

HOOD RIVER NEWS

5038 Health of children

Good news on tobacco use gives hope, but we have far to go

Things to be mindful of at our day of Thanksgiving: An imperfect, yet spirited, democracy. A stable, yet challenged, local economy. A spectacular, though stressed, Columbia Gorge environment.

These are not mixed blessings but complex realities from which we must draw both hope and resolve.

And the part of our lives to be most mindful, and thankful, is the health of our children.

In Hood River County, a slice of good news arrives: the number of eighth graders who are using tobacco products is down, just as it is statewide. In Hood River County over the last two years, use among eighth graders dropped from 15 to 13 percent. Among 11th graders the rate fell from 33 to 27 percent. (See page A1.)

This pairing of teen tobacco use is the result of many factors: restaurants banning smoking, businesses refusing to sell to anyone under 18, teachers and administrators continuing their message of health, and parents and mentors putting aside tobacco products.

But there is always more to be done to build our blessings.

This month, Children First for Oregon issued its Report Card 2000: The Status of Children in Oregon. The overall grade from the non-profit, non-partisan group was a sobering C.

"After a decade of measurement and analysis, Oregon continues to fall short of its own goals for improving the well-being of our state's children," the report states. According to Children First, the State of Oregon decided in 1993 to meet its set of "Benchmarks" for kids' quality of life, by the year 2000. Those benchmarks refer to areas such as investment in families, safety, education, early childhood, and teen years.

But things have not progressed as well as was hoped. Here is a selection of statewide findings in the Report Card 2000:

■ Sixteen percent of children under 18 live in poverty — a five percent increase over 1990.

■ 13.5 children per 1,000 are abused or neglected — far above the nine-per-1,000 benchmark.

■ In reading proficiency, 64 percent of 8th graders meet or exceed state standards, just above the 63 percent benchmark, compared to 56 percent meeting the math proficiency standards, with a benchmark of 59 percent.

■ 81 percent of babies are born to mothers who receive early prenatal care; the 2000 benchmark was 90 percent.

■ 73 percent of two-year-olds are current on immunizations, a rate behind the 90 percent benchmark.

Returning to the subject of 8th graders and unlawful substances, the report is mixed:

■ 26 percent of 8th graders use alcohol, which matches the 26 percent benchmark.

■ 19 percent of 8th graders use illicit drugs, compared to the 15 percent benchmark.

■ 20 percent of 8th graders smoke cigarettes, behind the 15 percent benchmark.

"Oregon's prosperity and commitment to community fosters a golden opportunity to maximize our working investments for kids," said Marie Hoeven, executive director for Children First for Oregon. "Through focused efforts on effective programs and services for children, we can turn the small steps of the '90s into great strides for children."

Yet in the face of looming budget cuts in social services as proposed by Gov. John Kitzhaber, the partnership of parents, schools, the media, and local government, becomes all the more critical.

Given that the 8th grader who takes up smoking is also likely to be experiencing family dysfunction, frustrations at school, or other social and emotional difficulties, it is the role of the community to ask that 8th grader as he or she lights up a cigarette, "Why are you doing this and how can we help you?"

And then be thankful if he or she gives you an answer.