

By George

Oregon gets 'D+' for kids



George Robertson

Sun
Sheridan, OR
09/15/2004

Oregon's high unemployment rate and out-of-control state budget are taking their toll on those who can least afford it -- our kids.

That's what a report issued this week by Children First for Oregon concludes.

The non-profit organization gives Oregon a "D+" grade in child well being -- its lowest grade ever in five years of conducting the study.

"This sharp decline in the overall well being of Oregon's children reveals the compound effects of a poor economy and cuts in proven state-funded programs during the past three years," the report says.

In other words, kids in Oregon are hurting more than ever.

"Key indicators such as child poverty, the number of uninsured children and confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect have worsened," the report adds.

If that isn't bad enough, the organization gives Oregon an "F" for family financial well being. The failing grade confirms "the continued weak financial health of many Oregon families in the midst of our lackluster economic recovery."

The organization gives Oregon a "D-" for health care, noting there are "more uninsured children and a slight drop in the percentage of mothers receiving early prenatal care."

Not satisfied with merely grading the state's care of its children, the report calls for specific steps to improve the dreary picture.

"If the state does not invest in critical programs like the Oregon Health Plan (which has been drastically trimmed) or child care assistance for working families, we can't expect our most vulnerable children to succeed," says Tina Kotek, Children First's policy director.

Indeed.

Children First's report shows a terrible trend. The organization gave Oregon a "B-" in 2002 and a "C-" in 2003.

In an effort to avoid total gloom and doom, the report points out that Oregon stayed on course with another year of declining pregnancy and high school dropout rates while the state's rate of immunizations for toddlers improved.

In addition, the report notes that third graders have met the state's benchmark in math proficiency.

Still, more than 148,000 children in Oregon live in extreme poverty and 113,000 children do not have health insurance.

Perhaps even more shocking, nearly 4,900 children were abused or neglected last year, up 12 percent from the previous year. And suicide attempts among youth have risen for the fifth consecutive year.

Clearly, we need to do more for our kids.

Not all solutions have to cost money or mean raising taxes. Maybe a good place to start is to hold some local meetings in our communities to discuss the Children First report and its implications.

Or maybe you, dear reader, have a few ideas to improve the "D+" grade by improving the way we take care of our children right here in Sheridan, Willamina and Grand Ronde.

A copy of the Children First report is available online at www.childrenfirstfororegon.org.