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Our community, our children

St. Louis Business Journal - by [Richard Patton](#)

In focusing on the health and well-being of St. Louis children, a recent St. Louis Business Journal editorial, Rx for the Region, highlights an issue central to regional community and economic development. The issue is this: The economic vitality and long-term sustainability of the St. Louis metropolitan area are linked directly to the well-being of its children.

An abundance of economic research, including that of University of Chicago economist James Heckman, the 2000 Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences, documents the link between promoting the well-being of children and the success of the larger society. Heckman's research demonstrates that the greatest social and economic returns are realized when available resources are invested in the development of children, particularly young children. Many metropolitan areas with which St. Louis compares and competes -- Chicago and Kansas City among them -- have heeded that message and begun to act on it. St. Louis must do the same.

More than 125,000 children in the St. Louis region face serious socio-economic risk, according to the Children of Metropolitan St. Louis 2003 report produced by Vision for Children at Risk. For example, the percentage of births to teen mothers receiving late or no prenatal care was 8.2 percent in 2000, compared to the national average of 3.9 percent. The percentage of children placed in out-of-home care is more than double the national average for 33 ZIP codes in the region. Equally problematic are stark disparities in the well-being of children within the region. Some St. Louis children fare very well, while the most fundamental life needs of others go unmet.

We should do the right thing by the community's children because it is the right thing. But also, communities that provide for the fundamental needs of their children are stronger, fare better economically and enjoy a higher quality of life. In such communities there are lower costs for law enforcement, health care, emergency services and crisis intervention.

Effective community efforts to promote the well-being of children must be focused, strategic and broad-based. An important regional initiative in this vein is the St. Louis Metropolitan Children's Agenda. A collaborative effort involving more than 300 agencies and community organizations, the Children's Agenda is implementing 36 policy and program strategies ranging across the areas of family support, child development, maternal/child health, quality education, safe neighborhoods and economic opportunity. There are other strategic initiatives to improve the well-being of St. Louis area children. The Deaconess Foundation has made children and youth the focus of its philanthropic efforts. The Missouri Foundation for Health supports a wide range of children's health initiatives including a broad community assessment. Establishment of a Children's Services Fund in the city of St. Louis is being explored by a group of community leaders.

Still missing from the St. Louis equation, though, is establishment of the needs of children as a top community priority. Civic leaders at all levels and from all sectors must be engaged in efforts to promote child well-being. St. Louis must make a regional commitment to providing for the fundamental needs of a higher percentage of its children. Concrete action must be taken and real resources committed to achieving that goal. Strategic action on behalf of children is every bit as important to the success of the region as downtown development, improving the transportation infrastructure and attracting new industry. Indeed, it is a prerequisite to the success of other metropolitan development strategies.

There are some recent signs of progress in making St. Louis children a community priority and engaging high-ranking civic leaders. Mayor Francis G. Slay has accepted the National League of Cities challenge to develop a strategic plan for early childhood success for St. Louis city. St. Charles has done the same. Top executives at the United Way, RCGA and ARCHS (Area Resources for Community & Human Services) have agreed to assist in linking St. Louis Children's Agenda initiatives to the broader metropolitan development agenda.

The need now is for other community leaders -- in business, government, education and the faith community -- to respond in kind. The St. Louis region must strengthen families, make quality child care available, provide maternal/child health care, ensure all children get a good education, provide opportunities in the non-school hours, and equip young people with career goals and job skills.

What's good for children is good for St. Louis. The region can ignore that imperative, but doing so will impair every aspect of regional development.

Richard Patton is director of Vision for Children at Risk, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the well-being of St. Louis-area children. For information on the St. Louis Metropolitan Children's Agenda or a copy of the Children of Metropolitan St. Louis 2003 report, call (314) 534-6015 or go to www.visionforchildren.org.

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