

## Opinion: Santa Clara County children's bill of rights more than symbolic

By Dana Bunnett and Katherine Lucero  
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If you've watched the hit film "The Blind Side," based on football star Michael Oher's life story, you've seen how it's possible to transform the future of a seriously disadvantaged young person by investing in him emotionally and financially.

A week from today, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors will vote on the adoption of The Bill of Rights for Children and Youth, which was designed with young people like Oher in mind.

No mere symbolic gesture, the Bill of Rights is a bold contract with the community that will hold public officials accountable when making budget and policy decisions that affect children.

The elements of the Bill of Rights seem obvious: Children should have food, shelter, clothing, health care, a quality education, a safe environment and positive relationships with supportive adults. But far too often, the promise of these rights is not fulfilled, even in an affluent region like Silicon Valley. Consider these statistics from Santa Clara County:

In 2008, 2,980 students in grades 9-12 dropped out of school — comparable to two midsized high schools.

At least 60 percent of the youth in juvenile hall have mental health issues, 78 percent have experienced trauma and most are several grades behind in reading and math.

Nearly 25,000 students who qualify do not receive free or reduced-cost lunches.

We have a stake in making sure that these trends are reversed. A child who is not safe and healthy is at great risk of dropping out of school.

Those who don't graduate have higher rates of unemployment, criminal behavior and dependence on public assistance.

The child advocacy organization Kids in Common has linked this Bill of Rights with the Santa Clara County Children's Agenda, an initiative that focuses on agencies working in concert to identify community goals.

The agenda includes 13 data points, such as school reading scores or the number of children with health insurance, that we use to track our progress.

The data will be monitored over time. By using research to inform decision-making, guide program improvement and drive results, the Children's Agenda is an important tool in backing up the Bill of Rights for Children and Youth.

This commitment will be tested soon as policy makers respond to the governor's proposed state budget cuts, which would be devastating to children's services.

According to the California Budget Project's analysis, our already strapped K-14 system will lose \$836 million in the current fiscal year and \$1.54 billion in the next fiscal year.

More than a third of the governor's "expenditure solutions" target health and human services programs.

Approximately 225,000 children will be dropped from Healthy Families health care coverage, and the program's vision-care benefits would be eliminated. (How do we expect children to learn if they cannot even see the blackboard?)

With the Children's Agenda and Bill of Rights, we take a very public stand: All children and youth — no matter their income level, race, culture, gender, sexual orientation or developmental abilities — should expect to be healthy, safe, get a quality education and be valued by the community.

Together, they help us make the welfare of young people a priority, even in times of financial upheaval.

DANA BUNNETT is executive director of Kids in Common, San Jose. KATHERINE LUCERO is supervising judge of Santa Clara County Dependency Court. They wrote this article for the Mercury News.