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Oregon attains higher grade for child services, still room to get better

Oregon received good news recently when the state earned a B- from Children First, a watchdog group measuring the well-being of children. While a B- might not be something to celebrate, the grade is up from a C last year and a C- the year before. The challenge is to keep improving this mark.

Children First looks at factors such as teen pregnancy, immunization and poverty levels. Oregon's booming economy of the 1990s slowly lifted some of those areas, but it's difficult to determine if the state's economic cool-down will have an adverse effect on future report cards. In fact, it's almost certain that the well-being of children will suffer as state dollars decline and fewer services are available.

The group graded the state in five areas using data from 1999 and 2000. The scores were calculated on both progress toward meeting the benchmark goals and the rate of change since 1990. The goals were based on standards set by the state. Those included prenatal care, child abuse, high school dropout rates, child poverty and affordable housing.

According to Chuck Sheketoff, director of the Silverton-based Oregon Center for Public Policy, Oregon still has a long way to go. He's right about that.

One in 10 Oregon kids live in poverty, said Marie Hoeven, executive director of Children First, in an Associated Press story. Thousands of kids do not have health care and more than one in three kids did not meet state standards in reading and math.

Oregon did score well with its tobacco programs and a new immunization tracking computer system. Child poverty rates and abuse rates fell as well. However, rates of teen suicide, dropout rates and alcohol use remained high, according to the Children First report.

Although Children First is an outside group rating the state, its methods and measurements are sound. We can tackle other children's issues as well as we have anti-tobacco programs. All it takes is determination and a lot of hard work.

Gov. John Kitzhaber laid the groundwork for these improvements during the last legislative session when he budgeted for several programs that deal with children's issues at an early stage. It's his belief that providing services at a young age will ensure a physically and emotionally healthy child. Those benefits will more than pay for themselves in the long run.

It's our hope Oregon can continue boosting its score in the coming years.