



Eduardo Padrón

UPFRONT

I REMEMBER WATCHING NEIL ARMSTRONG SET FOOT on the moon. It was 1969 and by some miracle of technology, we were seeing it happen on television.

I was quite young, but it struck me that something very profound was shifting in that moment. After all, we had grown up watching *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon*. It was called science fiction for a reason. But there it was, in black and white, on our TV screens.

The evening of November 4 was another of those “is-this-really-happening” moments. The image was high definition and full color, but it was, truly, our moment in Black and White. It was an evening of new images, dignified and even thrilling, allowing a weary parade of impressions—of fire hoses, dogs with bared teeth and much worse—to fade forever into history.

IT IS FOLLY TO BELIEVE WE CAN LOSE HALF OUR YOUTH AND STILL BUILD A PROSPEROUS NATION.



“That out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope.” On a night as atypical as any in the nation’s history, this was not the classic political closing. But the words, moving as they were, signaled an even more eloquent understanding—that our differences did not

run as deep as we thought. We shared the same breath. And as we breathe, we hope.

Unfortunately, or perhaps inevitably, our new dialect of hope is smiling into the void. Another language—of credit freezes, subprime loans, derivatives and bailouts—can make you hold your breath, waiting for the next financial shoe to drop.

And now we hear talk of a “stimulus plan” aimed at boosting state coffers, public works projects, and a host of additional projects. Experts everywhere are grasping for successful strategies, anything that will jump start the economy.

I have an idea. I don’t know if it’s the silver bullet but I raise the possibility of a new and different stimulus plan. I do so because I fear that education, as usual, will be shoved to the back burner during this crisis. We live with the illusion that people aren’t dying or losing their jobs or their life savings, so we wait, again, to reform our educational system. Meanwhile, it is the skills gap—not globalization or disparities in health care or technology—that is the prime factor in the widening inequality in the

U.S. and around the globe. It’s simple logic: if our people are ill-prepared to compete, they will be consigned to the lower rungs of society, and that society will suffer. Make no mistake, lives are at stake.

Fifty percent of high school students in the nation’s 50 largest cities do not graduate. That should be shocking to you, even if it’s not the first time you’re reading that statistic. The bottom line is that learning has been devalued in our country. Neither our kids nor our leadership, apparently, recognize how crucial it is to learn. Whatever it takes, we need to stimulate interest in reading, writing, science, math, technology, history, car mechanics or whatever else will light the fire in each young person.

To do so, we need to change the learning environment in what was once the premier public education system in the world. Like our economy, we are in corrective mode, digging out of a serious hole. And that provides us a unique economic opportunity to train and hire teachers, principals, advisors, tutors, remedial specialists, mentors and more. We can open the door to thousands of new jobs and help those in fields that are drying up to redirect their expertise. If we’re smart, we’ll pay them what they deserve for saving the lives

of countless young people and their communities. It is folly to think that we can lose half of our youth and build a prosperous, healthy living environment. It will not happen.

The companion challenge is to ensure that these students can attend and succeed in college. It is long past the time that a high school diploma alone served as the ticket to economic security. And that means that the nation’s public colleges and universities must be affordable for the millions of low- and middle-income students for whom college is presently out of reach.

You can ask the obvious question, “From where will the money come?” I don’t know, but we did find \$700 million when the banks on Wall Street went dry. But that begs the more basic question of whether we will find the societal will to elevate learning so our people can compete in the most challenging marketplace we have ever known. We are straining now to save a system and its critical industries, but we ought to be thinking about nurturing the talent to make that system and this society great once again. **H**

Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón is president of Miami Dade College, the largest institution of higher education in the nation.