

5038 Average, and slipping

Oregon gets a C-minus for children's well-being

As a means of measuring performance, letter grades are open to interpretation. A top grade in an easy course may be expected, while an average grade in a tough one can be a mark of achievement. A more meaningful reading can be obtained from comparing grades over time, to see whether they're improving or getting worse. For this reason, Oregonians should be disturbed by the grade of C-minus their state has received for the well-being of its children.

Each year, a group called Children First for Oregon issues a "Report Card on the Status of Children." It examines 23 measures of children's health, safety and education, ranging from substance abuse rates to infant mortality rates. It compares these statistics to the benchmarks set forth by the Oregon Progress Board, which has established economic and social goals for the state. These comparisons between reality and aspirations are translated into a letter grade.

For 2003, Children First gives Oregon a C-minus. That's nothing to be proud of, but it is a passing grade.

The year before, however, Oregon's grade was a B-minus. Oregon has slipped an entire letter grade in a single year, indicating a marked deterioration in the well-being of the state's young people.

The overall grade of C-minus is a composite of grades in five categories. The state's worst grade — a flat F — came in the five measurements grouped as indicators of family financial stability. Seventeen percent of Oregon children live in poverty, and 13.7 percent lack food security. Only 60 percent of child support payments are paid, unemployment is high and three-quarters of low-income families lack affordable housing. In all of these areas, Oregon falls short of meeting the benchmarks for 2005. The year before, Oregon's grade in the family financial stability category was a D.

The biggest slippage, however,

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came in the five measurements grouped as indicators of children's health. Children First gave Oregon a D in this category, down from a B-plus the year before. The statistics here actually don't look so bad. The teen pregnancy rate is already lower than the benchmark set for 2005, and the infant mortality rate, though higher than the benchmark, is among the lowest in the nation. But too many mothers lack pre-natal care, and too many children lack health insurance and up-to-date immunizations, to avoid a steep deterioration in performance.

The only bright spot on the report card came in the category of child safety, where Oregon earned a grade of B-plus, the same as last year. In all three measurements of child safety — the rate of child abuse and neglect, the number of children living at risk of abuse or harm, and rate of violent crimes — Oregon has already exceeded the 2005 benchmarks. This suggests that the Oregon Progress Board's goals are attainable.

The only improvement came in the category of early care and education, where the grade climbed to a C-plus from a flat C the year before. And in the category of youth development and education, Oregon received a grade of C — down from a B-plus in 2002.

Put it all together, and the result is a C-minus — certainly nothing to be proud of, and headed in the wrong direction. The grade is a rough measure of the priority that Oregonians assign to child welfare in public policy and in society as a whole. The success in meeting the benchmarks in certain important areas, and a record of above-average performance in previous years, strongly suggests that Oregon could do better.