

State News

State's report card for youth issues is poor

Child advocates say the legislature and governor fall short.

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Statesman Journal
May 10, 2003

Advocates for children warned Friday that the 2003 legislative session may result in a huge step backward for efforts to improve the health and well-being of Oregon's school-age children.

They cited a combination of proposed budget cuts and stalled legislation aimed at keeping children healthy and ready to learn.

"Right now, we have an unhealthy kids fail budget," said Tom Sincic, president of the Oregon School-Based Health Center Network.

Advocates rated legislative progress for the first half of the session in nine areas affecting children's ability to learn, including comprehensive health education, counseling services, nutrition services and school health services.

Eight of the nine scores indicated significant room for improvement, according to the Healthy Kids Learn Better Coalition.

The coalition is a partnership made up of representatives of more than 20 organizations, including the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, Children First for Oregon, Oregon Dairy Council, Oregon Environmental Council, Oregon Food Bank, Oregon Medical Association and Oregon School Nurses Association.

Despite Gov. Ted Kulongoski's pledge to put children first in his proposed budget for 2003-05, the coalition gave the governor and the Legislature an overall "on the couch" rating when it comes to following through on the promise.

The group said the rating reflects state leaders' "lackluster performance" in knocking down barriers — mental-health problems, substance abuse, obesity, lack of physical fitness, hunger and more — that prevent many children from reaching their potential.

"Exercise is good for all of us," said Courtni Dresser of the American Cancer Society. "The Legislature and the governor need to get off the couch and truly exercise their commitment to making children a priority this session."

Coalition members said they want to draw attention to the fundamental connection between health and education. As it stands now, they said, many state-funded programs for children are faltering.

Sincic pointed to the demise of school-based health clinics in communities throughout Oregon. Such clinics help prevent teen pregnancies and suicides, he said, but they are shutting their doors because of a lack of state funding.

"Stay tuned for me to come," Sincic said.

Virginia Rose, past president of the Oregon School Counselors Association, said Oregon's ratio of one counselor for every 480 students is abysmal. The result: Hard-pressed counselors have little time to help students struggling with tough problems, such as suicidal thoughts, abortion, divorce and peer pressure.

"These are real issues kids are having to deal with daily," Rose said.

Current staffing levels for school counselors mean that each student, on average,