

Oregon receives "Above Average" grade for child well-being

For the first time Oregon has earned an above average grade in the annual Report Card on the Status of Children, a report published by Children First for Oregon, a non-profit, non-partisan group dedicated to improving the well-being of Oregon's children. The improvement to a "B-" is a positive sign for kids and families. The group warns, however, that this improvement

came at the peak of economic growth, noting that the current economic slowdown will put a strain on families — especially low-income families — and the state and community investments designed to help them. Given the precariousness of the current economic picture, Oregon's children are at risk. Marie-Jeanne, executive director of Children First for Oregon, credits a healthy economy and targeted program investments for the overall improvement in child well-being in Oregon. "We can see in the results where strategic investments are having a positive effect," says Hoeven. "Two good examples are the state's anti-tobacco programs and a new, computerized immunization tracking system."

But Hoeven cautions about being too optimistic. "More than one in ten of Oregon's kids are still living in poverty, thousands of kids remain without health insurance, and more than one in three kids failed to meet state standards in reading and math. We may have improved, but those numbers are still too high." The economic boom of the

1990s contributed to some of the improvements in well-being. Affordable housing, however, stands out as one economic factor that has worsened. As more people moved to Oregon, housing prices skyrocketed, leaving many families without affordable housing.

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"No parent should have to choose between paying rent and paying for groceries — this is an area we must improve upon if we want to support the stability of Oregon's families," said Hoeven.

The report card shows us, in addition to affordable housing, child poverty, prenatal care, child abuse and high school dropout rates are among those indicators reported that have failed to meet the goals set by the state.

Grades in four of the five sub-categories the organization tracks for child well-being showed advancement during the last year, with the greatest improvement in the areas of investment in families and adolescents. The report card grades are calculated based upon both progress made toward meeting the 2000 Oregon Benchmark goals set by the state in 1993, and the rate of change since 1990.

Children First tracked both positive and negative trends in child well-being indicators for the last decade.

Positive Trends in Child Well Being since 1990:

* The amount of child support collected has improved from 50 percent to 70 percent over the decade.

* Oregon's teen pregnancy rate dropped by nearly one-third.

* The childhood immunization rate has improved from 67 percent to 80 percent.

Negative Trends in Child Well Being Since 1990:

* More low-income renters spend a disproportionate share of household income on rent than a decade ago.

* Alcohol use among teenagers has increased slightly.

* Teen suicide rates remain higher than the 1990 rate.

Oregon has set new Benchmarks for its goals for child well-being for the year 2010. Children First will continue to track the progress the state makes in meeting its goals for child well-being.

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