Regional Meeting 2010

Closing Remarks

October 6, 2010
By Emmett D. Carson, Ph.D.,
CEO and President
Good afternoon. My name is Emmett Carson and I have the privilege of serving as CEO and president of Silicon Valley Community Foundation. I have been given the welcome and difficult task of offering some closing remarks. It is a welcome task because I have a few things to say and a difficult one because I have to follow such a remarkable panel. To start, please join me in thanking our fabulous panel again. They were tremendous.

One of the hardest questions that I am asked is: What is the community foundation’s major focus? My response is that we are a comprehensive center for philanthropy engaged in making all forms of philanthropy more powerful and effective. We are a broad based enterprise in the same way that universities focus on promoting higher education and hospitals seek to improve overall health.

As Nancy described, we are very proud of our emergency responses to the earthquake in Haiti and the fire in San Bruno. Our Census work was highly effective and will result in millions of dollars coming back to our communities and greater representation from our state in Washington, DC.

We also have continued our intellectual leadership through research reports with Joint Venture Silicon Valley and Silicon Valley Leadership Group, among others. These reports provide a base from which we can facilitate and participate in informed debate about how to move our region forward to solve our most challenging problems.

We do our very best work when we use our entire toolkit: convening, research, grantmaking and advocacy and when we incorporate the time, talent and treasure of our donor advisors, corporate partners, nonprofit leaders and government partners. Our work in education is a perfect example.

Let me first set the context with a few facts.

- In the US, a child drops out of high school every 26 seconds.
- Among poor children, low academic achievement in the fifth grade can be traced back to chronic absenteeism in kindergarten.
- In Santa Clara County, 64 percent of elementary school principals report little or no contact with the preschools that send them their students.
- Only about a third of third grade Latino students and slightly more than a third of third grade African American students scored proficient or higher in reading in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties in 2008-2009.
- Less than half of all pre-algebra and algebra teachers in San Mateo and Santa Clara county middle schools have a mathematics teaching credential. In addition, 43 percent of the poorest middle schools do not have a single teacher — not one — credentialed in mathematics and there are three K-8 school districts collectively serving over 3,000 kids that do not have a single teacher credentialed in mathematics.

Why does algebra matter? In your meeting bag, you will find a Silicon Valley Community Foundation pen that we believe is a sure conversation starter. The education equation contained inside the pen shows that algebra in the 10th grade is a key predictor of whether students are on track to meet requirements for admission to California’s public universities. Of 26,579 10th grade students in San Mateo and Santa Clara County, only 10,276 students, a dismal 39 percent, are projected to meet requirements for admission. It is inconceivable that this is occurring in Silicon Valley and helps explain why California ranks 47th among states and the District of Columbia in 8th grade math and 49th in reading comprehension.

While I could continue with equally disturbing statistics, I want to focus on what the community foundation and our many partners are doing to address these issues across the educational pipeline.

- Through our early learning efforts, we have distributed over 17,000 brochures in English and Spanish as well as a DVD on how parents can prepare their children for academic success in kindergarten and beyond. Building on this work, we were proud to receive a competitive grant of $2.3 million from First Five to extend these efforts.
- Through our supporting organization, Raising A Reader, we are engaged in local and national efforts to expand our tested and proven literacy program for children up to 6 years old.
- Last year, through our generous donor advisors, both living and past, the community foundation awarded 304 college scholarships totaling over $721,000 to deserving students.
- Our work with corporate partners such as National Semiconductor with its “Power of Education” support for K-12 science and math instruction and Cisco’s “Global Education Leaders Program” to design new education systems based on 21st century needs are but two of many examples.
- In our efforts to close the middle school achievement gap in math, we have granted over $3.6 million to 53 organizations over the last two years to provide more teachers the skills to teach mathematics and to support in-school and out of school programs to increase the math proficiency of students.
- Our newest report, Closing the Racial Achievement Gap, was developed with the Silicon Valley Education Foundation and is in your meeting bag. In a post racial world, it is not easy to talk about racial disparities. I want to thank the teachers, principals and superintendents who along with donor advisors and business leaders engaged in courageous conversations around race and education.
One of the most disturbing things we learned was that many eighth graders who had successfully passed their algebra course were being required to repeat the class in ninth grade. Yes, you heard me correctly. Kids who received As, Bs and Cs were told, without explanation, that they would have to repeat a course that they passed. Kids who would otherwise be on track to meet math requirements for entry to a California public university are being taken off track by our educational system and this was more likely to happen to kids of color. We also learned that schools had no consistent policies or procedures for determining which students would be held back and why. This information is shocking, unacceptable and demands our immediate attention. It is my sincere hope that we will be able to report to you next year that we and our educational partners have made significant progress on this issue or explain to you why we have not.

Finally, our donor advisors are doing incredible work in advancing our understanding of how kids learn, how to involve parents, how to improve teaching and the value of alternative learning environments. We work closely with visionary donor advisors such as: Reed Hastings, Charlene and Derry Kabcenell, Dick Lavenstein, Tim Koogle and Pam Scott, among many others. Joining our family of donors, I am pleased to announce that Mark Zuckerberg’s philanthropic initiative, Startup: Education, a $100 million effort to help reform public schools in Newark, New Jersey, will carry out its work as the newest supporting organization of Silicon Valley Community Foundation. Startup: Education is very interested in learning from the efforts of our donor advisors, sharing their experiences, and providing opportunities for others to join with them in their efforts.

I hope this gives you a glimpse of how in just one area, education, we bring to bear all of the tools available to us to learn about and move issues forward.

Before closing, I would be remiss if I did not share with you the ongoing economic challenges facing families in our region. While the financial markets have started to stabilize, chronically poor families continue to face significant hardships and the ongoing recession is now enveloping the middle class.

Formerly middle class families have exhausted their financial resources. They do not have the same emotional resiliency that we have come to expect from those who are chronically poor. We hear that these families may be experiencing higher rates of domestic violence and that their kids may be more susceptible to suicide. These newly unemployed are unfamiliar with the workings of our fraying social safety-net as both the state and county governments are facing significant cutbacks. A jobless recovery in which 44 million Americans are out of work, one in seven people, will have profound consequences for our region for decades to come.

As you know, this is not the only work that we do. But I firmly believe that this is among the most important work for us to do now. Kids can’t learn when they are hungry; businesses can’t grow when people do not have jobs to buy goods and services; and local governments cannot provide vital safety net assistance when faced with declining tax revenue from falling property values and home foreclosures.

Two years ago, we asked for your help in supporting food and shelter organizations struggling to meet the demands from the onslaught of the recession — and you responded. We were able to raise and distribute $3 million through your generosity. Last year, we asked for your help in supporting our economic security fund to assist those hardest hit by the recession and again you responded. In addition to our discretionary grantmaking which has awarded $3.7 million to 22 organizations over the last two years, you provided over a quarter of a million dollars for foreclosure prevention, financial literacy education and efforts to curtail predatory payday lending which can charge interest rates as high as 400 percent. Consistent with what the law allows, the community foundation supported advocacy and lobbying efforts in Sacramento around SB 1146 to pilot alternatives to predatory payday lending that do not take advantage of people in poverty. The bill received overwhelming bi-partisan support and was signed in to law by Governor Schwarzenegger.

To all of you who supported these safety-net and economic security efforts, please accept my heartfelt thanks. You have helped both chronically and newly poor families throughout our region keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. Unfortunately, our work is not yet done because this economic crisis is not yet over. And so, today, I am again asking for your help to support our safety-net and economic security efforts.

As I conclude, I want to thank our outstanding board of directors. They devote an enormous amount of time and their intellectual talent to ensuring the community foundation’s success. I also want to thank the community foundation’s phenomenal staff. They are constantly widening the circle and deepening the engagement and none of our success would be possible without them.

I hope that you will stay for the reception and enjoy the special entertainment which will feature award winners from the community foundation’s Donor Circle for the Arts. These emerging artists are extremely talented and we are in for rare treat. Thank you for coming today and we look forward to seeing you next year as we celebrate our fifth year anniversary. We are adjourned.
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