

To *Your* HEALTH *Fresno County*

Bringing you public health issues and ways to improve personal, family, neighborhood and community health



Education is the Keystone

March 10, 2015

The Fresno Bee recently published an Op-Ed by me titled, "[Six holiday wishes for great public health.](#)" Those wishes address what are the most urgent Public Health needs in Fresno County and can be translated into goals for the coming years.

We can work together on the following specific goals:

1. Complete and quality education for all students of every age
2. Substantially lower rates of chronic disease and premature death
3. Quality air
4. A markedly decreased number of vehicular deaths
5. Greatly reduced rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted illnesses
6. Available and appropriate resources for all individuals for whom overwhelming obstacles have made attaining well-being and full potential practically impossible

In this letter, I will discuss the goal of complete quality education for all students of every age and propose ways in which we can work together to accomplish that ideal.

Education is the keystone to well-being, equity, and the realization of full potential which is public health.

"...a large body of evidence strongly ... links education with health, even when other factors like income are taken into account." ¹

Public, private, or in-home education lays a foundation for long term health outcomes. Most, if not all, public health problems can be traced back to root causes that include inadequate education. Even when public health challenges are highly rooted in poverty, inequitable power balances, and racism, education plays a significant role in the outcome.

Inadequate education includes incomplete knowledge, poor life-skill preparation, or insufficient self-respect and sensitivity. Any gap in education can lead to a deficiency in public health at some level.

Educational attainment and health are nearly impossible to separate. Health knowledge and behaviors, employment and income, and social and psychological factors contribute to both cause and effect with regards to health outcomes. This interrelated dynamic is often transferred from parent to child in a perpetuating cycle resulting in ever worsening health outcomes. ¹

What measures can we take to assure the educational foundation that leads to the maximal well-being of the entire community?

Frequent daily communication from adults for ALL infants

[Talk to them](#). Read to them. Sing to them. The fewer words children hear and learn, the more likely they are to experience an achievement gap. This gap persists through the preschool and kindergarten years and has a life-long impact on health and well-being. Last month, the [Fresno Children's Movement](#) launched the ["Talk, Read, Sing" Campaign](#) in Fresno County.

Quality pre-school or the in-home equivalent for ALL children

Research shows that development of the neural systems involved in cognitive, emotional, neuroendocrine, and neuroimmune functions have a profound correlation to early stimulation and positive experiences. These early experiences also modify an individual's response to stress throughout life. ²

Early childhood intervention programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start provide comprehensive child development, educational, health, nutritional, social, and family services to those that qualify, but serve fewer than one million children nationally. ²

Let's support organizations like [Fresno County's Early Stars](#) which is working to increase the quality and accessibility of early care and education in Fresno County. Early Stars connects families in the county with high quality licensed care and education providers.

In the [American Medical Association's Journal of Ethics](#), Barbara and David Low propose that the essential elements of a human-development-oriented U.S. health policy, at minimum, include:

- appropriate prenatal care;
- provision for parent training and financial support where necessary;
- quality child care delivered by well-qualified child development specialists;
- progressive introduction of elemental education beginning at a few months of age;
- regular assessment to insure development and cognitive milestones are met prior to a child's entering kindergarten. ²

High quality K-12 education for EVERY student

"Studies suggest that school health programs can have positive effects on educational outcomes, health-risk behaviors and health outcomes." ³

At all grade levels, students should receive information on proper nutrition, the benefits of physical activity, and illness prevention.

For life-long skills that support healthy decision-making and behavior, academic subjects must promote positive self-esteem and community values as well as give students opportunities to learn and practice practical life skills, decision-making, and positive interpersonal relations.

A high school diploma for EVERY young person

Many factors impact high school graduation rates. Any mental health, social-emotional, economic, or physical difficulty which could lead to deviant behavior, failure to thrive in school, and increased risk for “dropping out” must be identified early for intervention. As a routine policy, mental health screening for all students should encompass all grade levels. School-based health clinics that are easily accessible and available to the family members of all students have proven beneficial for early intervention of health-related issues.

Individually tailored / case-managed education in close collaboration with family would eliminate “dropping out” of school. Two examples of this type of education include the [North Carolina Positive Behavior Intervention and Support \(PBIS\)](#) and the personalization strategy incorporated in the North Carolina New Schools Project. ³

Trauma-informed and restorative practices can eliminate the need for expulsion and also significantly reduce suspensions. The University of California at San Francisco implemented a program, [Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools \(HEARTS\)](#), which reduced suspension by 89%. ⁴

The numerous changes that need to be implemented and sustained in order to ensure an education for our children and youth that sets the stage for success and health cannot be accomplished by schools alone. Each task will involve the collective efforts and will of our entire community. Parents must be engaged and make their child’s success a priority. Mental health and social aid agencies in both public and private sectors must closely collaborate with schools, with each other, and with centers for higher education, law enforcement agencies, and the judicial system.

I urge you to e-mail me your thoughts and ideas on education and public health in Fresno County at ToYourHealth@co.fresno.ca.us

How might you contribute to this important effort?

Here’s to your health!



Dr. Ken Bird, Fresno County Health Officer

Citations:

1. [RWJ Exploring the Social Determinants of Health](#)
2. [Education and Education Policy as Social Determinants of Health](#);
Virtual Mentor. November 2006, Volume 8, Number 11: 756–761.
3. [Educational Attainment as a Social Determinant of Health](#) by Joseph Telfair, Terri L. Shelton
4. [San Francisco's El Dorado Elementary uses trauma-informed & restorative practices; suspensions drop 89%](#) By Jane Ellen Stevens