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POSSIBILITIES START HERE

Compute the Cure

How gaming tech
can beat disease

Misplaced

The fight over
algebra success

Water Works

Rethinking water
as a system

Smart Start

How early education
improves young
learners' lives



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SVCF isn't just supporting learning programs. It's also pushing for policies and standards that value education in our communities.

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Raising A Reader participant Kimberly Ceron, age 2

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Why are students who succeed in middle school algebra forced to repeat it in high school? The answer is important — especially to the students being derailed from the college track.

By Janet Rae-Dupree

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT HOUSER

Smart Start

Preparing a child for school requires more than a lovingly packed lunch and a box of No. 2 pencils. It begins from infancy and continues through the early years of elementary education.

The brain develops fastest during a child's first three years, yet public spending on education doesn't begin until the bell sounds for the first day at school. Kids who aren't taught the basics early enough lag behind their peers, often for their entire educational career. The statistics (see "The Need by the Numbers") make it clear: The longer we wait to begin teaching our children, the more it costs to make up for early deficits.

Arrayed against that bleak backdrop is a growing national discussion about the benefits of early childhood learning. Silicon Valley Community Foundation is taking the lead on programs that provide an early start.

CENTER FOR EARLY LEARNING

"This is a ripe time with a lot of opportunity for early learning, and we anticipate playing a big role in that," says Michelle Sioson Hyman, initiative officer for school readiness at SVCF.

Sioson Hyman coordinates a web of programs that this spring will be consolidated into the new Center for Early Learning. This focused unit will combine research and leadership

Establishing good learning habits in young children matters later – for college, for career, for life. Find out how SVCF programs support the first steps in a long educational journey.



Juana Avila reads with daughter Kimberly Ceron using books from Raising A Reader.



1
million

The number of families
served by Raising A
Reader in the past
15 years

in a comprehensive approach to early learning from birth through age 8.

"We have a long legacy of leadership in this area, and we see ourselves playing an even larger role as various pieces of legislation come through Sacramento, including a possible universal transitional kindergarten bill," Sioson Hyman notes.

The "Parent Story Project," a regional survey to analyze whether parents have what they need to jump-start their children's education, will be one of the center's first initiatives. The center will conduct a series of community dialogues to share key issues and data points unearthed by the project.

Parents are a child's first and, often, best teachers. Babies who are shown picture books, read to and talked to regularly are exposed to seven to 10 times the number of words by the time they enter kindergarten than their less-stimulated peers, according to the Parents as Teachers program in St. Louis. And data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that children enrolled in preschool programs understand what's expected of them when they walk into their first day at kindergarten.

TRANSITION TO SCHOOL DAYS

Bridges to Success, an initiative supported in large part by First 5 San Mateo County, aims to ease the transition from life at home to learning at school.

Research demonstrates the need for programs:

1 There is a real risk of dropping out. Children who aren't reading proficiently by the end of third grade are more likely to drop out of high school before graduation. As of 2010, 6.6 million low-income children under age 8 were at risk of becoming high school dropouts.

(Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation)

2 Low-income families are hit harder. 83 percent of children from low-income families are not reading proficiently as they enter fourth grade.

(Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress)

3 Public money is dwindling. Federal spending on young children dropped precipitously from 2010 through 2013 and is projected to continue to decline to its lowest point since the Great Depression. (Source: The Urban Institute)

4 Return on investment is high. Every dollar spent on early childhood education produces a 7 to 10 percent annual return over the course of a student's schooling, based on reduced costs in remedial education, increased career earnings and other factors.

(Source: Nobel Economist James Heckman, *American Educator*, Spring 2011)

\$35

per child: The cost of Raising A Reader, which places up to 100 books into each child's hands in a year

"Bridges to Success allows us to create what some experts have called the next social contract for the primary years of education, one that is defined by a more systematic and coordinated approach to early care and education," says Erica Wood, senior vice president of community leadership and grantmaking at SVCF.

Bridges to Success revolves around two key programs: Kickoff to Kindergarten and Ready Schools. The first, Kickoff to Kindergarten, is a four-week summer workshop for roughly 1,000 children per year who don't have access to preschool. The goal is to help them navigate a classroom environment that might otherwise feel confusing or intimidating.

"Kids who have trouble communicating hold frustration in their little bodies, and that can prompt some challenging behaviors," explains Sarah Poulain, director for the Early Childhood and Family Intervention Services Department at StarVista.

As co-lead with SVCF on the Bridges to Success initiative, StarVista operates six early childhood and family services programs in San Mateo County. Much of the work is designed to support parents in their role as teachers.

"We help them begin to understand how their children are constantly learning from them by watching and listening," Poulain says. Counselors visit parents at home and interact with them and their children in small groups. The activities prepare kids for school and identify and treat developmental issues early.

A BRIDGE FOR TEACHERS

The second Bridges to Success program, Ready Schools, works with preschool and early-elementary educators to align learning goals so children are proficient in reading and math by the end of third grade.

Usually, kindergarten teachers have little to no contact with a community's preschools, which operate outside the school districts. By participating in Ready Schools teams, each group can see how colleagues instruct students at every stage.

For example, Cabrillo Unified School District in Half Moon Bay formed the Coastside Ready Schools Team to draw together widely dispersed preschool and pre-kindergarten programs. Assistant Superintendent Elizabeth Schuck, who coordinates the team, notes that the program costs her district nothing but brings in resources from agencies throughout the county.

"Prior to this, I had the idea that the preschools had

The Need by the Numbers



Kimberly Ceron, age 2, of Redwood City, Calif., benefits from the Raising A Reader program.

formed a secret society where we weren't welcome," she says with a laugh. "But the truth was that they thought it was an amazing idea just like we did. It was awesome and eye-opening for everyone at every level."

Working with the county's Office of Education and SVCF, Ready Schools teams have developed common assessment standards that help ensure each child has the necessary skills to progress in school. "We built brand-new bridges where none existed before," she says.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS

With Ready Schools experience, SVCF is sponsoring a series of workshops focusing on preschool through third grade. The first two were held in January and March, and the third will take place May 2.

At the second workshop, San José State University Professor Nancy Markowitz presented her work with the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, a nonprofit focused on social and emotional skills development.

"We know from our research that if you attend to the social and emotional skills issues, kids are more engaged, the high-risk kids are absent less, and academic achievement goes higher," Markowitz says.

Student teacher Briana Taylor is earning her teaching credentials in Markowitz's university program. She already has begun to use social-emotional cues in the San José classroom where she trains.

"I'm an anxious perfectionist, and I saw similar self-awareness in the kids," she says. "If they thought they couldn't do something right off the bat, they put

their pencils down and wouldn't try." So Taylor began drawing them back into the lesson by helping them identify where they began to feel flummoxed. "Don't just tell me, 'I don't get it.' Ask me questions. Ask other students questions. We can all help each other."

THE BIG LIFT

The tightly woven fabric of early learning initiatives now also includes The Big Lift, a new partnership between SVCF, San Mateo County's Office of Education, the County Manager's Office and the county's Board of Supervisors. Two related statistics prompted the partnership: First, 42 percent of the county's children are not proficient at reading by the end of third grade.

Second, 88 percent of high school dropouts were not reading by the third grade.

The partners have an ambitious goal: to reach 80 percent reading proficiency among third-graders by 2020. They hope to do so partly through promoting universal preschool. Currently, fewer than half of the county's families can afford private preschool programs, and more than 6,000 children are wait-listed for subsidized preschools.

RAISING READERS WITH PARENTS' HELP

Another piece of the puzzle has been in place for more than a decade: the now-national Raising A Reader program. The simple idea costs only about \$35 per child. Every week, four books are placed in a red canvas bag that low-income kids under age 6 receive through preschools, day care centers and home-visit programs. After a week of parent reading time at home, the bags come back for fresh material. Over the course of a year, each child enjoys 100 different books.

The program has been such a hit that Raising A Reader expanded to include elementary school students through the third grade. To encourage adoption, the program also conducts bilingual "read aloud" training for parents.

In the end, says Poulain, parents are the most important influence in a child's early years. "We work with the entire family because parents are their child's first teachers," she says. "That's what early childhood learning boils down to: Children do better when their parents are engaged and involved."



Share your insight on **early learning** on SVCF's Facebook page and on Twitter, using the hashtag **#SVCFEarlyLearning**. Get involved in early learning programs by visiting siliconvalleycf.org/spring-2014/early-learning.

"Helping parents to understand the magnitude of their impact – through time and involvement with their children – is one of the most important things we do."

—GABRIELLE E. MILLER,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
RAISING A READER

Misplaced

Why are **students who succeed** in algebra being left behind?

Math seems like a natural progression. Addition leads to subtraction; multiplication flows into division; whole numbers give way to fractions and decimals.

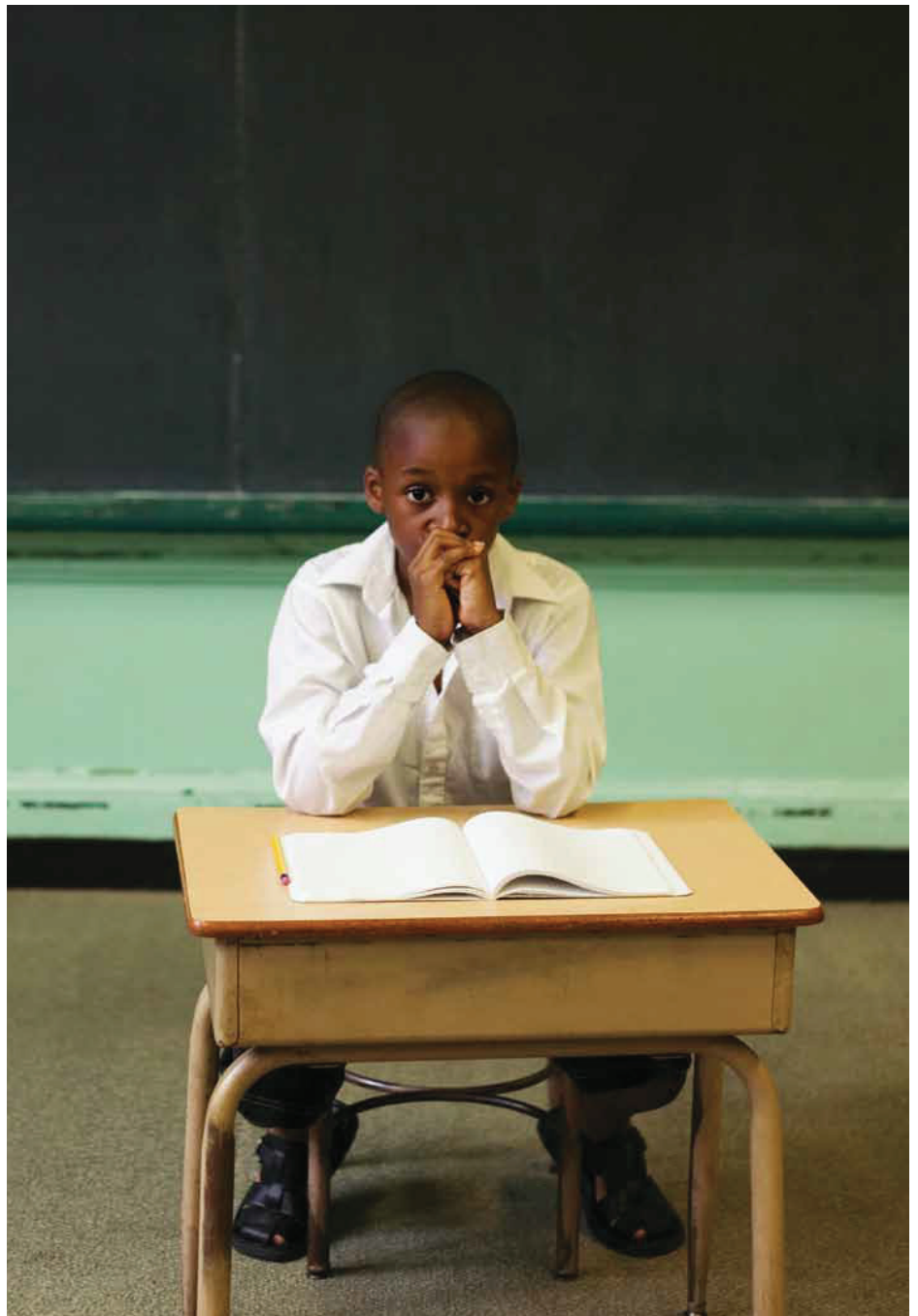
Then, with algebra, letters replace numbers, and formulas appear in place of simple arithmetic. Algebra is regarded as a challenging hurdle on the academic racetrack. But it is not insurmountable.

Completing Algebra I before high school significantly increases a child's chances of earning a high school diploma and attending a four-year college. Because college graduation has become a prerequisite to career success, California's Board of Education voted in 2008 to phase in mandatory algebra courses for all eighth-grade students.

Unfortunately, some children clear the algebra hurdle only to be sent back to the starting line.

A REPEATED PROBLEM

California students who succeed in eighth-grade Algebra I should move into Geometry for their freshman year. But research shows that disproportionate numbers of minority and disadvantaged students



CREATAS/THINKSTOCK

are being pushed into Algebra I again when they get to high school — even when grades or standardized test scores indicate they should advance. This misplacement derails a child from the college track.

“While it is technically acceptable for a college applicant to take Algebra I in ninth grade, the most competitive students begin ninth grade in Geometry and graduate having taken Calculus or another college-level mathematics class,” notes *Held Back*, a report issued by the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and funded by SVCF.

“We don’t get the hand-offs right in education,” says Erica Wood, senior vice president of community leadership and grantmaking at SVCF. “Every time a kid makes one of those transitions — from pre-K to kindergarten, or from elementary to middle school and then on to high school — the transition is a point of vulnerability where a student can be set up for success or can be misplaced and set up for more challenges.”

A SOLUTION FOR WRONG ANSWERS

Holding students back in math can have devastating consequences that cascade forward for years.

“The number one goal, especially in Silicon Valley, is to close the achievement gap,” says Dr. Morgan Marchbanks of Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education. “But how are we going to do that if we keep lowering expectations?”

A 2010 study from the Noyce Foundation, called *Pathways Report: Dead Ends and Wrong Turns on the Path Through Algebra*, revealed some troubling truths.

Nearly two-thirds of students were being held back after they completed eighth-grade algebra, including many students who had received good grades. “Progression was more uncertain for students from some ethnicities than from others,” the report noted.

At the time, Marchbanks was assistant superintendent for educational services at Sequoia Union High School District in Redwood City. After reading the report, she and fellow administrators investigated where Sequoia placed successful eighth-grade algebra students.

What they discovered shocked her.

“We found that the students for whom lower

placement occurred were almost exclusively kids of color who had attended the Ravenswood School District previously,” she says. “Their test scores indicated higher ability, but their teachers were recommending different placement.”

Why? The reasons varied, she says. Some teachers expressed concern about students who didn’t regularly complete homework. Others were worried that students didn’t pay close enough attention in class. And still others said the students simply weren’t ready to face academic challenges.

Sequoia set aside such subjective considerations and placed students in math courses according to their test scores. Within a year, the district had achieved “accurate placement” between 96 and 99 percent of the time. On behalf of SVCF, Marchbanks now is preparing a template other districts can follow.

“It is a social justice and an equity issue,” she says. “We need to make sure every kid gets a high-quality education with rigorous standards.”

SVCF FIGHTS MISPLACEMENT

The community foundation also has

commissioned a follow-up analysis of data gathered in 2012 on more than 24,000 students at 24 unified school districts throughout California. The original data, reported by WestEd, revealed that few students who repeated Algebra I improved their test scores after a second year of algebra study. Many actually scored lower.

Wood notes that based on an initial look at the follow-up analysis, black, Latino and low-income students were more likely to be held back in Algebra I for a second year than were white, Asian and high-income students.

With new Common Core State Standards coming (see page 3), “Now more than ever proper placement needs to be front and center,” Wood says.

“The transition is a point of vulnerability where a student can be set up for success or set up for more challenges.”

Learn more about SVCF’s education grantmaking at siliconvalleycf.org/spring-2014/education-grants.

Algebra Advocates

The push for algebra success is nothing new for SVCF. Below are four highlights from past work.

1 From 2010 to 2012, the community foundation awarded nearly \$3.8 million to nonprofits working on in-school and out-of-school strategies for improving performance.

2 Student-focused programs reached 6,340 students, who in turn were more than twice as likely to be on track for college than non-participating peers.

3 More than 80 percent of teachers in professional-development programs said their teaching skills improved as a result of training.

4 Students whose teachers received training outperformed their peers on standardized tests, with 56 percent scoring proficient or higher, compared with 31 percent of students whose teachers did not receive training.

(Source: *Closing the Middle School Achievement Gap in Mathematics*, SVCF Education Impact Brief)