

MID-VALLEY SUNDAY

Mixed grades on kids

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There's a little value, and plenty of room for skepticism, in learning that Oregon earned just a "C" on the latest "report card" on the status of children.

Children First For Oregon announced the grade this month, pointing out that the state continues to fall short of its own goals in 21 statistical "benchmarks" monitored by the Oregon Progress Board.

Children First grouped those 21 figures in five categories, listing grades ranging from "B-" (for education and early childhood) to "D" (for teen years).

Reasons for skepticism include the obvious point that choices of criteria, or whether to weight criteria for importance, can skew a grade. For example, should the low share (18 percent, compared to the goal of 65 percent) of high school students completing a work-experience program matter as much as whether eighth-graders are passing state reading and math standards?

Another cautionary factor is that Oregon's benchmarks are intended to be goals to stretch towards. An "A" from meeting lax goals would be worthless.

Children First's report noted some positive trends, including a sharp drop in children lacking health insurance, falling infant mortality rates, and the improvement in math and reading proficiency.

Negative trends included the rise in teen-agers' suicide attempts and the toll of high housing costs on low-income Oregonians.

Two points add context for this report. One is that Children First's grade actually is a slight improvement — for the previous three years, it gave Oregon only a "C." Another is a national comparison. In the 2000 Kids Count rankings (actually based on 1997 statistics), Oregon was listed at 27th, in the middle of the pack although down from 18th in 1990.

Remember also that these benchmarks are oriented toward programs that get tax dollars — public health, juvenile crime, schools, child abuse prevention and aid to low-income families. The ratings are useful when looking for which programs are cost-effective, but they also promote a bias toward investing more taxes overall to these programs.

That bias means the "report card" measures problem areas. It doesn't measure the successes of families that stay together, youths that join positive activities such as Boy Scouts and Campfire, religious participation or many other traits of healthy families.

This report has some value when looking at priorities for public spending. Just don't take it as an all-encompassing grade for Oregon's children and families.

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