

Outlook bleak for many Oregon kids

School election's an opportunity

The annual report on the status of children in Oregon is just out. To say that it's disheartening is understatement.

While we have made progress on some benchmarks tracked by Children First for Oregon — teen pregnancies and juvenile arrests are down, for example — the overall picture is dismal for the current generation of Oregon young people.

Children First gave the state a shaky B-minus for the status of its children, with a dismal D in the category of family financial stability and a discouraging C for early care and education.

Some of the numbers are familiar, because they're reported piecemeal from time to time. But to see them arrayed in a single place is to fear for the future of the state and of our communities.

What to make of the discouraging word that 8,700 Oregon high school students dropped out last year? That the number of eighth graders drinking alcohol increased by 19 percent? That 14 percent of Oregon's children live in poverty and must rely on food banks to avoid hunger — a dreary statistic matched by no other state?

The high-school dropout rate may be the most depressing figure of all. It is the self-perpetuating seedbed for more of the same — under-educated, under-employed families likely to raise yet another generation of children who will come up to bat with two strikes against them.

Children First describes the Oregon scene as "a picture of mediocrity and missed opportunities." The organization's executive director, Marie Hoeven, paints the big picture in depressing terms.

"The parents of 120,000 children in Oregon are struggling to cover even the basic costs of food and shelter for their families," Hoeven says. "For many of these children, common childhood experiences like getting back-to-school clothes, taking music lessons or playing a sport are unreachable dreams. Their lives and the lives of their families are burdened with uncertainty and with worrying about where their next meal is coming from, how they will cover next month's rent and endlessly searching for affordable and responsible child care."

There's no single, easy solution for the wide array of problems outlined by Children First. The answers are as basic as early childhood education and affordable housing. They are as complex as finding alternatives for an economic structure that offers fewer and fewer family-wage jobs.

One piece of the solution is headed our way in January, in the form of a ballot measure that would temporarily boost income taxes to help Oregon schools meet their current financial crisis. *It's not the best answer* for schools, only the best that a state legislature of Lilliputian vision could come up with.

But when we see it on our ballot, we should keep in mind the larger picture — the picture of that imperiled generation of Oregon children