

MY WORD

County's youth need healthy role models

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and
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AS A new year gets under way, a new report offers us an opportunity to reflect on how children are faring overall in San Mateo County.

On Dec. 4, the Board of Supervisors adopted "Children in Our Community: A Report on Their Health and Well-Being," which paints a mostly positive picture, but also points to a number of significant areas where children require our immediate attention and action.

The report, prepared by a collaborative of public and private agencies, highlights our progress as a community in achieving four key goals for children that were established in the year 2000: Children are healthy; they are nurtured in stable, caring environments; they are succeeding in school; and they are safe.

On many fronts, we can be proud that most San Mateo County children are thriving and exceeding state and national norms. But this good news disguises significant disparities along racial and economic lines, where we see the troubling evidence that health often requires wealth, and that not all of our community's children can expect to enjoy equal levels of well-being.

The fine achievements noted in the report — such as reducing the number of children without health insurance in San Mateo County from 17,000 to 3,000 in just two years — illustrate what we can accomplish when we as a community decide to pursue policy choices that make the health of all our young people a top priority.

This recent progress should galvanize us to do better on the less positive indicators, eliminating the disparities that can hinder the growth and development of many children. We would point to three significant areas that warrant action.

First, only about two in 10 low-income third-graders scored at or above the 50th percentile on the California Achievement Test (compared to 6 in 10 higher income students) in 2006. This score is considered a strong predictor of later school success, and thus a warning sign for our low-income children. We must invest much earlier in the cognitive and social development of our children, and support current initiatives that target

the earliest years, including before kindergarten.

Second, the report's findings reinforce the need for many more adults to serve as mentors and allies for our pre-teens and adolescents. For example, county 11th-graders surveyed during 2004-06 were more likely than their state counterparts to report use of alcohol, marijuana and cigarettes within the past month. Research has shown that having two to three supportive adult relationships can have a tremendous impact on the choices that young people make regarding risky behaviors and, ultimately, their health. Many local opportunities for mentorship are available for those willing to make the commitment.

Third, these data remind us of the troubling rise in childhood obesity. One out of four fifth-, seventh- and ninth-graders is overweight, with even higher proportions among populations of color and low-income populations. Reversing this trend will require major changes in individual and family habits regarding eating and exercise, but we also must find ways to improve the many environmental factors that affect a child's access to healthful food and safe physical activity.

As county residents, physicians, and leaders within organizations committed to promoting and sustaining the health of our children and our community, we applaud the many efforts currently under way to benefit children. We urge the county's policymakers and its philanthropic and community leaders to review the findings of the Children's Report, and marshal the will and the resources to ensure the well-being of all our county's children.

The San Mateo County Children's Report is available online at www.kidsdata.org/sanmateoreport.

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