About Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Silicon Valley Community Foundation is a leading voice and catalyst for innovative solutions to the region’s most challenging problems. Our mission, vision and values reflect our commitment to serving the vibrant communities in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. We bring together diverse groups of people—nonprofits, donors, government leaders, business people, faith-based organizations—all of whom care deeply about improving the quality of life in our region. Our goal is impact and we employ a variety of strategies to achieve it, including grantmaking, community initiatives, donor engagement, convening and research.
Major Trends

No Child Left Behind. The passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001 has had a tremendous impact on schools across the United States. Its intent is to improve the performance of primary and secondary schools by increasing the standards of accountability for states, school districts and individual schools. The legislation requires states to develop criterion-based assessments in basic skills to be given to all students in certain grades. If those states are to receive federal funding for schools. However, the effectiveness and desirability of NCLB’s measures have been vigorously debated. A primary criticism about NCLB is that students in lower performing schools are spending 15% less in lower performing schools than higher-performing ones. Wealthier school districts can hire more experienced and more capable teachers, which contributes to better student achievement (2).

Persistent Achievement Gaps. The gap in academic achievement between white, middle-class students and their minority and lower-class counterparts is widely recognized as one of the most significant challenges facing our schools. Although conventional opinion is that “failing” schools contribute to the achievement gap, the evidence indicates that schools already do a great deal of work to combat the academic achievement gap occurring long before a child begins school. As a result, social-class differences in average academic potential exist by the time these children are two years old. Thus, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of early childhood education programs as a means to address the achievement gap (3).

Emergence of New School Models. In order to respond to concerns about traditional public schools, several other models of schools have become popular in communities across the United States. Two such examples, charter schools and small schools, operate with greater autonomy and freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. Community schools, also known as full-service schools, are public schools that serve as sites for the provision of a broad range of services to children and families through partnerships with community-based organizations.

Disparity in the Quality of Education. California no longer has any racial or ethnic group that is a majority of the state population, yet schools serving large concentrations of low-income students, as well as those serving large numbers of African-Americans, Latinos and Native Americans, disproportionately receive fewer of the resources that matter in a quality education, resulting in lower student achievement. For example, research shows that teachers in schools with high percentages of low-income, minority, and low-performing students tend to be less experienced and more likely to lack credentials than teachers in other schools. Further, per pupil spending is generally lower in lower-performing schools than higher-performing ones. Wealthier school districts can hire more experienced and more capable teachers, which contributes to better student achievement (2).

High School Reform. States across the country are emphasizing high schools as a key area of focus for education reform and California and Colorado Councils, established by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, has designated high school reform as its first priority. This is because while progress is being made in raising achievement and closing gaps during elementary school years, these gains tend to erode when students enter high school. In 2007, less than 10 percent of the region’s high schools have reached the optimum level of 800 on the Academic Performance Index (5, 6). Researchers observe that high schools, which are especially effective at improving the academic achievement of previously low-performing students, open the door to rigorous courses for all students, regardless of prior achievement. These high schools also make literacy a priority and connect the most effective teachers with the most vulnerable students (12).

Sources

4. 2005 California Child Care Portfolio, California Child Care Resource and Referral Network.
12. Achievement in California: 2005: Where Are We Now, How Far Have We Come and How Far Do We Have to Go? The Education Trust—West, 2005.
Regional Indicators

- The estimated need for licensed child care (including preschool) in the region far outpaces supply. In 2005, licensed care was available for 26 percent of children ages 0-13 with parents in the workforce in Santa Clara County and for 30 percent in San Mateo County (4). See Figure 1.

- There are 58 different school districts in the region and enrollment varies widely. In Santa Clara County, the student population of the 33 school districts ranges from 35 students in Montebello Elementary School District to almost 31,000 students in San Jose Unified (5). See Figure 2.

- Half of the region's kindergartners have parents who are foreign-born and 42 percent are English Learners (6).

- Seven percent (475 children) in San Mateo County and 13 percent (2,503 children) in Santa Clara County have little or no proficiency on critical school readiness skills (6).

- Lower-income and English Learner students are far less likely to be reading at grade level by the time they reach the third grade (7). See Figure 3.

- Latino and African-American high school students are less likely to pass the California High School Exit Exam in Math than White and Asian students (5). See Figure 4.

- Silicon Valley’s high school graduation rate dropped for the third year in a row. Less than half of the region’s graduates have taken courses that meet UC/CSU entrance requirements (5). See Figure 5.

- Certain groups are less prepared to enter college upon graduation. Less than 25 percent of Latino graduates met UC/CSU requirements compared to 70 percent of Asians and over 50 percent of Whites (5). See Figure 6.
Issues for Discussion

Preschool to Elementary School

Preschool. Quality preschool increases children’s ability to develop emotional, intellectual and social skills that benefit them throughout school and life. Children who attend preschool are more likely to attend college, be better socialized and are less likely to become involved in crime or have unwanted pregnancies. Results have been most pronounced for disadvantaged children. A movement has emerged throughout the country, including California, to expand access to high quality preschool programs. Both San Mateo and Santa Clara have been among the first counties in the state to launch universal preschool initiatives with the intent to provide all age-eligible children with access to high-quality programs.

While the anticipated benefits of universal preschool initiatives are evident, a number of critical issues emerge related to expanding and improving preschool. One such issue is the extent to which these initiatives can ensure the participation of currently underserved populations, such as children from immigrant and lower-income families. Another important issue is ensuring high-quality programming, especially for children most at risk. Preschool quality hinges on an adequate supply of skilled and effective preschool teachers with the ability to nurture the social, emotional and cognitive development of ethnically and linguistically diverse young children. This is especially challenging given the generally low compensation and high turnover rates in the early education field (8).

Ready Schools. Ensuring that children start school ready to learn requires that attention be paid to one of the most complex and significant changes they will experience—transition to kindergarten. In 1998, the National Education Goals Panel articulated the importance of transition as a key characteristic of “ready schools.” A body of evidence is building that suggests effective transition practices are those which go beyond a one-time set of activities at kindergarten entry to continuing support as children move through kindergarten and the early grades. However, there is a disconnect between what we know about the crucial role that transition plays in ensuring continuity and what is currently available in our schools (9).

Reading Proficiency. Research over the past 20 years has shown the correlation between students’ reading ability at the end of third grade and their future academic and life success. In a technological society, the demands for higher literacy are ever increasing, creating more grievous consequences for those who fall short. For example, more than half of the state’s prison inmates are functionally illiterate and one in five read below a third-grade level. Recognizing the importance of reading proficiency, educators are implementing K-3 program improvements in the areas of language and literacy curricula, instructional practices, professional development, class size and full-day kindergarten. Districts with the most comprehensive strategies for achieving third grade reading goals are looking at not only K-3 improvements but also pre-kindergarten interventions for children and families, from birth to kindergarten age. In considering specific strategies to meet the needs of English Learners, who constitute 40 percent of the region’s K-3 students, researchers find that using bilingual teachers is more cost-effective than using monolingual teachers with supplemental support personnel (2, 5, 10, 11).

Middle to High School

Math Proficiency. Transition to middle school is marked by several changes in educational expectations and practices. In most elementary schools, children are taught in self-contained classrooms with a familiar set of peers and one or two teachers. Once students reach middle schools, however, they must interact with more peers, more teachers and with intensified expectations for both performance and individual responsibility. By middle school, the achievement gaps separating the region’s Latino and African-American students from their White peers are quite large. For example, less than 20 percent of African-American and Latino 8-11th grade students were proficient in Algebra I compared to 43 percent of Whites. Research has shown that competence in mathematics is crucial for functioning in everyday life as well as for success in workplaces that are reliant on technology (7, 12).
The Community Input Project

Silicon Valley Community Foundation is committed to the best ideas and most effective solutions—at the local and the regional levels. With those goals in mind, the community foundation has initiated the Community Input Project, a series of strategic conversations around needs and issues that matter most. The issues were selected based on a review of local data, the many excellent assessments available about the health, social and environmental concerns in the region, and issues community members and leaders have raised.

The community foundation anticipates this process will spur a greater interest in regional partnerships as well as strategic solutions for meaningful, lasting and transformative change. The community foundation’s board of directors will take the results of the community input process into consideration when making decisions about future directions and strategies.

This brief represents a summary of important trends and issues related to education. Similar briefs will be available in the areas of immigration, arts and culture, environment, community economic development, housing, civic engagement and child and youth development.

Introduction

Public education is of vital importance to our state and nation. It provides residents with the capacity, knowledge and skills to sustain our system of government, to foster a thriving economy and to provide the foundation for a harmonious society. The sobering reality of California’s education system is that too few schools can now provide the conditions for learning in which all students can succeed. The students who have been served least well in our public schools, colleges and universities—largely students from low-income families and students of color—also make up an even greater proportion of California’s increasing population. It is imperative to extend to these children the same degree of educational promise that has been provided to the generations of California students that preceded them.

Major Trends

No Child Left Behind. The passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001 has had a tremendous impact on schools across the United States. Its intent is to improve the performance of primary and secondary schools by increasing the standards of accountability for states, school districts and individual schools. The legislation requires states to develop criterion-based assessments in basic skills to be given to all students in certain grades, if those states are to receive federal funding for schools. However, the effectiveness and desirability of NCLB’s measures have been vigorously debated. A primary criticism asserts that NCLB reduces effective instruction and student learning because it may cause states to lower achievement goals and motivate teachers “to teach to the test.” Moreover, the standards are set to increase and there are worries as to whether California’s schools can meet them (1).

Complicated Finance and Governance Systems. Today, California K-12 education system is governed by a fragmented set of entities with overlapping roles that sometimes operate in conflict with one another, to the detriment of the educational services offered to students. Also, fragmentation and isolation prevent K-12 and post-secondary education institutions from effectively aligning and reducing the obstacles students face as they transition from preschool into elementary and secondary school. School finance is equally problematic and complicated. The number of dollars available to each school district is largely an historical artifact of spending in the 1970s combined with confusing categorical grants programs. As a result, similar districts can receive substantially different revenues per pupil, and differences in student needs across districts are not systematically accounted for in determining revenue levels. Moreover, whereas districts must have a cap on the resources they can generate, there is no limit to what wealthy school districts can afford (2).

Disparity in the Quality of Education. California no longer has any racial or ethnic group that is a majority of the state population, yet schools serving large concentrations of low-income students, as well as those serving large numbers of African-Americans, Latinos and Native Americans, disproportionately receive fewer of the resources that matter in a quality education, resulting in lower student achievement. For example, research has shown that teachers in schools with high percentages of low-income, minority, and low-performing students tend to be less experienced and more likely to lack credentials than teachers in other schools. Further, per pupil spending is generally less in lower-performing schools than higher-performing ones. Wealthier school districts can hire more experienced and more capable teachers, which contributes to better student achievement (2).

Persistent Achievement Gaps. The gap in academic achievement between white, middle-class students and their minority and lower-class counterparts is widely recognized as one of the most significant challenges facing our schools. Although conventional opinion is that “failing” schools contribute to the achievement gap, the evidence indicates that schools already do a good deal to combat it. The antecedents of the achievement gap are complex, but they are evident when the children are three years old. Thus, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of quality early childhood education programs as a means to address the achievement gap (3).

Emergence of New School Models. In order to respond to concerns about traditional public schools, several new models of schools have become popular in communities across the United States. Two such examples, charter schools and small schools, operate with greater autonomy and are less bound by regulations and tests. High schools also make literacy a priority and connect the most effective teachers with the most vulnerable students (12).

California High School Exit Exam. As students move from middle to high school, many face new social, emotional and academic demands. For low-achieving students, the transition is especially difficult for them. The 9th grade year is when many of these students experience coursework failure and grade retention, often cited as factors that increase the likelihood of students dropping out of school. Students in the graduating class of 2006 are also subject to new requirements. They must pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) in order to receive a high school diploma. Designed to motivate students and educators, some argue that these “high-stakes” tests may exacerbate existing inequalities in educational outcomes through increasing dropout rates and take attention away from root causes of unequal schools (13).

High School Reform. States across the country are emphasizing high schools as a key area of focus for education reform and California’s P-16 Council, established by the State Superintendent of Education, has designated high school reform as its first priority. This is because while progress is being made in raising achievement and closing gaps during elementary school years, these gains tend to erode when students enter high school. In 2007, less than 10 percent of the regions high schools have reached the optimal level of 800 on the Academic Performance Index (5, 12). Researchers observe that high schools, which are especially effective at improving the academic achievement of previously low-performing students, open the door to rigorous courses for all students, regardless of prior achievement. These high schools also make literacy a priority and connect the most effective teachers with the most vulnerable students (12).

Removing Barriers to Post-Secondary Education. At the national level, an estimated 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school each year. The majority are young people who have lived in the U.S. most of their lives, having come to the United States with their parents when they were young. While they are ready to attend college, become professionals, and contribute to society, they face a number of barriers. They often do not have the financial resources to attend college, are unable to work because of their undocumented status and live in fear of being detected by immigration officials. State and federal policy reforms are needed to remove these barriers. For example, the recently vetoed Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, would allow undocumented immigrants a six-year period of conditional status to graduate from a two-year community college, complete two years of a four-year college, or serve in the U.S. military for two years. Students who met these requirements would then be eligible to apply for permanent-residency status (14).

Sources

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12. 2006. 11.
13. 2005 California Child Care Portfolio, California Child Care Resource and Referral Network.
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