

Behind the Numbers



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SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE NEIGHBORHOODS

The FCFC's approach to achieving the desired community outcomes includes looking “behind the numbers” as part of our effort to move the community indicators in their desired directions (see pages 3-4). For the Safe and Supportive Neighborhoods outcome we have looked at Neighborhood Indicators (2006) and, in conjunction with the Economic Self-Sufficiency outcome, the Geography of Opportunity (2007). In this 10th Anniversary Report we revisit and update some of these analyses, and we show how they contribute to ongoing community conversations.

From the discussion of Neighborhood Indicators in the 2006 Report:

Concentrated poverty means that other troubling conditions that are associated with poverty—low educational attainment, poor health, and dismal outcomes for children growing up in these neighborhoods, to name a few—are also concentrated. While this fact may be well understood in a general sense, it is striking to see what this means for Montgomery County's neighborhoods.

UPDATE:

In 2008, the FCFC formed the Comprehensive Neighborhood Initiative, a place-based effort that will target neighborhoods with high rates of poverty. Impetus for this Initiative came from the work of the Supportive and Engaged Neighborhoods Outcome Team.

Over the last few years the Team has been calling attention to the negative consequences of chronic poverty, as evidenced by the excerpt above. Recent research underscores that concern. Simply put, the brains of low-income children were found to be much less efficient than they could or should be.¹

Researchers used an EEG machine to measure the brain waves of nine- and ten-year-old children watching images on a computer screen; the kids had been asked to identify and react to certain specific shapes. Low-income children were less able to detect the requested image and they were also less able to block out distractions. The lead researcher, a cognitive psychologist, put these

findings in everyday terms when he told a reporter, “It is a similar pattern to what's seen in patients with strokes” that have damaged a certain part of the brain.

While these researchers cannot determine at what age these low-income children suffered the “stroke-like” damage, it has been said, based on prior research, that “90% of a child's brain is developed by the age of five.”² It stands to reason, then, that the earlier in a child's life his or her brain is nurtured, the better the long-term consequences.

Such has been the thinking behind efforts of the Young People Succeeding Outcome Team and ReadySetSoar to expand the quality of early childhood care and education programs. The

need is especially urgent in low-income neighborhoods where too many children enter kindergarten lacking the cognitive and social skills to succeed.

An example of a promising intervention can be found in some recently published research. Early childhood specialists have long wondered “whether preschool education programs should emphasize academic achievement or social and emotional development.”³ According to an official of the National Institutes of Health, which funded the research, this study was the first attempt to develop a pre-school curriculum that teaches both. Children in the REDI (Research-Based,

Developmentally Informed) Head Start program did significantly better “on measures of vocabulary, emergent literacy, emotional understanding, social problem solving, social behavior, and learning engagement” than did children in traditional Head Start.⁴ In other words, the program improved the children's school-readiness both academically and non-academically.

A larger—and encouraging (!)—conclusion might be that well-designed and well-implemented programs can have a profoundly important influence on children in high poverty neighborhoods.



¹ To be published in Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience. News account available at http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2008-12-07-childrens-brains_N.htm?POE=click-refer; accessed on Dec. 8, 2008.

² Young People Succeeding Outcome Team Report in the FCFC 2007 Report, pgs. 13-16.

³ NIH/National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2008, November 14). New Program Teaches Preschoolers Reading Skills, Getting Along With Others. ScienceDaily. Retrieved November 17, 2008, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/11/081114080933.htm>.

⁴ Bierman, KL, Domitrovich, CE, Nix, RL, Gest, SD, Welsh, JA, Greenberg, MT, Blair, C, Nelson, KE, and Gill, S. (2008) Promoting Academic and Social-Emotional School Readiness: The Head Start REDI Program. Child Development, 79(6), 1802-1817.