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Let's Address Our Future by Funding College Education

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EVERYONE wants to improve the California business climate, but what would success look like?

We all agree that the equation includes tax rates, transportation and infrastructure. But policy makers often miss the boat when it comes to understanding a company's most important asset: its employees.

A skilled workforce is central to the prosperity of any region. That's why it's so troubling that Los Angeles has the highest proportion of undereducated adults of any major metropolitan area in the United States. One in 10 adults here lacks a sixth-grade education, and one in four lacks a high-school diploma.

Worse, these trends extend into the third generation of immigrants.

One of our strengths as a region is that people come to Los Angeles from all over the world to make a better life for themselves and their children. Unfortunately, our low education

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rate is undermining the aspirations of our people.

While parents uniformly want the best opportunities for their children, many in Los Angeles wrongly assume that college is out of reach. Recent research by the Tomas Rivera Pol-

icy Institute, for example, found that 94 percent of Latino parents want their kids to go to college, but a majority of them do not expect their kids to go, and cited cost as the biggest barrier.

That's why we are so encouraged that Mayor James Hahn, with the support of the Los Angeles City Council, created the L.A. Free Cash for College Project, and it's why we and other leaders from business, education, labor, government and non-profits have stepped up in support.

In its first two years thus far, the project has opened up access to higher education for 22,000 students and their families, by providing them much-needed information and help on how to access the available financial aid.

Sixty-one percent of the students said that they would be first in their families to attend college. We must maintain and further expand this program in the years ahead to help open the doors of college to all young Angelenos.

What's more, this can be accomplished without further straining our city's budget. On the contrary, getting college scholarships to needy Los Angeles families brings tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars to the Los Angeles economy, at no cost to local government. This is an economic stimulus we cannot afford to ignore.

This is what leadership is all about. At times, government must rise above the daily duties of managing a sprawling city - filling potholes, paving sidewalks, policing neighborhoods - and look ahead to the big challenges facing our common future. With Free Cash for College, a local coalition has developed an innovative, big-tent solution.

Expanded access to learning and literacy must be one of the major legacies of the Hahn administration. In a global economy driven by human capital, the future of Los Angeles depends on it.

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