



**Our Opinion: Children's Week
In good and bad times, kids need support**
April 3, 2009

The 14th annual Children's Week at the Capitol is wrapping up today. It's quite an affirmation of youthful optimism.

But once you get past the children's happy faces, the colorful handprints and the preschool singing groups, there's a grim reality to be faced by the adults in charge. Florida is failing its children at the same time state government is running out of money — by default and, to some extent, by design.

We know what works well for children: Prenatal care, health insurance, voluntary pre-K and school readiness programs, mentoring, dropout prevention and anything that helps families become stronger and more stable.

We also know what happens when the system doesn't work. Sunday's shooting in Tallahassee took the life of a 26-year-old who dropped out in 10th grade and was still trying to find work, according to his mother. Two men being held in jail in connection with the shooting are gang members, according to the sheriff's office. These aren't the strong families we're talking about.

But look where Florida stands.

The latest Kids Count report ranked Florida 35th of 50 states overall. Infant mortality, child deaths, teen births, dropout rates all are worse than the national average. In low-birthweight babies and infant mortality rates, the state ranks near the bottom. We have the second-highest percentage of uninsured children in the nation, and we rank 45th in high-school graduation rates.

An advocate for children in foster care pointed out that 100 percent of the inmates on Death Row had contact with the foster-care system. That's not to negate foster care, but rather to acknowledge the chaotic lives of parentless children who "age out" into the world without a compass or a road map. And still the legislators get their budget knives sharpened.

Chris Duggan, CEO of the Early Learning Coalition of the Big Bend Area, says school readiness funding hasn't changed since 1999, though certainly the cost of child care — from milk to teacher salaries — has.

Parents know the value of the program. Businesses know how important it is for workers to have good child care available. Legislators surely — many are parents themselves — understand that working parents need child care and that the stability this affords ties in with economic development and job creation in communities.

Yet this year, Duggan said, "We're going to be very blessed not to lose money." "Building strong children is easier than fixing broken adults. If we invest in our children's success, we won't have to pay for their failure," said former state Rep. Lorraine Ausley, a longtime advocate for children.

Our children need more than a week. They need a total commitment from our Legislature and our state.

We neglect them at our own peril.