



Eduardo Padrón

UPFRONT

IF YOU PICKED UP A COPY OF *TIME MAGAZINE* RECENTLY, you might have read the piece on British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. He suggests a bold prescription for the U.S.: “America’s gift to the world should be to offer every child the chance of an education.

“That would do more for the people’s perception of America than almost anything else.”

Criticism in Great Britain paints the prime minister as lacking vision, too conversant with the “nuts of bolts.” Frankly, I’d take these nuts and bolts any day.

Wise teachers always establish high expectations. They never sell students short. That’s the essence of vision—to articulate what others cannot see, to point down a road that is unknown. As you might imagine, the prime minister’s education proposal didn’t make any headlines here. And the question we might well ask

as abundant today as it has always been. Well, I have news.

The recent report from Editorial Projects in Education’s Research Center, entitled “Cities in Crisis,” found that only half the students in the public school systems of the nation’s 50 largest cities are graduating. You read that correctly, and it doesn’t stop there. Across the nation—urban, suburban and farm towns—one-third of students who enter ninth grade do not graduate from high school. Another third graduate without the knowledge and skills needed for success in college or work. Overall, some 1.2 million high school students drop out before graduation each year. That’s 7,000 per day; one child every 26 seconds.

If this is shocking to you, it should

be. We are in a race against time to save communities, metropolitan economies and, most of all, lives.

The Washington, D.C.-based Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that dropouts from the class of 2006-07

will cost the nation more than \$329 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity over their lifetime. Nearly half of all African-American and Native-American students will not graduate, and fewer than six in 10 Hispanic students will gain a diploma. Those students who drop out are more likely to be incarcerated, require the support of public services and forego health insurance than those who graduate from high school.

As Gen. Colin Powell, founding chair of America’s Promise Alliance, puts it, “When more than 1 million students a year drop out of high school, it’s more than a problem, it’s a catastrophe. Our economic and national security are at risk when we fail to educate the leaders and the workforce of the future. It’s time for a national ‘call to arms,’ because we cannot afford to let nearly one-third of our kids fail.”

Bear in mind, high school graduation is only the first stage of the battle. The days of achieving middle class stability in the factories and mills of this country are gone. *The New York Times* recently reported that the \$20 hourly

wage, the marker of middle class membership for skilled labor into the 1970s, is headed for extinction. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports a decline of 60 percent since 1979 in the number of manufacturing workers earning a \$20 per hour salary.

We need to chart a new course toward prosperity in this country. At the core should be an attractive college-going culture and ready institutions that establish learning pathways to in-demand and dynamic careers. And we need to equip each student with a toolkit of communication, technical and thinking skills to navigate a changeable marketplace.

Most importantly, we need to heed Gordon Brown. The College Board recently called for universal education through two years of higher education at a community college. Call it a vision or call it the nuts and bolts, but recognize it’s a necessary step to elevate the quality of life across this nation. **H**

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ourselves is why not?

Could it be that we don’t think big enough in the U.S. anymore? I doubt it. More likely, the prevailing notion among policy-makers is that we are offering an education to every child, that opportunity is