COMMUNITY VOICES: A brighter future, Kern County only if we dare to imagine it, act

Imagine. It’s a simple, yet powerful word that can invoke thoughts of apprehension, doubt, fear and peril. Though, depending on one’s disposition the same word can inspire positive ideas of hope, optimism, opportunity or dreams and visions of a brighter and abounding future.

I invite you to join me and imagine for a minute Kern County’s future, and what Kern and its residents may be like in the next five, 10 or 30 years. Imagine when our time comes and goes, and we hand over the pen to the next generation to author the next chapter in our history; what might they say?

Will they say we created conditions that left behind an affordable, thriving community, filled with opportunity? Will they write that we made smart investments, especially in the area of education which afforded their generation to gain the knowledge and skills needed to not only sustain themselves and a family, but also compete in tomorrow’s global economy?

The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) recently released a study that emphasized the importance of higher education as means of moving up the economic ladder and showed a correlation between the proportion of adults without a high school diploma and higher poverty rates in California counties. According to PPIC, 26.2 percent of adults aged 25 years and older in Kern do not have a high school diploma. This study also showed that 21.2 percent of Kern’s residents also live in poverty.

Further, just last month the California Employment Development Department released numbers showing Kern’s unemployment rate at 6.6 percent in November 2018. While down from 7.5 percent at the same time the year before, Kern’s numbers still pale in comparison to the statewide rate of 3.9 percent, and the national average of 3.5 percent.

These statistics do not bode well for Kern’s future. However, there’s bold, creative, innovative, intentional and results-oriented educational collaboration occurring around the county that ignites hope for a brighter tomorrow.

At Bakersfield College’s (BC) graduation ceremony last May, approximately 45 students walked across the stage and had an associate degree conferred in Ag Business. Big deal, right? But what if I were to tell you that those students received their two-year college degrees within weeks of receiving their high school diplomas? And, that these recent high school/community college graduates would be transferring to a four-year institution as juniors, slashing their college tuition costs by half, and eliminating or at least reducing the amount of debt saddling young college graduates struggling to gain footing in the workforce. This was accomplished by collaborative efforts between BC and educators at the Wonderful College Prep Academy in Delano.

At this year’s graduation ceremony, BC anticipates more Wonderful College Prep Academy students walking across the stage, though this time accompanied by students from Wasco High School, who, like Wonderful, availed itself of Early College innovation.

Early College is a guided pathway designed to provide a high schooler the ability to earn college credit while in high school through a clear, directed program of coursework carefully designed to ensure effective and efficient degree or certificate completion, so that a student can save time, tuition, transfer or hit the job market armed with a valuable skill or trade that’s relevant and in demand. Except, these efforts will begin as early as the ninth grade giving a student four years to achieve their goals, provide early exposure to the rigors of college and the college going culture, and for first generation college goers ample time to mitigate potential roadblocks to success.

If this isn’t enough to set your imagination to run wild, let’s examine McFarland High, well known for its competitive spirit, and more specifically its ability to win races, nine cross country state championships, and 24 consecutive state championship meet appearances. Now, boasting the highest high school graduation rate in Kern County on top of its cross-country accomplishments, McFarland is set to make its mark in college readiness through Early College.

Kern County is the top agriculture producing county in the United States. It’s the top oil producing county as well, and a leader in wind energy and solar power. Add defense and aerospace and it’s clear that Kern is the most important county in the U.S. Therefore, we have much at stake and the consequences of failing unimaginable. Thankfully, there are some bold, creative and innovative educators blazing a results-oriented path to help us avoid an unimaginable future. Through their work it shouldn’t be too difficult to imagine Kern leading in educational achievement in the not too distant future. Now, all we need to do is act.

Romeo Agbalog serves as a member of the Board of Trustees for the Kern Community College District and is the executive director of Kern Citizens for Sustainable Government.

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