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## ENOUGH

Up Front

“Enough.” One word, mid-speech, a presidential gavel sounding an overdue verdict. “We have accepted failure for too long,” said President Obama. “Let there be no doubt, the future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens.”

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Eduardo Padrón

Perhaps every president acknowledges this, but this one doubled the federal education budget. If you think it's unaffordable, then ask our 8th graders who rank 9th in the world in math. The President pointed out that Singapore's middle schoolers outperform ours three to one. Ask the two-thirds of our 13- and 14-year-olds who cannot read at grade level. Our high school graduation rate has fallen to 10th among advanced nations and our college completion rate has plunged from second to 11th. Ask the African American and Hispanic students whose achievement continues to trail their white classmates, year after year. More than enough.

The president's recent speech was an exercise in truth-telling. He had the audacity to tell us that our K-12 system has been engaged in “a race to the bottom.” He shined a bright light on all the states that have adopted intolerably low standards that produce rosy assessments of student progress. He might as well have asked, “Who are we kidding?” When a student in Mississippi is light years behind one in the same grade in Wyoming, when our 8th grade curriculum is two years behind the most advanced nations, and when the skills of many of our young students fall into the lowest 40 percent worldwide, who, in fact, are we kidding?

Echoing the president's urgency, a formidable duo brought the message of education renewal to Miami Dade College recently. Arne Duncan, the new U.S. Secretary of Education, and Dr. Jill Biden, professor of English at Northern Virginia Community College and wife of Vice President Joe Biden, seemed to genuinely revel in the company of students. The Secretary told them that the country had a historic opportunity to change the educational landscape. “We will educate our way to a better economy. There is nothing more important.”

To some this is hyperbole. We are knee deep in a convoluted system of capital, our banks are choking, and somehow, upgrading 8th grade math and reading doesn't add up. Understood. But what if we change the rules of the conversation? What if human capital took on the same importance as capitalizing our banks? What if the economic mobility derived from a college education genuinely rivaled the importance of more fluid credit. What if our investment in education demonstrated real payoffs instead of the plagiarized manipulations of the banking industry?

Let's begin with a return on investment of \$1.2 million. That's the difference in lifetime earnings between those who earn a bachelor's degree and those who merely graduate from high school. Complete a two-year associate degree and the advantage over a high school diploma is \$400,000. The impact of those low-income students who earn degrees is subtracted from the ledgers

of public spending in hospitals, food banks, courts and yes, jails. Talk about derivatives.

President Obama asked each young person in America to commit to at least one year of higher education. I am both delighted and disappointed, the latter because it might not be enough, and because a two-year degree is a ticket to the future. As both the president and the Secretary vowed, the nation's community colleges, "a great and undervalued asset" as per the president, will play a central role in rejuvenating the nation's economy. In towns and cities across the country, these institutions are the open door, a fresh start for youngsters out of high school and veteran workers desperately needing to retool for a new economy. As Secretary Duncan told the students, it was "not by coincidence" that he and Dr. Biden chose Miami Dade College as their first visit to higher education. "We've come to the best of the best."

Time will tell if we have the focus and political will to reform American education. But make no mistake, the children of America can learn as well as any in the world. If we support them, they will, undoubtedly, prove their mettle. A lot is riding on their success.

Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón is president of Miami Dade College, the largest institution of higher education in the nation, and chair of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.