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House District 20 candidates: In their own words

The Statesman Journal invited Vicki Berger and Connie Garcia, Republican and Democratic candidates for the state House, to submit 400 words about this topic: What specific steps would you take to improve children's well-being, which Children First for Oregon rated D+?

Focus on prevention and research-based solutions

Oregon is in economic recovery. We are no longer the state of hunger and joblessness. Positive signs from the Oregon Progress Board include a decrease in teen pregnancy and improved math and reading scores. This good news, however, must be tempered with a reality check. We remain ground zero for meth abuse. Poverty, obesity and unresolved mental-health issues are still with us and these problems disproportionately affect the youngest and most vulnerable citizens of Oregon — our children.



VICKI BERGER
Guest Opinion
The best place to address any problem is at the local level and in this case we have a team in place which is ready, willing and able.

At a recent Marion County Children and Family Commission forum, I listened as local business leaders, law enforcement officials, faith-based advocates, medical experts and educators outlined a very specific action plan.

While this plan will be implemented by the local team, the state role was clearly outlined: Find a way to provide affordable health care for children, improve our foster-care system and put more effort into addiction and recovery systems so families get help before crisis leads to disintegration. Recent brain research is pointing us in a clear direction.

Problems of mental and physical health which are not addressed in the first few years of life often result in an individual pattern of strife which will be paid for by the taxpayers in education services, unemployment problems, incarceration and dependence on expensive social services. Prevention is the only affordable option.

This means early identification and intervention. This means parent education and support. This next legislative session, we must be willing to make investments in the future of our children. Partnerships and sound bites must be replaced by serious efforts to find workable, research-based solutions to our problems with drugs and child abuse. Community-based programs with measurable results like Liberty House, Family Building Blocks and Drug Court provide models which can be duplicated in other parts of the state.

With the improving economy, there will be many competing needs. As your state representative, I pledge to join with local, state and federal officials in proactive strategies to improve the lives of our children.

Rep. Vicki Berger, R-Salem, is running for re-election in House District 20. Contact her campaign at (503) 559-6169 or www.vickiberger.net.

Stabilize state funding, then pay for Head Start

After 29 years, I retired from teaching because I wanted to do something more for our children. I taught in a high school where for several years the hall was lined with 30-gallon garbage cans to catch the rain coming in through the leaky roof.



GONNIE GARCIA
Guest Opinion
The gap between the rich and poor widens. We've become a society segregated by the dollar, in danger of losing our most precious resource, our children, to hopelessness and despair. We can fix some problems without raising taxes. To stabilize funding, suspend the corporate kicker, setting it aside in a "rainy-day fund." To save money, create a statewide health-insurance pool for schools, state, county and city workers. To increase revenue, audit state programs, close tax loopholes, go after tax cheats and ask corporations to pay their fair share of taxes. But first fund Head Start.

For safety alone we cannot keep doing everything on the cheap. Is it any surprise that Children First for Oregon has given the state a D+ on the status of the state's children? Whose "family values" are these? If we truly care for our children's well-being and education, it cannot happen in overcrowded classrooms where teachers must demonstrate excellence in educating both mainstream and challenged children without the resources needed.

Hanging in the balance is a school's ability to meet high scholastic performance standards set by the No Child Left Behind Act. This underfunded mandate hurts those most in need. If schools fail to meet those standards they risk losing students through transfers to other, "better" schools.

Gonnie Garcia of Independence is the Democratic candidate for House District 20. Contact her campaign at www.conniegarcia2006.com.