

Pondering Proposition 10...

By Sid Gardner, President
Children and Family Futures

"The man who sets out to carry a cat by its tail learns something that will always be useful and which never will grow dim or doubtful." - Mark Twain

Sometimes thinking about the future of Healthy Start is like carrying that cat. You never know what is going to happen, but you have a pretty good idea that there will be problems if you approach it the wrong way.

The right way is to think strategically—which means taking into account the major opportunities in your community that can enhance the future of Healthy Start programs and see how well they "fit" with Healthy Start. The wrong way, it would seem, is to proceed tactically—to lunge at *each* opportunity without deciding which ones fit and which ones would undermine what Healthy Start tries to do.

Proposition 10 raises some of the most important issues Healthy Start programs have faced, and serves as a good example of a test of strategic thinking.

Our responses to Prop 10 can be tactical or they can be strategic. It will be tactical if it is just a quick fix for funding; it will be strategic if it is part of a multi-year approach to going to scale with institutionalized funding.

The hardest question is how to think about the challenge of linking K-12 programs with early childhood programs. Some schools have served younger siblings of students in their health programs, as a good example of a family-focused approach. But a larger challenge arises in asking how many schools "tag" children who have been in pre-school or Head Start programs to measure how well they do in elementary school. We know a great deal about the "third-grade washout" effect of some early childhood programs, which lose their impact on students' performance by third grade. The obvious question is how the school is monitoring itself to see if that is happening.

So there are at least 3 questions we can ask about Prop 10 and Healthy Start:

1. What is your role in developing the strategic plan-- are they using Healthy Start data about kids' needs? What needs of younger children have you proposed they address with Prop 10 funds? If home visiting plans are being considered, what will your input be on which families will be served-- what risk factors at birth or other key events will be used as the HV triggers?
2. What is your role in serving younger siblings now--what do you know about the school readiness programs in your community that is formally linked with your Healthy Start programs?

3. What is your role in assuring that Prop 10 funds are linked with and leveraging other institutionalized funding, such as Medicaid, district funds, drug and alcohol treatment and prevention funding, and child welfare funding? Special attention— how much of the TANF support funding for special needs parents has been spent in your county— that is family support money and it has not been allocated in most counties.

A thoughtful county commission will allocate funds based on the existing "platforms" for community services, to use the phrase from Neal Halfon's excellent paper produced for Prop 10 commissions by UCLA's Center for Healthy Children, Families, and Communities. And one of the best platforms for serving families with younger children is a broad-based Healthy Start commission. The trick is insuring that such funding fits integrally into a Healthy Start five-year strategic plan, instead of just seeking new money that will take the Healthy Start project away from its original goals.