

State's grade on status of children isn't the full story

Statesman Journal (Salem, OR)
December 6, 2007
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Everyone knows that a D is a really bad grade. It suggests lack of knowledge, or worse, lack of effort.

However, when it comes to Oregon's overall grade of D on the Children First for Oregon 2007 Report Card on The Status of Children, released in October, it doesn't tell the whole story.

At the Commission on Children and Families, both at the state and local level, we have been working tirelessly to make sure our children are safe and healthy. In fact, in the past year, we've made great strides for children and working families.

Why such a bad grade? For the most part, it has to do with major budget cuts during the past six years, averaging anywhere from 20 percent for some programs to a whopping 60 percent for others. This, combined with stricter 2010 benchmark targets set by the Oregon Progress Board to calculate the grades, makes it difficult to achieve a high grade, but that's OK. Stringent benchmarks ultimately will mean better things for our children, and that is what the Oregon Commission on Children and Families is all about.

What this poor overall grade does not reflect is the strong commitment and considerable investment that has been made in "Health" and "Early Care and Education," the two categories where we Oregonians received the lowest grade. The 2007 state Legislature substantially funded Head Start, the pre-school program for low-income children ages 3 to 5, and the Employment Related Day Care Program for working families -- a combined \$79 million increase in funding for 2007-09. There is no doubt this investment will pay off as safer, healthier and better-prepared children reach elementary school.

The 2007 Report Card did have some good news. Notable strides made in the "Family Financial Stability" and "Youth Development and Education" categories, where 12 out of 14 indicators (86 percent) showed improvement. And grades in these categories will continue to improve in the coming years as a direct result of the health-care reform and the \$6.25 billion in funding for K-12 education across Oregon.

Still, there is much work to be done. The 2007 Report Card, sadly, shows that child abuse and neglect rates have risen to a 10-year high. But a critical performance measure, the recurrence of maltreatment, went down from 10.2 percent in 2005 to 6.7 percent in 2006. Any time reabuse is prevented, a victory has been made.

It's a bitter pill to swallow, receiving such a poor grade when we are trying so hard. But I look at it this way -- anything that keeps the safety and welfare of Oregon's children in our consciousness and reminds us all of our collective responsibility to do what's right for them is a good thing.

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