

The Herald-Sun

Introducing The Family Success Alliance

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BY MICHAEL STEINER and MARK DOROSIN, Columnists



Mark Dorosin



Michael Steiner, M.D.

CHAPEL HILL —

“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” Frederick Douglass

We hope that by now you’ve heard that there is increasing concern about income disparities and poverty in Orange County, and particularly about its impact on children. We all want to live in a community where every child has the opportunity to thrive in school and beyond because successful, supported children grow up to be successful and give back to their family, workplace, and community. As a physician and a lawyer, we have witnessed firsthand the challenges children and families face in Orange County as they struggle with living paycheck to paycheck.

The newly formed Family Success Alliance seeks to improve the lives and opportunities for long term success for children and families struggling to make ends meet. Communities across the country have found that the key to affecting meaningful change is to break down silos and build a comprehensive system of engagement on education and health, with built in family and community supports. A “pipeline” of coordinated community resources can ensure successful passage of children from cradle to career or college. This new approach is known as Collective Impact, and it means that diverse organizations across a community develop common goals, shared ways to measure success, do mutually enforcing activities, and communicate continuously with each other and with the community. The Family Success Alliance has embarked down this path with a group of elected officials, community organizations, neighborhood leaders, and government partners coming together to start this work.

The Family Success Alliance started because data and stories from our communities demonstrated a growing number of children living in poverty in Orange County. In fact, one in three students in our two

school districts are enrolled in free or reduced lunch, and one in four children in Orange County are enrolled in Medicaid. It is likely that far more qualify but aren't enrolled. These facts are profoundly troubling, because when families struggle economically, there are lasting impacts on children — health impacts, educational impacts, social and psychological impacts — that last well into the future.

Take, for example, the brain development of children. Brains are built early in life — 80 percent of a child's brain is developed by age three and stimulation and positive experience lays a positive foundation for a lifetime. Unfortunately, it has been demonstrated that adverse experiences or toxic stress early in life have a similar negative long-term effect. This early life foundation links to such concrete things as how well children do in school, whether they graduate on time, and their physical and mental health for decades to come.

While the adverse impacts of poverty affect thousands of children in Orange County, there are portions of the county where the cumulative effects are especially severe. Using a range of local data, we identified six areas, or “zones” that stand out with the highest number of families struggling to meet basic living standards, like medical care, food, and housing. Because adapting the lessons from other successful models to our communities will be a learning process, the Family Success Alliance will start piloting the program in 2015 in two of the six zones, and will ensure the strategies are effective before expanding. By initially concentrating our efforts in limited geographic regions, we can help ensure each zone receives the full range of resources and reach a tipping point for community success.

In the coming months and years you will be hearing more about the work to establish pipelines of success for children and families through the coordinated, collaborative efforts of the Family Success Alliance, community groups, and residents.

If you'd like to get involved in this exciting opportunity to help address the impacts of income disparities and poverty on children and families in Orange County, please contact Meredith McMonigle, Coordinator of the Family Success Alliance, at (919) 245-2071.

The public is also invited to attend the Family Success Alliance Council meeting on December 16th where the zones will answer questions about their applications and the two pilot zones will be selected. The meeting will take place from 3:30-6 PM in the County Commissioners Board Room on the second floor of the Whitted Building located at 300 West Tryon Street in Hillsborough.

Thank you in advance for your support and excitement about making meaningful change for our community.

Editor's note: Michael Steiner, M.D., and Orange County Commissioner Mark Dorosin are members of the Family Success Alliance advisory council.