



2010 Central California Children's Agenda



“Our vision is a region that prioritizes and ensures a healthy and prosperous future for all children and families.”

THE CHILDREN'S AGENDA REGIONAL LEADERSHIP TEAM, 2010



THE 2010 CENTRAL CALIFORNIA CHILDREN'S AGENDA



PURPOSE:

The Central California Children's Agenda articulates agreed upon outcomes and recommended policy strategies for improving the lives of all children and youth in the San Joaquin Valley. The Valley is the highest-producing agricultural region in the nation. At the same time, people of the region face many daunting challenges associated with the region's rurality, high levels of poverty and unemployment, substantial immigrant and undocumented populations, and poor air and water quality. Notwithstanding these challenges, we believe in our ability and responsibility to positively influence the Valley's future. The policy strategies set forth in this Children's Agenda represent a collective plea to state and local policymakers, grantmakers, and elected officials to make greater prevention-oriented investments in all of the Valley's children and families to assure a healthier and more prosperous future for the region.

BACKGROUND:

The needs of families in the San Joaquin Valley call for fiscal and other policy decisions that support their readiness for raising children, and their ability to successfully nurture those children into adulthood. The Central California Children's Agenda sets forth six policy priorities for children and youth that, when achieved, will fundamentally improve their well-being.

These policy priorities and strategies were derived from a series of meetings of the 20-member Children's Agenda Regional Leadership Team over a 12-month period between September 2009 and August 2010. The team members both provided and participated in expert briefings and conversations that culminated in these recommendations.

It is critical that private and public agencies work collaboratively to support, empower and partner with families to promote optimal child health and development. This Agenda is an action framework designed to promote better understanding of the needs of children and families among those who make decisions affecting them, and facilitate collaboration among child and family advocates so that they may more effectively address the needs of the region's children, youth and families.

GOAL 1:

Communities and Families Ready for Children

OUTCOME 1:

Families bear children in communities where their basic needs for healthy physical and social-emotional growth and development are met.

NEED:

Too many children in the San Joaquin Valley are born into families living in chronic poverty and excessive stress. Poverty exerts a powerful influence on a child's physical, social and emotional well-being and in 2007, over 25% of families in the Valley with children under age 18 lived at or below the federal poverty level. Nearly half of poor families with children face food insecurity. Low educational attainment is common across the region, with only 25% of Valley adults having completed high school. With large numbers of immigrants who often face an array of employment and education challenges, the stability of each child's home environment is eroded. In 2009, there were high rates of unemployment across all Valley counties ranging from 15% in Madera County to 18% in Merced County, further adding to family stress. These realities create the need for a strong community safety net to strengthen each family's ability to raise healthy children.

POLICY PRIORITY:

Communities support each family's efforts to provide for the basic economic, physical and social-emotional needs of their children.

STRATEGIES:

- Increase resources focused on the prevention of health and social problems in children before they occur.
- Improve access to services that ensure planned and healthy pregnancies.
- Increase availability and affordability of healthy foods, particularly in low-income neighborhoods.
- Create employment opportunities that provide livable wages and benefits to support healthy families.
- Facilitate cross-agency and multidisciplinary teams to work together to better serve families in a comprehensive and cohesive fashion.



GOAL 2: Nurturing Parents and Caregivers

OUTCOME 2:

Children are born into families with caregivers who are prepared to provide loving relationships and support their emotional, spiritual and mental well-being.

NEED:

Chronic stress due to adverse life conditions, untreated brain disorders such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse and lack of awareness regarding how the family environment affects the developing brain can place children at great risk. Domestic violence, child abuse and neighborhood violence are major concerns in the San Joaquin Valley. The trauma associated with these adverse life circumstances has lasting, negative effects on child well-being.



POLICY PRIORITY:

Assure that children are loved, protected from violence, and have positive emotional connections with caregivers during their early years.

STRATEGIES:

- Encourage hospitals and other health care providers to expand and extend outreach services to support new parents, including breastfeeding promotion and follow-up, and perinatal mental health screening.
- Expand county-level public health support for evidence-based home visitation programs that offer family support and training, including parenting education.
- Assist fathers and other male role models in becoming more involved with their children, particularly for boys and young men of color.
- Improve early identification of families in need of substance abuse treatment, and access to substance abuse treatment services to facilitate healthier home environments and stronger parent-child relationships.
- Engage a broader range of community, public and faith agencies in providing educational programs to prevent domestic violence and child abuse and neglect, and provide a wider array of services for victims of abuse.

GOAL 3:

Children Ready for School

OUTCOME 3:

Children enter school ready to learn and able to meet the requirements of today's educational environment.

NEED:

Parents and other caregivers are the child's very first teachers and experiences during the first years of life directly contribute to readiness for school. A rich and appropriately stimulating environment, coupled with positive disciplinary practices and nurturing relationships, improves the chances that a child will be ready to meet the challenges of kindergarten. Children from poor and less advantaged backgrounds may have a weaker vocabulary, poorer emotional regulation, and less familiarity with technology than children from more affluent families. Children living in families where there is lower English language proficiency are also at a disadvantage in school. Disparities in access to enriching environments may place children behind their peers before they reach school-age. Lack of available quality preschool and subsidized child care slots in the San Joaquin Valley contributes to this problem.



POLICY PRIORITY:

Widespread opportunities are available and accessible for all children to learn and fully reach their intellectual and psychosocial potential prior to entering school.

STRATEGIES:

- Improve community awareness of the impact of early relationships on cognition and school readiness.
- Increase access to high-quality preschool programs.
- Expand adult education programs to improve family literacy and English language proficiency so that parents are better able to foster their children's school readiness.
- Expand medical and other community-based systems for early screening, referral, assessment and intervention services for children with developmental, health, social, emotional, behavioral, and other special needs.
- Provide outreach programs, particularly to immigrant and refugee families, to increase parental engagement as partners with schools in fostering their child's academic success.

GOAL 4:

Healthy, Safe and Secure Youth

OUTCOME 4:

Children and youth attain and maintain optimal physical and mental health, and are safe and protected in their homes, schools and neighborhoods.

NEED:

Children in the San Joaquin Valley have higher rates of asthma, obesity, diabetes, depression, and fatal injuries than youth in California as a whole. In 2007, 15.5% of adolescents ages 12-17 years in the Valley reported being overweight or obese which was higher than the state at 14.2%. A quarter of Valley adolescents lack a source of regular medical care and have fewer doctor visits per year compared to the entire state. The percentage of children ages 12-17 who reported having smoked or having had an alcoholic drink was also higher as compared to the state. Valley females ages 15-24 had higher rates of chlamydia and gonorrhea than in California as a whole. Families in the Valley tend to underutilize preventive health services, especially when children appear to be healthy, and often, despite having health insurance. Schools and local communities have limited resources for offering health promotion activities.



POLICY PRIORITY:

Families, neighborhoods and schools support the health and safety of all children.

STRATEGIES:

- Increase family knowledge and utilization of preventive health and wellness programs by implementing community outreach models that are culturally and linguistically appropriate competent.
- Expand availability of health education, nutrition and wellness programs, and access to affordable and healthy food.
- Expand availability of school-based health centers in elementary, middle and high school settings.
- Expand implementation of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Supports* to create healthier and safer school and home environments.
- Expand safe and affordable housing, and the use of schools and community facilities as safe environments for children to play.

*School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports (SW-PBS): a broad range of systemic and individualized strategies for achieving important social and learning outcomes while preventing problems before they occur. SW-PBS is a decision-making framework that guides selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidence-based academic and behavioral practices for improving important academic and behavior outcomes for all students.

GOAL 5: Engaged and Connected Youth

OUTCOME 5:

Youth have connections with each other, with caring adults and with their communities that strengthen resiliency against teen pregnancy, gang involvement, substance abuse and other risky behaviors.

NEED:

Youth in the San Joaquin Valley experience high rates of teen pregnancy, gang involvement and substance abuse, with teen pregnancy rates being the highest in Madera, Kern and Tulare counties as compared to the state. Madera County also has the highest percentage of male (18.1%) and female (12.2%) students in grade 9 who reported that they considered themselves a member of a gang. Substance abuse is prevalent in the Valley among adolescents with Madera County also having the highest percentage of male 11th graders who reported binge drinking (consuming five or more drinks of alcohol within a couple of hours in the past 1-2 days). These problems are exacerbated by the lack of healthy alternatives for youth. Valley residents identify youth high-risk behaviors as one of the most pressing concerns facing children. Residents also recognize the importance of the parent-child relationship for youth success and avoidance of risky behaviors.



POLICY PRIORITY:

Supportive activities and healing relationships between youth and their peers, parents, other adults, schools and community institutions become a central focus of institutional policy.

STRATEGIES:

- Invest in the expansion of recreational, service and employment opportunities for youth in both urban and rural communities.
- Educate parents about how to talk to youth about the dangers of risky behavior such as early sexual activity, drug use and gang violence, and provide the emotional support needed to help them resist these activities.
- Expand training and continuous learning for police officers, school officials and others in the importance of racial/cultural understanding, positive behavioral supports, and trauma – informed programs and services, particularly as it relates to boys and young men of color.
- Increase community supports, local mentoring, and after school programs that focus on developing healthy relationships of all types.
- Provide assistance to new immigrant families in understanding American systems and how to help their youth succeed.

GOAL 6:

Youth Prepared for Life

OUTCOME 6:

Youth complete high school and maximize their potential for a productive life through job skills training, employment or further education.

NEED:

Youth in the San Joaquin Valley, particularly boys and young men of color, are less likely to achieve academic proficiency and are more likely to drop out of high school than their white counterparts. High school dropout rates are the highest in Kern County (26.9%) and lowest in Madera (17.1%) as compared to the state (18.9%). Latino youth are less likely to complete college preparatory courses as compared to African-Americans, Asians and Whites. The percentage of persons age 25 and above who have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher is much lower in the Valley than it is in the State (26.6%), with Fresno County having the highest percentage (17.5%) and Kings County having the lowest (10.4%) of all counties. Further, more than 72,000 students in the Valley were enrolled in special education in 2009, with more than half of them (52.6%) having a specific learning disability.



POLICY PRIORITY:

All youth receive the support they need to become self-sufficient, productive members of society.

STRATEGIES:

- Improve school climates and expand academic support services both during in-school and after school hours to assure that all youth complete high school, particularly boys and young men of color.
- Commit the resources necessary to encourage school districts to provide career technical education programs that make youth competitive for living wage jobs.
- Provide comprehensive life skills, family life education and career-ready competencies to youth throughout their school careers, including youth with disabilities.
- Partner with public and private sector employers to create and integrate workplace mentoring and apprenticeship opportunities into the high school curriculum to connect students to the world of work.
- Ensure all youth transitioning out of foster care have the health, educational, financial, and emotional supports they need to make a successful transition to adulthood.

THE CENTRAL CALIFORNIA CHILDREN'S AGENDA REGIONAL LEADERSHIP TEAM

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