

Picture's not pretty for Oregon kids

*Two studies show disturbing trends
in how the state cares for its own*

Statistics alone can't complete a picture, but they can help us sketch in the basics. And the basics provided this week by two studies about Oregon children are disturbing at best.

One, the annual Children First for Oregon report, gave the state its worst overall marks in a decade on 22 measures of family and child health.

The other, a report by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, said Oregon graduates fewer students from high school and prepares fewer for college than almost any state in the nation.

The numbers are all relative, of course, but the message here is clear: As Oregon hurts, so do the Oregonians least able to fend for themselves.

In 2002, according to the Children First report, 17 percent of Oregon children lived in poverty, and the number of "food insecure" families remained above the national average. Fewer Oregon children had health insurance in 2002 than in 2001.

When they reach high school, a third fail to graduate in four years, according to the Manhattan Institute study. And only about a quarter who did graduate in 2001 met Oregon's 10th grade reading and math standards, a measure of college readiness.

Education and social experts say these numbers aren't good enough, that Oregon has to do better if its children are to survive the world, much less thrive in it.

And they are cause, certainly, for new soul-searching within a state that has done its share of late.

Are a few percentage points' slippage across a few categories of children's wellness the inescapable and temporary result of a troubled economy? Are they a funding problem, something to be improved with a temporary or long-term tax increase? Or is the answer not economic at all but in approach?

Much has been said lately about Oregon's troubles, about problems in education and tax structure and even in a lack of clarity and direction about the kind of state this should be. The studies about children released this week add a few more pieces of information to an emerging picture.

It isn't, by most measures, the one we think any Oregonian would hope to draw.

Correction

Eagle Point school administrators don't believe they would have to cut school days to balance the district budget if voters reject a tax increase next year. The editorial in Thursday's paper relied on outdated information.