

# Report: Local kids have it better

By Barie Lancaster  
of the Daily Courier

A Children's First for Oregon report on the status of children in Oregon released earlier this week ranks the overall conditions for Josephine County youth on par with the rest of the state.

Children First publishes an annual report on Oregon's children, as part of the national Kids Count survey. Reports of soaring dropouts among Oregon's high school students led researchers to focus on the "forgotten kids in the middle" in a search for answers this year.

Josephine County has seen progress in the high school dropout rate, in eighth grade reading and math scores and has seen a reduction in substance abuse, said Marie Hoeven, Chil-

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Sara McDonald  
JoCo Commission for Children and Families

dren First executive director. During the 1998-1999 school year, 6 percent — or 212 students — dropped out of high school in Josephine County, a rate 9 percent below the state rate. The county received a 4 percent lower rate

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of child abuse and neglect than the rest of the state with 13 per 1,000 children being affected.

Josephine County snagged a high ranking on the availability of child care with 30 percent better availability than the state rate.

"I think overall we are certainly seeing an improvement in conditions for teens in the area," said Sara McDonald, director of the Josephine County Commission for Children and Families.

Thomas Drummond, director of alcohol and drug programs for the Josephine County Mental Health Department, says the Children's First report is mixed.

Drummond also heads the county's College Dreams program, which targets at-risk middle

school students and sets aside college scholarship money for them. He was excited to see a focus on middle school students this year. "So much is happening at this age," he said. "Kids are starting to make decisions about the rest of their lives." Children's First reported that in a regional 1999 survey of Southern Oregon, 12 percent of middle school students said they do not have a caring adult to talk to when worried or scared. By focusing on youth during this time period, many of the problems like dropping out of school, teen pregnancy and substance abuse can be averted, Drummond said. Teen pregnancy continues to be a problem in the area with 16.6 per 1,000 teens age 10 to 17 getting pregnant in 1999, 4 percent higher than the state average. McDonald said the main reason for teen pregnancy is that the youths don't have a strong goal in their life and often the pregnancies are marked by a history of substance abuse. However, the teen pregnancy rate has gone down since 1990 when 24 teens per 1,000 got pregnant, she added. Another area of alarm for McDonald is Josephine County youth suicide attempts, which were 48 percent higher than the statewide rate. In 1999, 26 attempts by children between the ages of 10 to 17 were reported by local emergency rooms. County mental health is in the process of working to train some 200 people in the county in a gatekeeper program called Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training. In a two-day seminar, ASIST trains people to identify at-risk youth and to be first responders to them. Gary McConahay, ASIST supervisor, said that Josephine County suicide attempts are likely higher than the state because emergency room personnel are skilled at identifying suicide attempts and actively report them, whereas some counties might not be so diligent. Juvenile arrests in the county also were significantly higher than the rest of the state with 58.5 per 1,000 youths getting arrested in 1999. McDonald credits this high rate to an active local juvenile justice system.

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