Behind 1,2,3? the Numbers

What Are the Indicators Telling Us?

For a look at more data and discussion, go to page 17, 55, and 56.

A core component of the Family and Children First Council's annual Reports is a set of indicators, things such as Low Birthweight, Graduation Rate, and Unemployment. We think these indicators have a story to tell us. That is why we track them and report on their trends. They are fuel for community conversations about the conditions facing our children, families, adults, and neighborhoods. This year, in order to enhance the ability of the indicators to talk to us, we have discontinued or revised a number of them, and added some new ones. (See page 6.) As a result we are now tracking 24 indicators; for the past few years we had been tracking 27.

We go "behind the numbers" in every Report in an effort to put what the indicators are telling us in perspective. The reality is that the indicators by themselves are just a collection of graphs with new points being added to each line every year. The challenge is to weave these strands – and the way they are moving – into a coherent story and to start some conversations. In one sense this is like trying to connect a handful of stars into a constellation; two people can look at the same set of stars and discern two different patterns. When a compelling story can be told about the constellation it becomes easier for people to interpret what they are seeing.

The same is true for the indicators. The story that weaves them together must do so in a way that helps people in the community clearly see what has been happening and what is currently happening, especially if the purpose for tracking the indicators is to spur action. In other words, the "story" is a common sense version that folds the data into a set of ideas about the "way things ought to be." [1]

So what are these 24 indicators telling us? Are we getting closer to "the way things ought to be" and to achieving the Council's Vision for Montgomery County? A look at all of the trends (see page 3) would suggest "Yes…and no." Ten of the 24 indicators are moving in the desired direction but eight are not; the remaining six are flat, not making any significant net change during the time they have been tracked. However, the average county comparative ranking[2] puts Montgomery County between 6th and 7th among Ohio's ten largest counties, far from the 1st place ranking that is considered "most desirable."

It is sobering to realize that three of the eight indicators which are heading in an undesired direction are directly related to the community's economic vitality: Unemployment, People Receiving Public Assistance, and Median Household Income. Two more of these eight – Employment Rate for Persons with a Disability and Poverty Rate for Persons with a Disability[3] – speak to the challenges that people in special populations face in trying to participate in the economic life of the community.

It would seem, therefore, that part of the story that the indicators are telling us has to do with the economy or, perhaps more accurately, how well area residents are faring. In this regard our local indicators are echoing the national search for more jobs. A particularly dramatic example is shown in Figure 1 where the effects that the recent recession and financial

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[1] Jennifer James, Ph.D., Urban Cultural Anthropologist and Plenary Session Speaker at the 2004 Community Indicators Conference, Reno, NV.

[2] For the 20 indicators for which they are available. Montgomery County's rankings range from 1st to 10th.

[3] For each of these newly introduced indicators we only have two years of data.

crisis have had on the local public assistance caseload can easily be seen. As a corollary, the unemployment rate almost doubled during this time period. (See page 54.)

The Unemployment and People Receiving Public Assistance indicators speak to the number of jobs in the community. Of equal, if not more, importance is the quality of those jobs. One measure of that is the Median Household Income indicator. Because the bulk of household income is from wages and salaries, this indicator in effect tells us the value that employers put on our local workforce.

The fact that this indicator is not heading in the desired direction (see page 56) is troubling enough, but Figure 2 puts the situation into sharp focus. The connection between an individual person's educational attainment and his or her ability to earn income is generally understood, but when viewed on a state by state basis the strength of the correlation is readily apparent. Across the country, states and local communities are often said to be competing with each other economically. Figure 2 tells us that Montgomery County's place in that competition is not where we want it to be.

Speaking directly to this issue is a report[4] recently released by the Pathways to Prosperity Project, based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The authors talk about the challenges facing countries around the world in "preparing young people for an increasingly competitive labor market" and conclude that the United States has fallen behind:

It's not just that many countries are leapfrogging the U.S. in educational attainment and achievement. Some of these systems are also doing a much better job of helping young adults make a successful transition to the labor market.

4 William C. Symonds, Robert B. Schwartz and Ronald Ferguson, February 2011. Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century. Report issued by the Pathways to Prosperity Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

They emphasize the importance of educational attainment and convincingly make the case that "we now need every young American not only to complete high school, but to obtain a post-secondary credential or degree with currency in the labor market." They call for broad school reform "that embraces multiple pathways to help young people successfully navigate the journey from adolescence to adulthood." In other words, if we want to equip as many people as possible with a marketable credential – one that has "currency in the labor market" – we will need to emphasize pathways that lead to an associate's degree or a post-secondary occupational credential as well as those that lead to a four-year degree and beyond.
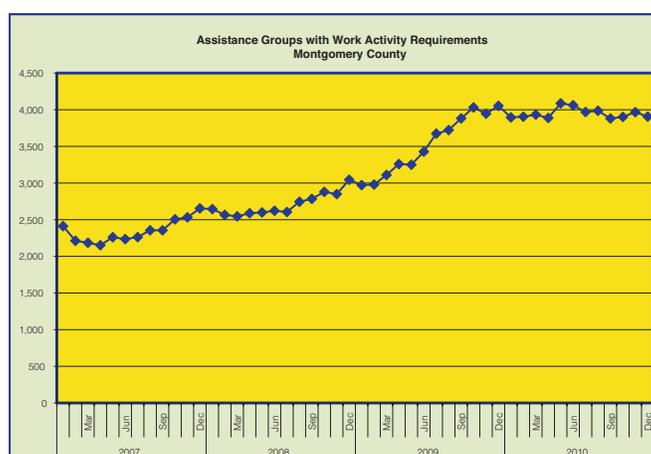

Figure 1. *Each recipient of public assistance is a member of an "assistance group" which, for practical purposes, can be considered a household. When tracking the rise and fall in the number of assistance groups with a work activity requirement, the FCFC excludes those households receiving benefits solely because of the presence of an eligible child. The number of assistance groups with a work activity requirement almost doubled between early 2007 and early 2010. This time span includes what some have called the "Great Recession," from December 2007 to June 2009. Source: Montgomery County Dept. of Job and Family Services.*

Based on what Figure 2 is telling us about our local situation, this message has been heard loud and clear. The local vision for the "Young People Succeeding Journey" (see page 44) is that every student is ready to learn when entering kindergarten, ready to learn when graduating from high school, and ready to earn when graduating with a post-secondary credential, either a 2- or 4-year degree, or a career-ready credential.

A key part of this vision is that every child is ready to learn when entering kindergarten. In Montgomery County, according to another one of our indicators, Kindergarten Readiness (see page 17), about 77% of the children are assessed in Bands 2 and 3 on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment – Literacy Test (KRA-L). This means that about one-fourth of them are assessed to be in Band 1, meaning they need broad intense instruction when they start school.

Children who start school significantly behind have difficulty catching up. So this indicator is telling us that we, as a community, need to do what we can to boost their school readiness. By going "behind the numbers" we can examine the demographic data of those children who have taken the KRA-L. This can give us some insight on which children are most likely to benefit from extra help before their first day of school. We learn, for example, that the racial disparity found

Behind the Numbers

Educational Attainment and Median Household Income
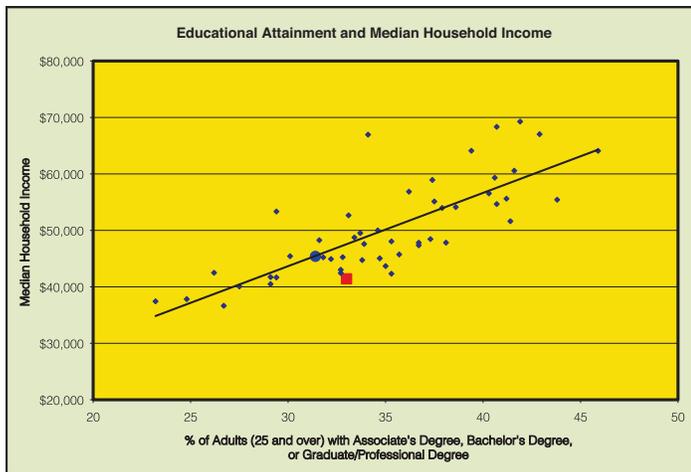

Figure 2. Median household income increases significantly with higher levels of educational attainment. Each point represents one of the 50 states, with Ohio (blue circle) highlighted. For comparison, Montgomery County (red square) is included. Source: 2009 American Community Survey.

in so many health and social service measures is also present here; in Montgomery County, a black child is 83% more likely to be assessed in Band 1 than a white child. An even larger disparity is found when economic status is considered instead of race. As Figure 3 shows, students who are economically disadvantaged are almost three times as likely to be assessed in Band 1 as non-economically disadvantaged students.

Such an observation reinforces the wisdom of targeting distressed neighborhoods for the TOTS ("Taking Off To Success") program, intended to improve kindergarten readiness (see page 43). In addition it reminds us, again, of the negative consequences of poverty, a topic which the FCFC has addressed from a number of different angles in previous Reports, and one which is the focus of the Avoiding Poverty indicator. Sadly, this is another one of the eight indicators that has not been heading in the desired direction. In this case that trend has been true for most of the past two decades (see page 27), although the last two years have seen a welcome reversal.

This reversal is certainly encouraging, but if we want to get closer to "the way things ought to be" it will need to be sustained. In addition, the other indicators that have not been trending in the desired direction will have to

Meet Anthony, one of the people "behind the numbers."

Going "behind the numbers" to tell the story of the indicators is one way to make them come alive. Another way is to tell the story of a real person who is part of these numbers. This year the Positive Living for Special Populations Outcome Team is introducing two new indicators to help capture the challenges that people in special populations face in trying to participate in the economic life of the community. Anthony is one of those people. We thank Goodwill Easter Seals Miami Valley for telling us his story:

Anthony faced many barriers and challenges in his life. He graduated from high school but struggled to figure out what was next.

Anthony was referred to our Youth Employment Training Services program in 2008. He was diagnosed with autism and difficulties with expressive and receptive language skills, as well as challenges with his social skills and interpersonal relationships. Anthony had no previous work experience, but a strong desire for employment in order to achieve some level of financial and personal independence.

The staff helped Anthony learn valuable job-seeking skills and provided guidance on his journey toward independence. He began to interact more positively with others and learned acceptable social practices. Anthony was very diligent in keeping detailed information and records while completing applications for employment. He never used his disability as an excuse but focused on his organizational and time management skills, believing that the perfect job was out there for him.

With the help of Beth Kelso, Youth Employment Specialist, Anthony learned the public transportation system and became more comfortable taking public transportation to his appointments with potential employers. Over several months, Anthony interviewed for various jobs but was not hired. He did not give up hope, but continued to improve his interviewing and people skills.

His open-mindedness and determination paid off in September of 2009 when Anthony was hired at Kingston Rehabilitation Center as a Dietary Aide. His job responsibilities include setting up the dining room, serving patients, prepping desserts, bussing tables and assisting on the tray line. He has proven to be a great asset to the dietary team and continues to strive toward total independence.

"To finally get a job after a year of searching, it was the boost of confidence that I needed," Anthony said. "It was an exciting moment."

Beth Kelso said, "Anthony is always friendly and kind to everyone he meets. He's come such a long way! He's a great example of how persistence and hard work truly pays off."

Knowing there are more mountains to climb ahead, Anthony continues to learn new skills and build his experience, making many friends along the way. He also spends time volunteering at a local church and said, "I enjoy helping others."

Behind the Numbers

KRA-L Test Results by Economic Disadvantagement
Montgomery County, Fall 2009

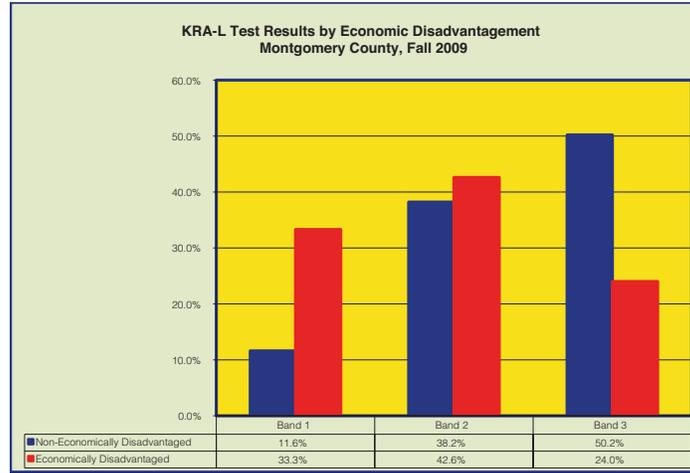|	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3
Non-Economically Disadvantaged	11.6%	38.2%	50.2%
Economically Disadvantaged	33.3%	42.6%	24.0%

Figure 3. There are significant differences in the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment – Literacy results for students depending on whether they are identified by the school district as economically disadvantaged or not.[1] An economically disadvantaged student is almost 3 times as likely to be assessed in Band 1 (needing broad intense instruction) and less than half as likely to be assessed in Band 3 (needing enriched instruction). Source: Ohio Dept. of Education. (ODE)

turn around…and the ones that have been going in the desired direction will need to keep their momentum.

The TOTS program has already been mentioned as one example of an effort to drive an indicator in the desired direction or, to put it another way, to write a more positive story for that indicator. It will take time to see how that story evolves, as it will for all the initiatives underway in the community, some of which are described on the other pages of this Report.

Taken together, then, these indicators are telling us that we face serious challenges, challenges that include turning the curves of some indicators and making sure that other indicators keep moving in the desired direction. Going "behind the numbers" gives us a better understanding of the story that the indicators are telling so that we can tell that story to others and engage them in responding, both to the challenges and to the opportunities that they present.

The most important thing to remember is that the story is still being written. We invite the readers of this Report to help us write it. What are the indicators saying to you? What other information do we need to consider? Contact us at **communityconversations@fcfc.montco.org.** And thanks for helping us write our community's story.

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1 How "Economic Disadvantagement" is determined is explained in the Ohio Dept. of Education's Education Management Information System (EMIS) Manual available from their Web site, http://www.ode.state.oh.us/. How "Economic Disadvantagement" is determined is explained in the Ohio Dept. of Education's (ODE) Education Management Information System (EMIS) Manual available from their Web site, http://www.ode.state.oh.us/. Because of the way the data are reported by ODE, Figure 3 represents about 87% of the Montgomery County kindergartners who took the KRA-L Test in the fall of 2009.