

Opinion: A strategy to better protect Silicon Valley's children

By Leonard Edwards and Dr. Fernando Mendoza
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How is it possible that in Santa Clara County, a region of vast resources and innovation, more than 15,000 children suffer from chronic hunger? Why is it acceptable that 17.3 percent of children younger than 18 have never been to a dentist, 28 percent of our Latino youth do not graduate from high school and only 18 percent of our middle school students feel valued by the community?

Those of us in our community who work in health, education, law and social services care deeply about children. Yet even though we work hard to help individual children and their families, we don't recognize how our work is intricately interconnected. Often, historical practices and the complexity of systems and funding streams keep us from seeing the bigger picture of a child's world. This prevents us from working together to provide seamless and coordinated services to children and their families, limiting families' capacity to meet the challenges and opportunities they face each day.

In the end, we all need to realize how the work we do on behalf of children and families is connected. A child who is hungry, who witnesses violence in her neighborhood or whose teeth hurt is not going to perform well in school. A child who doesn't have meaningful adult relationships or becomes alienated from school is more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system or homeless.

If we want our children to do better, we need to see beyond the organizational niche we work in, look at how our work influences other providers of services, and focus on how we can work better together. What if a student and her family could get social and mental health services right at the school campus? Wouldn't it help if children were automatically enrolled in the free or reduced-cost lunch program when they enrolled in subsidized health insurance? Imagine a family having to fill out only one form to apply for all the support and services they need.

The Santa Clara County's Children's Agenda, led by Kids in Common, provides a means of connecting the performance of programs and agencies to the overall well-being of our children. The Children's Agenda provides a common vision for Santa Clara County children: Every child safe, healthy, successful in learning, successful in life. This vision encourages us to be accountable, not only for our programs' results, but also for the overall impact these programs have on our community's children.

We know this approach can work. The Children's Health Initiative brought people and organizations together to achieve an audacious goal: every child insured. Applied Materials' Education Initiative invested in community-based organizations and schools to significantly improve academic performance and increase the number of students going on to attend college.

It is not acceptable that children in Santa Clara County don't feel valued, are hungry and are not graduating from high school. We can do better.

No one claims that this will be easy. Budget deficits threaten our agencies, schools and the delivery of health care and social supports to our most vulnerable families. But it is precisely because of these challenges that we need to take steps to find the areas in our systems that will benefit from combining our efforts. By working together — not harder — we can transform our network of programs into a county system of support for children and their families that will make every child safe, healthy, successful in learning, successful in life. That is what every child in Silicon Valley deserves.

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