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State report card on children's well-being has few bright spots

By TRACY GARCIA, Staff Writer

California is a national leader when it comes to providing after-school programs - but that's about the only good news coming out of an annual report card on the well-being of the state's children.

The report card, released last week by the nonprofit group Children Now, assigns letter grades to individual issues like early learning and development, K-12 education and health coverage.

And the 2010 report card is sporting California's worst grade-point average ever for statistics like:

Fewer than half of third-graders meet grade-level standards in reading;

Nearly 20 percent of high school students drop out before graduation; and

Since 2007, K-12 funding has declined 6 percent, or about \$4.5 billion.

In K-12 education, the report gave California a grade of D - slightly worse than the D+ given to the issues of health coverage and child safety.

"This report confirms what we all know - education is in trouble and the origin is at the state level," said Ron Carruth, superintendent of the 6,600-student Whittier City School District.

"Currently we are ranked 47th in the nation for funding," he said. "This is a tragedy for all of our children."

In fact, the report says, if current trends continue, California is expected to have a shortage of 1 million college graduates by 2025, when 41 percent of its jobs will likely require a bachelor's degree.

However, when it comes to after-school programs, the state earned a solid B+, thanks to the largest publicly funded after-school infrastructure in the nation.

At the Baldwin Park Unified School District, Assistant Superintendent Christine Dennis said the after-school program run by the nonprofit THINK Together has been an "outstanding partnership."

"And what we've found is that our children are not just getting the same lessons they get during the school day - they're getting math enrichment and physical activity and homework help," she said. "It's like a school within a school."

The report gave a C in the area of early learning and development - a mark that, unfortunately, is pretty accurate, said Celia C. Ayala, chief operating officer for Los Angeles Universal Preschool.

LAUP helps fund and train staff in preschool programs throughout Los Angeles County, including sites in the San Gabriel Valley and Whittier areas.

"Early care and education is doing better than K-12 and health care," Ayala said. "But there needs to be an integration of agencies. Schools cannot do it alone."

The report, however, did give credit to the state for establishing an advisory council to make it eligible for federal early education dollars and taking steps to ensure quality preschool programs.

"This report for me is a wake-up call," Ayala said. "If we do not invest in children and don't do the right things to have an accountability system with ongoing continuous improvement every year - then in 2010, we'll be in a worse place than we are today."

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Photo Gallery

[Children's Well-being Report Card](#)



(SGVN/Staff Photo by Eric Reed)