

5038 Poverty plagues Oregon kids

Although an annual report on the status of children shows some improvements, the state of the economy could change that

By **BILL GRAVES**
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Fewer Oregon children die in infancy, get arrested, become pregnant or smoke cigarettes than a decade ago, but more attempt suicide and one in seven lives in poverty, according to an annual report card released today on the status of children.

Children First for Oregon gave the state an overall B-minus, the same as last year and the highest grade since the nonprofit agency began keeping track in 1990.

"We have shown we can make progress in so many areas" when the state makes strategic investments, said Marie Hoeven, executive director of Children First—a nonprofit public policy group. "We have just got to keep that commitment, even in these tumultuous financial times."

The status of today's children, however, may already have declined from that described in the report card, which relies on statistics from 2000 and 2001, Hoeven acknowledged. In its fifth special session, for example, the Legislature cut money last week for preschool expansion, mental health and drug services for children, and money for the Oregon Youth Conservation Corps.

"If the decisions we are making today continue as they have been going, you can just kiss this B-minus goodbye, and we are back to a C and maybe D," Hoeven said.

The Legislature also eliminated the Oregon Progress Board last week. It set the benchmarks that Children First used to gauge the state's headway in helping children.

Children First gave the state its lowest grade, a D, for family financial stability, a category that measures childhood poverty, child support payments, the availability of affordable housing, food insecurity and unemployment. The grade, based on indicators from a year ago, would certainly be worse now, given Oregon's persistent recession and high

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On her way to work Monday, Sia Sellu, a single mother who lives in Northeast Portland, takes daughter Arianna, 7, to before-school care. "I don't qualify for any subsidy or anything," Sellu said, "but I don't have the money to pay for the cost of quality child care."

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