

Oregon's children receive D+ grade

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The grade for the well-being of Oregon's children has dropped to an alarming "D+" according to a spokesman for Children First for Oregon.

The non-profit, non-partisan group calls itself the "state's leading voice for children since 1991."

Each year they grade Oregon on key indicators such as child poverty, the number of uninsured children, and confirmed cases of child abuse.

Oregon earned a D+ this year — its lowest statewide grade ever.

"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," said a spokesman for Children First.

"If the previous two years' Report Cards didn't alarm Oregon's leaders and the public, we certainly believe this must be our wake-up call," said Robin Christian, executive director of Children First.

"Our children are suffering at the hands of our complacency — living in poverty, without health care and in unsafe homes. Today's report

shows us definitively that Oregon's ongoing poor fiscal health is costing our children their future," Christian said.

Children First reports the grades in the "family financial stability" and "health" categories are especially alarming. The state repeated its failing "F" grade in the family financial well-being area, thus confirming the continued weak financial health of many Oregon families in the midst of the lackluster economic recovery. The health category grade slid down to a "D-" primarily driven by more uninsured children and a slight drop in the percentage of mothers receiving early prenatal care.

A bright spot

One of the bright spots was that Oregon stayed on course with another year of declining teen pregnancy and high school drop-out rates, while the state's rate of immunizations for toddlers improved.

Teen pregnancy has decreased dramatically over the last eight years and is at a 14-year low.

The report also found that reported violent crime in Oregon is at its lowest point since before 1990.

The high school dropout

rate is at its lowest since before 1997 at 4.4 percent, compared to the 2005 benchmark of 5.4 percent.

The negative trends in child well being include:

- More than 148,000 children live in extreme poverty.

- An estimated 113,000 children do not have health insurance on any given day in Oregon.

- A total of 4,867 children were reported to have been abused or neglected in 2003, up 12 percent from the previous year.

- Suicide attempts among youth have risen for the fifth consecutive year.

- Low-income families continue to struggle to find affordable housing and child care and feed their families.

- Oregon's unemployment rate is at a 16-year high and is 137 percent of the national rate, leaving many families with inadequate or no income.

- More than one in five Oregon children lives in a home where parents worry about how to provide the next meal. Oregon's rate of food insecurity is 131 percent of the national average.

For the fifth consecutive year, Portland General Electric is the presenting sponsor of the Report Card. A copy of the 2004 report may be viewed online at www.childrenfirstfororegon.org.