

Guest Column: Mapping the future of Yolo youth — A post-pandemic response

July 1, 2021: These past weeks have been a time of joy in Yolo County. A parade of high school seniors crossed stages to receive their diplomas. Children of all ages completed an unprecedented year of virtual and masked in-person schooling, due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These celebrations reflect a significant achievement in our communities, yet there are troubling signs that many of our young people and their families are struggling.

Along with the celebrations, we need a long-range plan to ensure a better future for Yolo County. This means confronting the issues of poverty and physical and mental health — especially among our youngest friends and neighbors.

According to the Yolo County Office of Education, our county is home to just under 30,000 students in K–12 schools and a little more than 13,600 children ages 0–5. Of these:

- Approximately 15 percent of all children 0–17 live in poverty.
- Local Black children face a 28 percent poverty rate.
- Latino children endure a 20 percent poverty rate.

Poverty also creates toxic stress in babies in utero, and prenatal care is an essential preventative measure. According to First 5 of Yolo County, during the pandemic:

- Only 47 percent of pregnant women on Medi-Cal in Yolo received on-time prenatal care. Compare that to 2018, when 84 percent of mothers on Medi-Cal received on-time prenatal care.
- Pediatric well-child visits dropped by an estimated 24 percent from pre-pandemic baselines.
- Childhood vaccinations dropped by more than 40 percent since the start of the pandemic.

How do we ensure our children and families move from surviving to thriving? How do we meet this post-pandemic moment and create structural change? How do we tap the potential of the region and make it a place of innovation where young people thrive and families see our county as a place to work, live, and succeed?

These are the questions (many) elected officials throughout Yolo County are asking. The pandemic has demonstrated that we have a collective responsibility to our

communities that can only be met by acknowledging our joint responsibility to leverage the federal, state, and local opportunities before us.

Although we have had successful county collaborative efforts in the past, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and other anticipated one-time funding provide a unique, once-in-a-generation opportunity to invest in communities and build up our public health and economic infrastructure.

And the investment that will have the biggest long-term impact for our society is an investment in our children, youth and families.

We are observing the greatest COVID-related impacts in areas of mental health and well-being. Even prior to the pandemic, high school students attending Yolo County's Youth Empowerment Summit shared stories about their mental health. Their stories were supported by public health statistics indicating that:

- In 2018, 22 percent of youth accessing Medi-Cal mental health services in Yolo County did so at a crisis level, according to the California Department of Health Care Services.
- A 2020 California Healthy Kids Survey found that 28 percent of Yolo County 11th graders were harassed or bullied in the previous year.
- Nearly 36 percent experienced chronic sadness/hopelessness while at school. The pandemic exacerbated this issue.

We need to plan, with urgency, a new focus on the physical AND mental health of our communities by developing an innovative, practical and effective cradle-to-career blueprint for every one of our young people.

To make this a reality, we must make a commitment to one another and our community to plan together, to dream together, to rebuild and re-engage together.

We have an unprecedented opportunity to develop a comprehensive and coordinated strategic plan for children, youth and families throughout the county. Yolo County is one interconnected community and we understand that when one community thrives, we all thrive together.

We call on our elected colleagues on the Board of Supervisors, city councils, school boards, and Yolo County Office of Education to join us in this effort as we work collaboratively with our leaders in youth advocacy, higher education, nonprofit and private sectors to develop a roadmap for countywide success.

The blueprint would:

- Promote balanced economic development.
- Provide parents viable opportunities to earn a living wage.
- Ensure our children live healthy lives.
- Create positive opportunities for our youth to enjoy increased civic engagement, leadership development, and a healthy environment to work, live, and play in Yolo County.

This plan should be transformative and leverage resources across the entire county and all sectors in such a way that prioritizes children, youth and families. It is only by working in a more intentional and collaborative way that these resources will have a long-term, multi-generational impact on our community.

In July, the county will begin convening virtual and in-person community workshops. To learn more go to <http://www.bit.ly/yoloamericanrescueplan>.

Join us and help support our effort in this important journey as we map out the future of our county through a commitment to collaboration the Yolo Way.

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