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Better education vital to economy

By LISA GIBBS

Education is an economic issue -- I touched on that theme a couple of weeks ago in writing about education funding in President Barack Obama's stimulus plan. Investing in K-12 education is vital to ensuring that we have the workforce we need to build Florida's economic future.

Connecting education to the economy is not exactly a bold statement, I know. But clearly there have been obstacles in translating such a principle into action, despite the hard work of a number of educators, business leaders and nonprofit organizations.

So I was intrigued to learn of a new initiative from financial services firm Citi's foundation, working through Miami-Dade Public Schools and The Education Fund locally, being announced Monday. The Citi Foundation is spending \$600,000 -- to be matched by local donations -- over five years to develop programs aimed at increasing the number of low-income public high school students who enroll in some form of post-high school education.

Miami-Dade is one of three regions chosen for the Citi Postsecondary Success Program; the others are Philadelphia and San Francisco.

The focus on this particular issue stems from the recognition that the United States is falling behind other developed nations in the percentage of its students who pursue college or other post-secondary education -- this country has fallen from first to 14th, said Daria Sheehan, a senior program officer at Citi Foundation.

In Miami-Dade, just 44 percent of high school students graduate and go on to

more coursework, said Education Fund President Linda Lecht.

The foundation isn't interested in creating a lot of new programs, Sheehan said. It's interested in doing a better job coordinating the efforts of the many organizations already out there working on college readiness in South Florida, such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) and The Children's Trust. Districtwide, the emphasis will be on academic preparation of course, but also on helping students understand simply what they need to do to apply for college and finance it.

As Corey Yugler, program director at The Education Fund, put it, "We are not educating our children to the standards we demand of our employees," she said. The question she asks: "Does the business community have the will to do it?"

We have no choice, responded Barry Johnson, president of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, which is developing its own plan on education. "We can't rely on Tallahassee to do it," he said, giving a nod to the state's revenue shortfalls. "We've got to figure out a way to work around the challenges we have."

Lisa Gibbs is executive business editor.

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