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Children's status report shows county has bright and dark spots

Programs for reading, new mothers a plus, but infant deaths, dropouts a negative

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Of the News-Register

In some ways, Yamhill County does a good job of helping families raise healthy children: Its two largest public libraries offer storytelling times for babies and small children, two local hospitals offer support groups for new mothers, programs match volunteers with elementary school children to help them read or simply spend time with them.

But there are dark areas in the picture: Yamhill County has some of the state's highest rates of infant mortality, high school dropout rates and teen pregnancies, according to a report released this week Children First for Oregon, a children's advocacy organization.

The organization publishes an annual report on the status of children in the state, breaking it down

by county. The report includes information on children's health, family well-being, child care and early education, community, juvenile arrests, suicides and pregnancies, reading proficiency, high school dropout rate and child abuse. All information is for 1998.

Although 81 percent of 2-year-olds in the eight-county region that includes Yamhill County were up-to-date on their immunizations, infants did not fare so well. The report stated that the county's infant mortality rate worsened, going from a five-year average rate of 5.5 deaths per 1,000 live births to 9.2 deaths per 1,000. At the same time, the number of infants born with low birthweights decreased slightly.

The number of deaths in children ages 1 to 14 also increased, and the number of children who were abused or neglected worsened slightly.

Teen pregnancies increased, but the number of teen-agers who attempted to commit suicide decreased, as did the number of teens arrested.

Child care is woefully lacking, the report said, with only 19 slots per 100 children age 0-12. Oregon Head Start prekindergarten serves 179 children whose families cannot afford to pay for preschool, but the report said that's only about 40 percent of the children estimated to be eligible.

The McMinnville School District had the highest dropout rate in the county in 1997-1998, jumping from 8.19 percent in 1996-1997 to 12.95 percent.

School officials spent much of 1999 trying to find ways to address the problem. As a result, the most recent statistics show a drop in early leavers, with a dropout rate of just over 10 percent.

This fall, the district hired dropout prevention specialists to work with children in elementary, middle and high schools. At the high school, an on-campus alternative school started to accommodate about 60 students who were struggling in the traditional program.