

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/in-brief/systems-solutions-for-social-challenges/>

Business leader, author and rocket scientist Sylvia Acevedo describes how she transitioned from running a tech startup to solving problems in the education system. Engineers and technologists can make significant contributions to social challenges, she finds, by bringing a systems approach to the table and collaborating with domain experts to build scalable solutions. In her case, her efforts led to a role as a Commissioner of the White House initiative for Educational Excellence for Hispanics during the Obama administration.



Transcript

- Really curious to hear 00:00:03,760 about your time at the White House.. I mean, what an incredible opportunity to work, you know, in the Obama administration on such an important goal of focused on educational excellence for Hispanics.. How did you get that opportunity, and can you tell us a little bit about it? - Yes.. 00:00:22,160 You know, I was in Austin at the time and I had just been a successful entrepreneur who just sold his company, Viva technology, and I had options.. And I could have gone back to technology at that time.. But fortunately for me, somebody had encouraged me to, mentor and tutor a kid in a title one school.. And at that moment, I learned that that girl needed, a lot of work on dental hygiene.. And I went to the teacher, I was irate like, how could you not help this child? And she said, "Sylvia, this entire classroom.. In fact, if you have 35 bucks, this kid broke his glasses and needs to get them repaired and doesn't have the money." And what I realized from that moment was, that teachers are amazing and they excel at the one-on-one or the on few, but the demographic changes were happening so quickly.. And also the healthcare and economic disparities were also growing so quickly..

That their solutions just didn't scale, to the size of the need.. And I remember thinking, you know what what, I'm not an educator, I'm not great on the one-on-one or one on few, but I know how to scale.. That I can deal with.. And when I learned about the need, for example, in central Texas, 11,000 kids needed glasses.. They didn't have them.. And yes, they could get vouchers, but the challenges, it was really tough to get the vouchers.. And then when they went to get the glasses, the business tried to sell up.. And it was just a real challenge for the families to get the glasses.. And I realized like, if, how can a child learn if they can't even see, and there's 11,000 kids.. And there were great organizations that wanted to support, but they wanted to support with 10 glasses, or a hundred, I'm talking 11,000 glasses, which required a systems solution, which we provided..

We got a mobile van, donated.. We made that into a vision lab where we actually created glasses on the spot.. We got volunteers.. And then we had optometrists also volunteer their time.. And they would go school by school and make glasses for kids.. And, it is one of my most heartwarming memories of having a kid who put his glasses on and looking up at his mom and smiling.. And he said, "you're beautiful." (chuckles) - Oh My! Wonderful.. 00:02:46,890 That's so wonderful.. - I know.. 00:02:49,500 And so, then I also discovered that kids didn't have books at home..

And, I began grassroots mobilization campaigns.. I ended up getting more than 250,000, a quarter of a million books distributed 10,000 home libraries started giving away 25,000 dental kids.. And so, and that spread from Austin to Los Angeles, to Miami, to Atlanta.. And at that point, I got the notice of the Obama administration.. So they asked me to join this commission, which was unusual because they were all educators, they were university professors, they were academics and here was an engineer in their midst.. But what was interesting is I was really focused.. Remember you asked me what are some of the transferable skills? Well, one of them was really be focused on the goal and what you wanted to accomplished.. And so I focused on early childhood, and then I realized that we had a lot of kids who were in health headstart or other pre-K programs and their native language at home wasn't English, but federal funding at that time would only support English only programs.. And that if you could teach a kid in its native language and then bridge that to English, they will learn both languages.. And, dual language really helps the brain as well..

And it would give America a workforce that could be globally competitive.. And so I stayed focused on how do we get that

policy change so that federal funding could be used for dual language programs.. So the kids would still learn English, but they would also be supported in a way, in a language that they already understood.. So they could learn English that much faster.. And I'm pleased to say that, that focus actually got that policy changed and knock on wood it still hasn't changed.. But again, it was that focus and it was a really exciting time, to be working in education...