

# Valley children's well-being: Report shows need for improvement in education, health and welfare

By Barbara Anderson

A report released today on the well-being of children in California counties shows a need for improvement in the education, health and economic welfare of youngsters in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Based on a five-star rating system, with one star indicating a county is among the lowest-performing, Valley counties did not reach above three stars in the categories of education, health and welfare.

Kings and Madera counties had three stars for welfare and economic well-being and Tulare County had three stars in education.

Tulare and Kings were near the bottom statewide, at 1.5 stars, in child health.

Fresno County had 2.5 stars across the board for education, health and welfare.

Statewide, no county scored a perfect five stars in any category, according to the [2014-15 California County Scorecard of Children's Well-Being](#) by Children Now.

"Every county has its strengths and weaknesses," said Jessica Mindnich, director of research at Children Now, a policy development and advocacy organization for children. The organization has released a scorecard on child well-being since 2008.

Poverty likely is a factor in the Valley's ratings, Mindnich said.

Child poverty rates ranged from 32% in Kings County to 39% in Fresno County, compared to a statewide poverty rate of 23%.

"The first thing I notice is that in each of these counties the percentage of children living in poverty is above the state average," Mindnich said. "We know in each of these counties there's a greater need."

Children living in areas of concentrated poverty often have barriers to well-being, such as a lack of transportation to healthcare providers and good schools, she said.

In communities with higher poverty, "there's a need for an even more robust safety net to ensure we're meeting the needs of all these kids," Mindnich said.

The Children Now scorecard measured 29 indicators of child well-being in the 58 counties and compared the data over a two-year span, by race and ethnicity, to the California average and to other counties' performances. Data for the scorecard was gathered from outside sources, such as the California Department of Education, U.S. Census and the California Health Interview Survey.

Some of the performance indicators: preschool attendance, high school students graduating on time, children who are at a healthy weight and newborns who are exclusively breastfed while in the hospital.

In the Valley, the high school graduation rate is lower in Fresno, Kings and Madera counties than the statewide average of 80%. Fresno and Madera are graduating 77% of their students and 76% graduate in Kings County.

Tulare County, with 81% of students graduating on time, had a slightly higher rate than the state.

Improving the graduation rate has been a focus for Fresno Unified School District, and on Monday at a State of Education luncheon Superintendent Michael Hanson said progress has been made. Graduation rates have increased over the past four years, he said. And four years ago, only 25% of the district's students completed the classes required to apply to a four-year university, he said. By the end of last school year, almost 47% had applied to universities, he said.

Valley counties also enroll fewer young children in preschool than elsewhere. In Fresno County, 33% of 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled. In Kings County, 38% of those children are in school and 44% were enrolled in Tulare County. The rate for Madera was not available. Statewide, 47% of children ages 3 and 4 are enrolled in preschools.

Early childhood education has become a priority among school districts in the Valley, and Hanson said Monday that Fresno Unified has invested \$10 million in resources for early learning. One example he cited: Since 2011, the district has added 53 preschool classrooms.

In the health category, the Valley struggles in several areas, including childhood weight and newborn breastfeeding.

On Tuesday, county health officials said they had not been able to review the Children Now scorecard and were hesitant to comment on specific ratings, but appreciated a spotlight on child health.

"We all want our children to be in a safe environment and to have every opportunity to grow up and be healthy and to succeed in school," said Dr. Karen Haught, health officer for Tulare County.

County health officials said efforts to improve child health are showing results, but they still have work to do.

In Tulare County, only 43% of new moms breastfeed exclusively while in the hospital, according to the scorecard. The rates are 46% in Fresno and 45% in Kings County.

Madera County has 62% of its newborns being exclusively breastfed while in the hospital, only slightly less than the 63% state average.

Haught said Tulare's breastfeeding rate now is 47% — not a high enough number, but an improvement. Two hospitals, Tulare Regional Medical Center and Sierra View District Hospital in Porterville, have First 5 grants to provide lactation consultants, she said. "That's really helping."

Van Do-Reynoso, health director for Madera County, said the county has made efforts to provide breastfeeding services to new moms. But the real difficulty is helping moms continue to breastfeed after they leave the hospital, she said. They are returning to jobs, such as agriculture work, "that may not be supportive of breastfeeding."

Less than half the children in the Valley are at a healthy weight, according to the scorecard. Statewide, 56% of children are at a healthy weight.

"Healthy weight is a complex issue," Do-Reynoso said.

In Madera County, 49% of children are at a healthy weight. "Children and families need access to both medical and preventive care," she said. "The charge for us is to work to where access to healthy foods and active lifestyles are readily available to all residents."

The Children Now scorecard is intended to encourage communities to set priorities for improving the well-being of children, Mindnich said. "I hope they look at this as a resource and really try and look at the assets in their communities and how to leverage them."

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