

Executive Summary - Action Agenda for School-Age Children and Youth

Why We Need an Action Agenda for Ages 6-18

Children and youth are our community's highest priority. Sustaining a community that values children and youth is not only an investment for our future; it is also a reflection on our quality of life at present. However, despite impressive and effective work already happening in King County, many of our children and youth are not accessing the resources they need for success. Where efforts could be coordinated, work happens in isolation.

King County still faces an opportunity gap. Children and youth seeking resources face barriers, particularly children and youth of color, children of immigrant and refugee families, lower income families, young people in rural communities, children and youth with disabilities, girls in some cases, boys in others, and youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Nationally, 15% of children ages 6-12 frequently spend time unsupervised during hours outside of school.¹ In King County in 2004, 43% of 8th graders experienced academic failure and 49% experienced low neighborhood attachment, risk factors that may lead to harmful outcomes in young people's lives.² Meanwhile, many youth lack the "protective factors" shown to contribute to safe, resilient lives.³ Resources are spread inequitably across our county; we are reinforcing structures of inequality in a generation that is still growing up.

If we want systemic results, we must have systemic solutions that recognize local work. An action agenda does just that; it addresses the issues we face by tying together all levels of efforts for children and youth into regional and countywide solutions. An action agenda allows us to connect efforts that are already happening – but often in an isolated fashion – throughout King County, to streamline resources, to learn from each other, and to improve the lives of children and youth together. An action agenda draws on what is already strong in the community and uses those strengths to their fullest potential – an approach supported by research.⁴

Bringing together research, best practices, and the community's own visions, this Action Agenda provides direction and next steps to improve the success of school-age children and youth in school and in life.

Vision

SOAR challenges our community to make children and youth our highest priority. SOAR connects, convenes and catalyzes communities in King County in order to create a welcoming, safe and empowering environment to give young people ages 6-18 the opportunity to reach their full potential.



Guiding Principles

- An expectation for cultural relevancy infuses all aspects of the plan.
- Youth voice is an essential element in the development and implementation of this action agenda.
- Partnering with others is essential to advance the plan and strengthen resources.
- The plan addresses areas where SOAR has the ability to have an impact, recognizing that other community partners may have a lead role (e.g., schools have the lead role in academic achievement and SOAR-aligned after-school programs can support schools' efforts).
- Our goals and strategies are based on:
 - ✓ Data driven methodologies
 - ✓ Innovation
 - ✓ Best practices
 - ✓ Community input

This Action Agenda defines success as follows:

Success means having and using inner strength and outside resources to develop, nurture and achieve both day-to-day goals and lifelong dreams.

If we are to reach real peace in this world... we shall have to begin with children.

- Mahatma Gandhi, Social & Political Leader

Goals

The Action Agenda identifies four countywide goals:

- **Goal 1. Access to Quality Out-of-School Programs:** Children and youth have *full and safe* access to local, quality, engaging and relevant programs that help them succeed in school and in life.
- **Goal 2. Meaningful Roles:** Children and youth have culturally relevant and age-appropriate opportunities to be leaders, decision makers, and engaged members of a community that values them.
- **Goal 3. Meaningful Relationships:** Children and youth have positive, healthy, and nurturing relationships with caregivers, family, peers, mentors, program staff, and their community; these relationships guide and inspire them toward success.
- **Goal 4. Resiliency & Valued Identities:** Children and youth build resiliency and participate safely, without experiencing or expressing bias, as valued members of diverse, conscientious communities.

Cultural relevancy, also referred to as cultural competency, is a shared value that shapes the Action Agenda and is central to all the Action Agenda goals and strategies. Cultural relevancy is rooted in the belief that respect, understanding, and awareness of cultures in one's community is of paramount importance. It seeks to expand our minds and hearts in shaping all aspects of community resources to reflect the needs, goals, values, languages, beliefs, communication styles and strengths of children, youth and families. Cultural relevancy helps ensure resources are accessible, meaningful, and tailored to meet community needs.

SOAR values work that *challenges bias*, recognizing that barriers youth face often are rooted in the cycle of poverty, discrimination, bias and oppression, as well as limited cultural relevancy in the provision of services. The shared values of cultural relevancy and challenging bias are essential in order to support the development, learning, and well-being of all children.

Recommended Actions and Strategies

This Action Agenda encompasses four strategies, each of which contains recommended actions that are directly tied to goals and outcomes. The recommended actions include ideas that may be applied countywide, subregionally, or on a sector level. The strategies include:

- Build Connections & Convene Communities
- Centralize and Share Information and Resources
- Identify and Fill Gaps
- Increase Promising Practices

What Comes Next

The Action Agenda is a roadmap for community action, illustrating ways to put the pieces of our work together to create systemic change. *SOAR, helping children reach for the sky* is championing the Action Agenda countywide, and supporting sectors and subregions in taking on pieces of the action agenda. SOAR brings the community together to build on what already exists, streamline efforts, learn from one another, and fuel our shared goals.

How this will happen:

- **Subregions:** In each area of King County, SOAR will identify or convene subregional groups interested in choosing and implementing SOAR goals and strategies that are relevant to their own subregions.
- **Countywide:** SOAR will convene groups to take the lead on strategies that involve countywide mobilization.
- **Sectors:** SOAR will encourage various sectors to take on Recommended Actions, since this is a plan with ways for everyone to get involved, including individuals, agencies, and systems.
- **Other Efforts:** SOAR will communicate with other local efforts that address social issues that affect children and youth to ensure our work supports one another's efforts.

Pick battles big enough to matter, small enough to win.

— Jonathan Kozol, Educator and Writer