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It's not that hard

Quit starving our schools and universities

It is impossible to find a new way of emphasizing how communities and states desperately need their citizens to know a thing or two.

Education is the underpinning of great individual accomplishment and of the cities, states and nations that benefit from collective intelligence, energy and innovation.

How hard a lesson is that?

Yet here in Florida we are letting our public schools and universities languish, even though we once passed a constitutional amendment demanding quality public education. We continue to ignore its call.

What we do in Florida is bow to the lowest-common denominator approach to managing government, which by extension includes public schools, colleges and universities.

It's a shame and an embarrassment, and it is so self-defeating that one can only conclude our educational system has personally failed our state legislators who don't seem to know how to connect the dots.

They should duck their heads in shame to know that Florida State University students are planning to raise \$100,000 — somehow, some way — to help supplement the salaries of their faculty. That's a drop in the bucket to the \$38 million FSU must cut this year — across town at Florida A&M University, they have to cut \$17.5 million.

But the point is that the students get it.

On Tuesday, more than 500 students from FSU, FAMU and Tallahassee Community College rallied at the Capitol to express their near-panic over what the assault on higher education means to them personally.

City Commissioner Andrew Gillum joined the group, arguing for "real leadership" that understands that to be competitive in the 21st century means investing first in education.

"We know that the cost of education continues to rise... that the Legislature and the governor consistently balance the state's budget on the backs of students," Mr. Gillum said.

Almost every influential and knowledgeable organization in the state is rooting for lawmakers to do the right thing.

That means finding the revenues necessary to stabilize our schools and universities even if that path means they lose their next election. If they do, that would be a shame on their indifferent constituents

— and a shame on the legislators themselves who didn't have the courage to educate their constituents about what's at stake when you tolerate, even promote, an ignorant society.

That's the kind of leadership Mr. Gillum is demonstrating.

It's the kind of leadership Associated Industries of Florida is talking about when it says; "A business approach to economic stimulus must absolutely include provisions for continued state investment for our K-20 education system." AIF also emphasizes creating construction jobs by continuing funding for education facilities in all sectors.

It's the kind of leadership Florida TaxWatch has in mind when it urges expanding virtual higher education offerings, streamlining K-12 administrative duplication and maximizing flexibility in class-size reductions in the 67 counties, and tightening Bright Futures scholarships so they reduce the cost but keep the mission.

It's the kind of leadership the Florida Center for Fiscal & Economic policy wants when it says we can't have a well-trained and educated workforce that will "sustain and enhance Florida's economic growth" without a significant bump in higher education funding.

It's the kind of leadership the LeRoy Collins Institute's "Tough Choices" report is challenging when it asks "How low can it go in higher education?" pointing out that Florida "lags dramatically behind other states in the South and the U.S. as a whole" in per capita spending on education. That Florida is, in fact, the lowest of all the states in tuition.

The students get even that. They are willing to pay more tuition in order to get the education they want, need, and deserve.

What part of this scenario remains blurry to the Florida Legislature? What more can be said to persuade its members that the tough choice is really on the only choice they've got.
