



Dr. Samuel D. Henry: Do we have the will to put children first?

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This year's "Report Card on the Status of Children" released by Children First for Oregon sent a clear message: We're failing our youngest Oregonians. The report cited a number of negative trends including fewer children with health insurance and good-quality child care, and many more children with their families living in poverty.

These results are alarming, but not surprising. Throughout the state we've made deep cuts to programs that promote children's health and school readiness and to services that help families remain economically secure and better able to access food, healthcare, housing and transportation. The rationale was the state's revenue crisis. The crisis is real, and we now face the results.

To solve the crisis in the short-term, our state has all but eliminated proven programs for children that save money in the long-term -- and more importantly, save our most vulnerable children. The remaining programs are so under-funded they may not have the resources necessary to implement the practices that science has shown reduce child abuse, keep kids in school, reduce crime and change lives for the better. In better times, these programs proved their worth with dramatic results while ensuring a return on our investment:

Child abuse and neglect victims decreased 19.2 percent during 2000 and 2001.

Juvenile arrests dropped 28.1 percent from 1996 to 2001.

Repeat juvenile offenders decreased from 37.3 percent in 1996 to 34.8 percent in 2000.

Children entering school ready to learn improved by 31 percent from 1996 to 2002.

Where is the safety net for our children now? We're already seeing what happens when we do less for them. This year's report card is as much proof as any person could want. It's well established that children who suffer abuse or neglect face increased risk of mental disorders, criminal behavior, substance abuse and academic failure. School dropouts are four times more likely to be covered by the Oregon Health Plan, more than twice as likely to be unemployed, and to earn 30 percent less than others who stay in school.

Once recognized for our promising innovations in the planning and delivery of services and supports, Oregon now drops from last year's B-minus to a disappointing C-minus. What grade will we get next year? How low will we let it go? Do we have the will to achieve better for our children?

We know how to address the needs of our children. We know what works: quality early education and care, health and mental health programs, juvenile crime prevention, positive youth development, and parent support and education to help more families help themselves. Families that benefit from these programs are better able to stay productive and independent, thereby increasing tax revenues, decreasing welfare costs, decreasing health costs and lowering crime.