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WE MUST MAKE CHILDREN'S BILL OF RIGHTS A PRIORITY

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It has been almost a year since the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors endorsed the Bill of Rights for Children and Youth, and already we are seeing positive results that range from improved test scores to fewer juvenile arrests.

The bill of rights may have appeared to be simply a laundry list of the obvious: Children have a right to nutritious food, shelter, clothing, health care and a quality education. But for too long the obvious has been slipping through the cracks. As the Mercury News editorialized when the bill passed, "Do we really need to be told these things are important? In a word, yes."

And we aren't just paying lip service.

We are measuring whether we are adhering to the principles in the bill of rights by following the Children's Agenda, established in 2006 as an integrated countywide initiative.

During the past year, thanks to the passion and commitment shared by the six Santa Clara County cities, 12 school districts and hundreds of organizations, we have made progress in several areas:

- More children from low-income families are starting kindergarten ready to learn, rather than trying to catch up. Santa Clara County children are performing better on state fitness tests. Fewer youths were arrested and detained in the juvenile justice system.
- When problems such as domestic violence or job loss arise, families get help early from community-based organizations. This has led to a 40 percent decrease since 2007 in substantiated cases of child abuse or neglect and first-time entries into foster care.

Larry Best, executive director of the Peninsula Partnership Leadership Council at the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, put it this way: "The children's bill of rights is contributing to a cultural shift in Santa Clara County so that all of us are beginning to prioritize children in a way that has never happened before. This is the start of a movement that is building momentum to fulfill the goals in the bill of rights. These early results speak for themselves."

However, we are losing ground in some areas. More children qualify for the National School Lunch program, but too many are not taking advantage and still go hungry. And, with no new funding for the county's Children's Health Initiative, fewer children will have insurance coverage.

Even though fewer youths are being locked up, a high percentage of those who are in the system have mental health issues, have experienced trauma and are several years behind in school.

We need to make more progress. The bill of rights makes children Santa Clara County's first priority as a matter of justice. It frames our commitment to the young people who live here by saying all children have a right to a good education, healthy food and safe places to play.

Our work ensuring that children have these basic rights is going to get harder as schools and social service programs face unprecedented state and local budget deficits and another round of cuts.

That's why dozens of community agencies will gather at the Fourth Annual Children's Summit on Friday in the Santa Clara Convention Center to reconfirm our commitment to making our young people a priority. Please join us to give voice to children whose rights must be championed -- and protected from the budget ax.

This is an investment in their future and ours.

DANA BUNNETT is director of Kids in Common, a program of Planned Parenthood Mar Monte. (For more information about the Bill of Rights and the Children's Summit, go to www.kidsincommon.org.) She wrote this article for this newspaper.

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