Miami's $1.7B challenge

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If you ask me for goals for the coming year, I am not at a loss. But none of these goals, important as they may be, has a chance without a new foundation of understanding. We are at a crossroads with regard to education in America and that means every major community in the country. The understanding that drives us and the choices we make will be critical for years to come.

It can be argued that our country still has the finest educational system in the world, but it has become a haphazard argument. The world has changed dramatically in a very short span of our history. Communication and information technology have flattened the landscape, and we now collaborate and compete -- like it or not -- with people from every corner of the globe. The world of work demands cultural,

environmental and civic awareness. It asks all of us -- neophytes and old hands -- to be nimble and creative in the face of challenges heretofore unknown to us.

Are we still the best? Recent statistics report that the United States is a mere 10th among advanced nations for the percentage of the population with a bachelor's degree. Our K-12 students graduate in alarmingly low numbers and lag far behind children in other countries in math and science achievement.

But we will fix all of this if we can pass the real test of understanding: Do we recognize the urgency to prepare our people, young and old, to thrive in this new realm? And part B of the quiz and perhaps more important: Do we recognize that the chance to participate must be extended to everyone?

That's my goal for 2010 -- to build a community of understanding that is passionate and unified on the subject of education. Is there any reason why Miami cannot be the education community, the one that truly gets it, that realizes that educating its members is central to the entire community's success?

This is not just the education sector's challenge. We need to answer this question together. Leadership from every facet of this community -- business, civic and government, religious, philanthropic, media, arts and culture -- you name it, needs to join with education leaders to move this goal forward. We in education are determined to work together to ensure that students learn what they need to move seamlessly forward. Our students will be competitive with those who attend elite universities anywhere in the world. They will be true global citizens ready to contribute to their industries and their communities.

But it won't be enough unless a new message is circulated to every corner of this community. The message will state that education all the way through college is a birthright

for each person in this community. A birthright and a necessity.

We have to win the war in people's minds, the one that says ``I can't go to college. It doesn't matter. Besides, I don't have what it takes.'' I've heard this voice, and the argument is false. I know this because I have seen thousands of students

arrive badly under-prepared for college, but they found that spark of understanding within themselves. And they succeeded. They silenced that voice.

Yet in neighborhoods throughout our community we are losing too many battles, wasting an immense pool of raw talent. Recently, the leaders of all sectors of our community gathered to address the Talent Dividend, a national initiative that challenges the nation's largest metro areas to increase college graduation by one percentage point. For our community, that would mean aggregate income gains of $1.7 billion. Rest assured, everyone can participate in supporting this endeavor. From on-site registration and classes and flexible work schedules to mentoring and tutoring in religious and civic environments to scholarship funds and much more, all of us can contribute to this groundswell.

The grandest of aspirations begins with a small, silent recognition. But those are the unshakable roots. Sinking roots of understanding in 2010 is a worthy goal.

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