

5038 Heard before, but worth hearing again

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Sitting, the governor declared that children have to become the first priority of the state.

"As carefully as we have used and preserved, as passionately as we have cared about the our forests," he told the Portland audience, "so must we husband and harvest the new growth of talent and hope that lies within the next generation."

Oregon, unfortunately, didn't have much money to do any of this, so private companies, agencies and individuals would have to pitch in, and all Oregonians commit to "become stewards of the child."

It was a ringing declaration to kick off Gov. Ted Kulongoski's new call for a Children's Charter, delivered Tuesday to the annual lunch of the advocacy group Children First for Oregon. Except it wasn't.

It was Gov. Neil Goldschmidt's State of the State message in 1988, calling for a Children's Agenda.

Now, declared Kulongoski in the more recent version, "Thousands — maybe even tens of thousands — of children in Oregon are leading lives that would be barely recognizable two and three decades ago."

* And now, of course, we have even less money.

Kulongoski, who has said since the beginning of his campaign for governor that kids needed to go to the front of the line, called for a return to an earlier compact, one that said, "We not only take care of our own children, and our neighbors' children. We take care

of children we don't know."

That would, he noted, take considerable private effort, although he voiced — and got his biggest hand for — the hope that the state's effort wouldn't be dropping sharply.

And even if the words — and the state's background music — sounded familiar, it was worth hearing again that doing something about the condition of kids in Oregon is the only way to do anything about the

economic and social future of the state.

Because lots of the time around here, we seem to forget it.

"Report Card 2003 on the Status of Children in Oregon," distributed at lunch, related "a troubling decline in child well being" in the state, an overall grade of C-, down from last year's B-. Oregon kids are steadily poorer and less secure.

As Marie Hoewen, executive director of Children First for Oregon, said afterward, it was heartening just to hear a governor talk about how we might deal with kids' problems — because so often in Oregon, the question seems to be not "how" but "if."

But looking back over the 15 years between Children's Agenda and Children's Charter, there are signs that if we want to, we can change things.

We've made some progress in health insurance for kids, largely due to the determination of former Gov. John Kitzhaber and the federal CHIP program. Teen-age pregnancy is down sharply. We've made some improvements in juvenile justice, partly due to Kulongoski's own efforts when attorney general.

On the other hand, the institution affecting the most kids — the schools — has lost ground, with fewer offerings, bigger classes and some parts of the state struggling just to keep the doors open.

Over a door into Portland's Cleveland High School is inscribed, "The foundation stone of a state is the education of its youth." Friday morning, the 40 seniors in a Cleveland English class weren't fooled; they've seen programs dwindle and crowding rise just since their freshman year.

Their problems aren't over. Since 1988, Oregon has done far less than many other states in supporting higher education. Declaring the Children's Agenda, Goldschmidt warned of toddlers with inadequate child care; those same Oregonians are now entering our underfunded universities.

We've seen that there are gains to be made if we work to make them — and that lack of commitment really does make things get worse.

So even if Ted Kulongoski set out some of the same language, some of the same problems and some of the same limitations the state heard from Neil Goldschmidt 15 years ago, calling for a Children's Charter is still a move forward.

Because the first step in doing something for Oregon's kids is reminding us that they matter.



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