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## ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

# Creating a place where all children can thrive

**A**s a single, working parent of two teenagers, I count on everything running smoothly. When one of my kids gets sick or injured (they both play sports), their school life and my work life are thrown into chaos. That's why the health of my family and thousands of other Oregon families depends on access to quality health care.

Access to care is more than just having insurance. Insurance does not guarantee a child will receive appropriate care. Insurance does not promise that parents will be able to leave work to take their kids to a doctor or be able to afford the co-payment. And with 117,000 uninsured children in our state, getting all kids covered is not going to happen overnight.

At a time when public dollars are strained and health care needs are soaring, it is imperative that we invest in systems that are working.

So what can we do today? We can support delivery models that provide affordable, quality health care in community settings. One such model is the system of 45 certified, school-based health centers across the state, including 14 in the Portland area. In Oregon, nearly 18,000 elementary, middle and high school students were served by these centers in 2004-05, more than half of whom had no health insurance.

School-based health centers deliver professional health care (physical, mental and preventive) to children where they

are — in the schools. They serve all children, the insured, the underinsured and the uninsured. The care is developmentally appropriate, something that is especially important when working with adolescents to avert drug and alcohol use that can lead to larger problems down the line.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of school-based health centers in Oregon. This week, Portland is host to the National School-Based Health Care Convention.

Hundreds of school-based health professionals from around the nation are here in Oregon to learn about our successes, as well as delve into such critical topics as mental health services, obesity prevention and sustainable funding strategies.

One of the few victories for children in the 2005 Legislature was an additional investment of \$500,000 for school-based health centers statewide. This increased funding allowed the state to leverage local resources to support the creation of new centers in five counties.

Oregon should be a place where all children thrive. Access to health care, as a critical element of supporting the health of our children, must be a top priority for elected leaders. School-based health centers are one cost-effective solution that makes good sense.



**ROBIN CHRISTIAN**

IN MY OPINION

*Robin Christian is the executive director of Children First for Oregon, a nonprofit group that advocates for children.*