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N.C. meeting some quality-of-life goals, is lagging on others

RALEIGH - An interim report on whether North Carolina is approaching quality-of-life goals set in 2001 finds some targets are being met, while other aims are further away than before.

The North Carolina Progress Board said Monday the state has already attained targets set for 2020 in about a dozen of 84 areas being monitored, including violent crime reduction, an attractive business climate, and student proficiency in math and science.

But little progress has been made on health care, poverty and high school graduation rates that drag behind the rest of the country, so there's lots of room for improvement, the report found.

The mixed results aren't surprising because of the state's fiscal challenges of the past four years, natural disasters and an economic downturn during which at least 163,000 manufacturing jobs were eliminated or moved out of North Carolina, the report said.

"Despite a recession and several years of tight budgets, we have maintained our competitive position for the race ahead," said James Leutze, the board's interim executive director and the former chancellor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. But "we have a great deal to do to make North Carolina the national and global leader we all want it to be."

Another three-dozen indicators weren't examined because new data weren't available or the cash-strapped board hasn't been able to perform research, said Bob Melville, the Chapel Hill consultant who compiled the report. Many incomplete items relate to progress toward a cleaner environment.

The board was first created by the General Assembly in 1995 to set long-term goals for the state. The 19-member board receives less than \$250,000 annually in tax dollars but intends to begin seeking private donations.

Since the "North Carolina 20/20" report released in 2001 laid out eight broad goals for the state to attain, board leaders fine-tuned the targets to serve as measuring sticks toward those goals.

The update doesn't create a grading system to measure North Carolina's performance. Rather, it compared North Carolina data in each category with the 2020 goal and how the current rate ranks nationwide and among the 10 Southeastern states.

The board found that the state is making progress in many areas where specific targets haven't been met.

The gap between North Carolina's average SAT score and the national average has narrowed by 20 points since 1998. And 89 percent of infants are being properly immunized, which is lower than the 95 percent goal set by the board but remains higher than the national average.

Other figures are heading south.

The percentage of North Carolinians with health insurance has declined since 2000 – only six other states saw its uninsured population grow faster. The median family income in North Carolina is 88 percent of the national average, while the state's rank fell from 32nd in 2000 to 40th in 2003.

The report also finds North Carolina behind the national average on congested roads, natural gas prices, and high school graduation and dropout rates.

Improving the percentage of young people with high school diplomas is a key initiative in Gov. Mike Easley's second term, said Dan Gerlach, Mr. Easley's senior budget adviser.

Mr. Easley has focused on education improvements and fiscal responsibility, Mr. Gerlach said, and that's paying off.

North Carolina already has exceeded one target, in which per-capita spending within state government is below 95 percent of the national average. That efficiency gives North Carolina breathing room to rework its tax system and tap into growing areas of the economy for revenue, such as services, said Sorien Schmidt with the North Carolina Justice Center.
