

Portland, OR  
(Multnomah Co.)  
Tribune  
(Cir. 2xW 180,000)

DEC 15 2006  
Allen's P.C.B. Est 1888

## SOAPBOX ● Investing in children offers hope for future

# D+ is unacceptable for Oregon

By William R. Swindells and Rhonda McDowall

**T**he annual report card recently released by nonprofit Children First for Oregon indicates the outlook for children in Oregon is dismal.

With a D+ rating, we've failed to achieve our goals concerning the well-being of children in our state.

### The facts are startling

One in five children is not ready for kindergarten, according to a 2004 Oregon Department of Education report. Oregon ranks 40th out of 50 states in the percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in pre-kindergarten (only 41 percent are enrolled), according to the Children's Institute.

According to a 2001 Education Commission of the States report, children who are be-

hind in reading in the first grade only have a 1-in-8 chance of ever catching up. Ninety percent of brain development occurs before age 6, yet our public educational system starts with students typically at age 5 or 6.

Children who fail in school are far more likely to commit crimes leading to incarceration. It costs \$59,130 annually to house an Oregon youth in a juvenile correctional facility.

Each year, more than 20,000 Oregon youths are involved with either their county juvenile department or the Oregon Youth Authority.

### Kids are a sound investment

The YMCA of Columbia-Willamette has made a significant investment in children.

The Y is the largest nonprofit operator of Early Childhood Development Centers in the greater Portland-Vancouver, Wash., area, serving more than 1,400 children daily.

High-quality early-learning

programs are an effective and efficient use of public and private resources. Research consistently shows that high-quality child care helps kids grow socially, emotionally and cognitively.

More than 90 percent of YMCA preschool children met or exceeded social/emotional development benchmarks, versus the norm of 70 percent.

Next to having great parents, children need consistent, caring nonparent role models in their lives to help lead the way. Educated adults earn more, pay more taxes and use fewer social services.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski said that he would push to make early learning available to all eligible children. The cost is about \$40 million to phase in this program for all eligible 3- and 4-year-olds over the next two years.

It would be a wonderful step toward putting kids on the right track for success.

Full funding is a critical state

issue. The governor, the Senate and the House must make an investment in our children and our economy.

They should look to the many terrific community organizations operating high-quality child development services to help fill the service gap. These organizations already have the infrastructure in place to expand programs. At the Y, 25 percent of youths attend child care with financial assistance provided by the Y and its donors. We make it affordable.

A D+ grade for Oregon's children is simply unacceptable. We must invest in kids by providing critical child development services for all children, especially those most at risk for starting school behind their peers.

*William R. Swindells serves on the YMCA Board of Trustees, and Rhonda McDowall is the YMCA's executive vice president of child care.*