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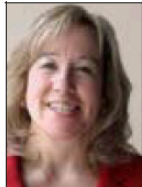
MIAMI-DADE STUDENTS

On a pathway to educational success

BY LINDA LECHT

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One of the critical steps that Florida can take to strengthen its economy for tomorrow is eliminating gaps in educational attainment so that the fastest growing populations — students of color and diverse ethnicities — reach their full potential.



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This isn't necessarily news to us, though a recent analysis of national college completion data affirms that

the progress we are making and the lessons we are learning in Miami-Dade can help point the way.

The Education Trust, a leading national champion of closing academic achievement gaps, recently found that the number of black students who enrolled in four-year colleges between 2009 and 2011 grew 8.5 percent nationally, and the number of Latino undergraduates grew 22 percent.

This is good news for all of us. As the Center on

Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University notes, by 2018, 1.6 million of the expected 2.8 million job vacancies in Florida will require a post-secondary credential. We will not get there — in Florida or nationally — without improving post-secondary success rates for low-income students and students of color.

That is why we need to celebrate, share and learn from our successes here in Miami-Dade, where more black and Latino students are overcoming hurdles to finish their high school careers with a diploma in one hand and a college acceptance letter in the other.

Between 2009 and 2012, a group of Miami-Dade County high schools has seen college enrollment rates increase 69 percent for black students, 25 percent for Latino students and 23 percent for English language learners. That exceeds the Education Trust data.

These local students worked hard and set high expectations, though they had a new kind of help. School communities rallied around them to pro-



vide smart and targeted support through the five-year-old Post-secondary Success Collaborative.

Launched by the Citi Foundation and led locally by The Education Fund, the initiative seeks to

break down barriers to college access and success by helping communities take stock of existing resources and activities and identify where there are gaps.

A lot of well-meaning programs work to get students into college, but too many work in isolation, lack expertise in certain areas or lack adequate funding. To address this challenge, we used the Post-secondary Success Asset Map, a rigorous inventory provided by FHI 360, a global development nonprofit group.

The findings set us on a new course for success. We learned that we were talking to students about college far too late in their high school careers and that parents lacked the understanding to make post-secondary decisions or finish critical paperwork. We also found that many smart and capable students did not have college-level math skills and that others simply gave up on their dreams, believing that they were not college material.

One by one, we went down the list to identify partners and resources to

meet these needs. Our Success Collaborative schools now have college clubs that welcome freshmen. Our "FAFSA Marathons" have paired hundreds of families with higher education experts to complete financial aid forms.

We also developed a college-prep math curriculum that is now in use by more than a dozen schools in the district. We will continue building on this effort and expanding community partnerships to increase the number of adults who earn college degrees — not only because it's an economic imperative, but because it's the right thing to do.

And while there is a great amount of work to be done, there is good news here in Miami-Dade and lessons being learned that can be studied and replicated.

Working together, we can make the Success Collaborative pathways to post-secondary opportunity available to even more students.

Linda Lecht is president of The Education Fund, a Miami-based organization.