

An Indispensable Investment in Education

By Judith B. Greiman and David G. Carter

If our goal is to build the best education system in America, we must begin at the beginning.

The *Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*, issued recently by the National Center on Education and the Economy, emphasized that “high-quality early childhood education is one of the best investments a nation can make in its young people.” But the report also found that “this country has never committed the funds necessary to provide high quality early childhood education to its 3-and 4- year olds.”

Connecticut is on the verge of committing those much-needed funds, and taking a significant step towards reasserting its traditional leadership in education. We are poised to act, and not a moment too soon.

We believe that an investment in education must start early and be sustained across the education continuum. Anything less sells short the future of today’s youth, and the prospects for academic success, financial self-sufficiency and economic vibrancy.

Accordingly, we applaud the Governor’s commitment to a multi-faceted PK-16 approach, and the General Assembly’s attention to this issue in the current session. The plan now being considered includes a phased-in expansion of universal pre-school, support for higher education’s early childhood programs, development of scholarship and loan forgiveness programs for students in early childhood education, expansion of the Connecticut minority teacher incentive program, revisions to the mandatory high school curriculum and sorely needed additional funding for need-based aid for college students.

Across the country, states are grappling with students who either do not make it to or do not perform well in high school, students who enter college in need of serious remediation in core areas and students who are not able to matriculate to college due to poor K-12 preparation. Connecticut faces similar problems, particularly in our urban schools. We are at a crossroads and what we do – or fail to do – in the months ahead will go a long way towards determining Connecticut’s future success.

The member institutions of the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges (CCIC) and the Connecticut State University System (CSUS), have a vital interest in enhancing education at all levels, as Connecticut’s teachers mostly come from our programs. Our work at enhancing the breadth and quality of their education, and that of their classmates across every field of endeavor, is central to Connecticut’s well-being.

We need to be able to prepare our students not only for today’s rapidly changing world, but also for the world we don’t know that lies just ahead. Because our primary natural resource in Connecticut is our well-educated citizenry, and because our population is not expected to grow in the coming years, we must be deliberate in how we address the preparation gap. We must set high standards and then be sure that all Connecticut students are given the tools necessary for success, from the outset and across the learning continuum.

The *New England 2020 Report*, prepared by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, says that Connecticut will have a decline in the percentage of young people who hold bachelors degree and the bulk of tomorrow’s workforce will be living in urban areas where many live in poverty and

are not prepared to succeed in college. As a result, there will be a shortage of well-qualified, well-educated workers. That will be Connecticut's reality, unless we act now to change the trend.

Other states have been bold in their responses to these challenges. Texas has enacted a law that makes a college-prep curriculum the default for all high school students. This has pushed change down to the middle and elementary levels. Arkansas has developed the "Smart Core" default college-prep curriculum. Indiana, which has a recommended college-prep curriculum, is considering making this the default curriculum and tying it to admission at state four-year institutions.

We cannot allow Connecticut to lag behind other states. The 2020 report states that Connecticut "needs an economic/education strategy, embraced by its business, government, education, and non-profit leadership." We agree. As never before, we must view education as a continuum, and we cannot afford to shortchange any step along the way.

The president of the National Association of Manufacturers and member of the national commission, John Engler, recently asked "Are there states or communities with the confidence and the courage to act before it is too late?" In Connecticut, let our answer be an emphatic *yes*. And let us begin now.

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