Texas KIDS COUNT.