

EUGENE REGISTER-GUARD

Passing isn't good enough

Oregon gets a 'C' in children's well-being

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A bright child who brings home a report card full of average grades is suspected of not trying hard enough. Oregonians like to think of their state as better than average, but Children First for Oregon has awarded it an overall grade of "C" for its success in raising healthy, safe and well-educated kids. That's not good enough. Oregonians need to try harder.

Children First has been preparing report cards on children's well-being for years, but this time the organization has a new yardstick. In 1993, the Oregon Progress Board set a series of goals, or benchmarks, and challenged the state to reach them by the year 2000. Children First was able to compare the state's achievements to its aspirations, much as Oregon school children's performance is being measured against state standards. The result was a middling grade.

One of Oregon's best performances came in the category of education, where it received a grade of "B-minus." By this year, the Progress Board had hoped that 63 percent of eighth-graders would meet or exceed state reading standards. Oregon students beat this goal, with 64 percent meeting or exceeding the reading standards. But eighth-graders fell short of the benchmark for math proficiency standards, the 6.6 percent high school dropout rate is well above the goal of 5 percent, and few high school students complete school-related work experience programs.

Oregon also earned a "B-minus" in the category relating to early childhood. The state has met its benchmark goals of reducing infant mortality and providing child care. But the Progress Board had hoped that by 2000, 90 percent of pregnant women would receive prenatal care and 90

percent of children would be immunized against disease. Instead, nearly a fifth of Oregon infants are born to women who received no early prenatal care, and more than a quarter of Oregon children are not fully immunized.

The state's worst grade, a "D," came in the category relating to the well-being of teen-agers. Juvenile arrests and teen pregnancy rates are higher than the levels the Progress Board set in its goals for 2000. Cigarette smoking (20 percent) and illegal drug use (19 percent) among eighth-graders is higher than the benchmark levels. The Progress Board did not set a benchmark for teen suicides, but the current rate is higher than in 1990, which can't be counted as progress.

Children First gave Oregon a grade of "C-minus" for its investment in families — a category that includes childhood poverty, access to medical insurance, payment of child support and availability of affordable housing. The group gave the state a grade of "C-plus" for child safety, which includes the rate of child abuse and neglect, the child death rate and the overall rate of violent crime.

The Progress Board set an ambitious agenda for the state in many areas, ranging from the economy to the environment. It's not surprising to find that many of the benchmarks for 2000 have not been attained. But if Oregon is to aim high in any subject, it should be in the area of children's well-being. By earning a grade of "A" for the health, education and safety of its children, Oregon could be assured that good grades in other subjects would eventually follow. A state that gets a middling grade for the well-being of its young people, however, is on the road to a middling future.