

# A disturbing grade

Oregon gets a D-plus for children's well-being

A child who brought home grades averaging D-plus would not get very far arguing that the report card used flawed measurements. Similarly, Oregonians may quibble with the scoring techniques, but they can't squirm away from the low grade that Children First for Oregon gave the state for the well-being of its young people.

The group gave Oregon an overall grade of D-plus, the lowest mark in the 12 years that Children First has prepared its report card. Even if the state could jawbone the teacher into changing the grade to a C-minus, the plain fact remains that Oregon's children are losing ground. Oregon can do better in meeting its fundamental obligation to the future — indeed, the state was doing better just a few years ago.

Children First, a private non-profit advocacy group, grades the well-being of Oregon's children each year, examining 22 statistical measures ranging from immunization rates to test scores. It compares the state's performance in each of these areas to benchmarks established by the Oregon Progress Board. The progress board's benchmarks are goals for statewide economic and social achievement. Children First's analysis shows that Oregon is falling short of reaching most of the goals that directly affect children's lives.

The state's worst grade came in five measures grouped as indicators of family financial stability. Oregon received a grade of F in this area. Children First found that 18 percent of the state's children are living in poverty — 50 percent above the benchmark of 12 percent. Unemployment is high, and the availability of affordable housing is low. Oregon's rate of "food insecurity" is among the nation's highest, and more than one-third of court-ordered child

support payments are never made.

In other areas, Oregon is doing reasonably well. The state received a grade of B-minus in the area of youth development and education, mainly because the high-school dropout rate, the number of juvenile arrests and the percentage of eighth graders who smoke cigarettes are low enough to meet the state benchmarks. By other measures — including eighth-graders' scores on reading and math tests and the abuse of alcohol and other drugs — Oregon has far to go.

Some of the grades seem to have been prepared on a steep curve. In the area of children's health, for instance, Children First gave Oregon a grade of D-minus. Yet the pregnancy rate for girls aged 15 through 17 is 27 percent below the benchmark rate for 2005. The state's infant mortality rate, though still short of the benchmark, is among the nation's lowest. The percentage of 2-year-olds who are up to date on their immunizations is close to the benchmark target and moving closer. The worst indicator is in the percentage of children without health insurance, which exceeds the benchmark rate by 50 percent. In the aggregate, a near-failing grade in this area seems undeserved.

The marks themselves, however, may mean less than the direction in which they're moving. In this respect, Children First has issued a disturbing report. Using the same techniques, the group gave Oregon an overall grade of B-minus in 2002 and C-minus in 2003. Now the state has sunk to a D-plus — a steep deterioration over a two-year period. In important statistical measures of children's well-being, Oregon is moving in the wrong direction. Oregonians must resolve to show that improving grades can come as quickly as declining ones.