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Status of state's kids put at D+

Report card - A nonprofit says Oregon fell short of its goals on childhood poverty and health care, among others

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The 20 children in Michele Walker's Head Start class hail from all over the world, including Kenya, the Fiji Islands and Vietnam. With help from Walker and two other teachers, they will learn English, their numbers, letters and other skills that will put them on even ground when they enter kindergarten.

"It would be an awesome thing if all children had the advantage these kids have," says Walker, 40, a veteran preschool teacher whose class meets in Beaverton's Chehalem Elementary School.

But in Oregon, the federally subsidized preschool program for low-income families must turn away four in 10 eligible children for lack of money.

And that's one reason Oregon gets a D- in early care and education on the 2006 report card that rates the status of the state's children. Children First for Oregon gives the state an overall D+, calling its annual report card, released today, a "sobering snapshot" of the challenges facing the state's youth.

The nonprofit group graded the state that low only once before, in 2004, since it began issuing the report card 15 years ago. However, it reorganized and changed some indicators it uses to calculate grades this year. The report card measures the status of children in terms of 10-year trends and goals set by the Oregon Progress Board, an agency that monitors the state's social and economic health.

The state fell short of its 2005 goals on numerous fronts, including childhood poverty, immunization, health care, obesity, child abuse and neglect, child-care access and affordability and third-grade reading, the report card shows.

On the bright side, Oregon has met its benchmarks in reducing juvenile arrests, teen smoking, hunger and teen pregnancy. And leaders appear ready to do something about expanding Head Start.

Senate and House committees, the major gubernatorial candidates, business leaders and the Children's Institute of Oregon say they will push in the 2007 Legislature to make Head Start available to all eligible children, not just the 60 percent who now get in.

"It is one of those issues where there is broad, bipartisan support," says Rep. Dave Hunt, D-Gladstone.

It would cost about \$40 million to phase in Head Start for all eligible 3- and 4-year-olds over the next two years. Research shows investment in quality preschool pays off because children who attend are more likely to succeed in school and life. They are less likely to cost the state more in remedial education, crime, teen births and other social costs that come with school failure.

While investing in Head Start is a small step, "it is the step that will have the greatest payoff," says Swati Adarkar, executive director of the Children's Institute of Oregon, a child-advocacy group.

Momentum also is building among state leaders to improve Oregon's D+ grade on health by providing health insurance to the 117,000 children who do not have it. Gov. Ted Kulongoski on Monday proposed paying for the additional health care by raising the cigarette tax by 85 cents to \$2.03 per pack. Leaders and legislators from both major parties also are calling for universal health care for Oregon's children.

Still, children also suffer from poverty, unemployment, unaffordable housing and other social conditions the state is failing to address adequately because of a weak, unstable tax structure, says Cathy Kaufmann, spokeswoman for Children First.

"We're giving away millions in corporate kickers," she says. "If we don't have a tax structure that does not support basic needs that we can all agree upon, then we're shooting ourselves in the foot."

Chuck Sheketoff, executive director of the Oregon Center for Public Policy, says the state needs to more aggressively fight poverty, foster higher-paying jobs and support public institutions.

"If kids are going to be healthy and thrive, we need adequate public structures and we need to pay for those," says Sheketoff, whose research group in Silverton focuses on policies affecting low-economic groups.

Steve Buckstein, senior policy analyst with the Cascade Policy Institute, argues that the state has plenty of money if it would spend it smarter to fund initiatives such as Head Start and children's health care.

"Don't blame the lack of money for the status kids are in," says Buckstein, whose group advocates market-oriented public policies. "The money is there. It is being misallocated, misspent and wasted in a system that isn't meeting their needs very well."

Children First has made it a priority to defeat Measures 41 and 48, which would cut income taxes and limit growth in state spending. It also recommends putting the corporate kicker -- tax money the state returns to businesses when revenue exceeds projections -- into a rainy day fund.

And Children First adds its voice to the chorus of leaders calling for universal health care for children and Head Start for every eligible child.

"This is a huge untapped area that will make an enormous difference to the state," says Adarkar of the Children's Institute. "It is the right thing to do. These are the kids who need it the most."

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