

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# Early College Commitment:

A SOLUTION FOR EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS

## **Introduction**

Once the nation and the world's leader in higher education, California faces serious challenges over the next two decades in educating its population. Unless California makes significant gains in the level of educational attainment of its population, and aggressively pursues policies that promote college access and success, the future prosperity and economic competitiveness of the State will be at risk.

This report is intended to inform California policymakers about a promising solution that can help improve educational attainment in California – Early College Commitment. Through this policy, the State of California will commit a place in college, support services and financial aid to eligible middle and high school students who sign a Save Me a Spot in College Pledge and take steps to prepare themselves for the opportunity.

## **Our History and Core Values**

Early College Commitment is based on two values widely shared by Californians—**educational opportunity** and **joint responsibility**. Through the 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education, California established the principle that any student with the interest could pursue a college education in our state. Early College Commitment is a way for California to renew that historic commitment, and for the first time, make it directly to students and families beginning in middle school.

## **The Problem: Declining Educational Attainment, Growing Economic Demands**

A review of recent research shows that California grapples with a multifaceted set of issues in our K-12 and higher education system:

- A persistent achievement gap, with low-income students performing far worse than their more affluent peers.
- An estimated 31% of 9th graders dropping out of high school between 9th and 12th grade.
- Lack of preparation, in college preparatory or career technical coursework, for education after high school.
- A college-going rate in decline over the last decade, which now puts California 40th in the nation on this important measure.
- Substantially lower college participation rates in inland and rural California and for black and Latino students state-wide.

If these educational trends are not improved, given the rapid demographic change the state is facing and the retirement of the highly educated Baby Boom generation, the consequences will be significant.

**Declining Personal Income and State Tax Revenues:** If educational attainment remains at current levels for each ethnic group, California will experience the greatest decline in per capita personal income of any state in the nation between 2000 and 2020. California will see approximately \$2,475 less income per resident, which will considerably reduce our State’s tax base and affect the quality of life for our residents (see Figure 1).

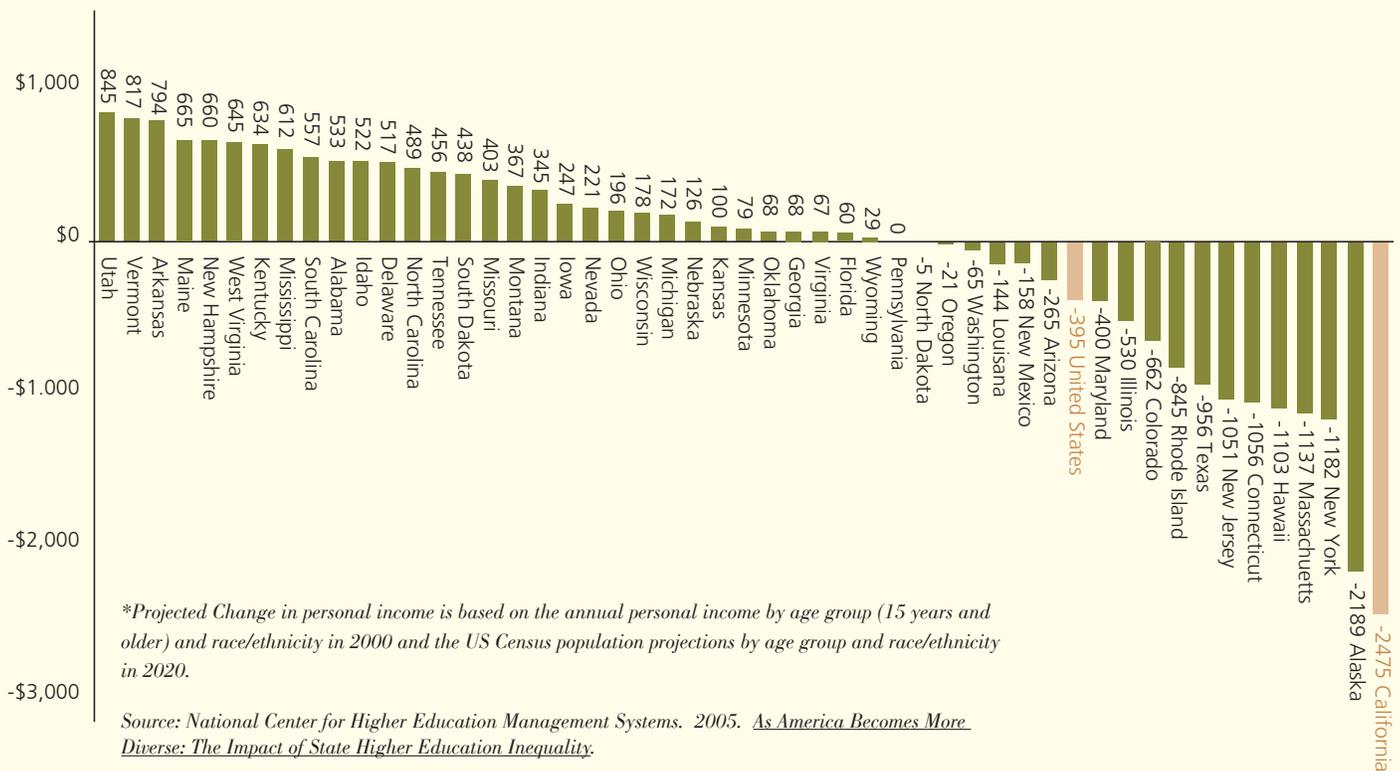
**A Shortage of Highly Educated Workers:** The Public Policy Institute of California found that

if educational attainment of California’s population remains static for each ethnic group at present levels, the State will face a less educated workforce in the future, while at the same time, the economy will demand greater levels of education due to a shift from goods-producing the service sectors (see Figure 2).

**Need for a College Roadmap**

Many families are not aware of the steps to prepare for college and think college costs more than it does and is therefore out of reach. A recent ethnographic study (2006) examining the college perceptions of low-income middle and high school students and parents found that their knowledge of the application process and financial aid opportunities was low and compounded by confusion of when or where to

**FIGURE 1:** California Stands to See the Greatest Decline in Per Capita Income with Current Levels of Educational Attainment (Projected Change\* in Personal Income Per Capita, 2000-2020, in 2000 Dollars)



start the process. “Research confirmed a roadmap is clearly needed given their lack of knowledge, in order [to] overcome the obstacles to entering college.”

**Recommendations for a Statewide Early College Commitment Program in California**

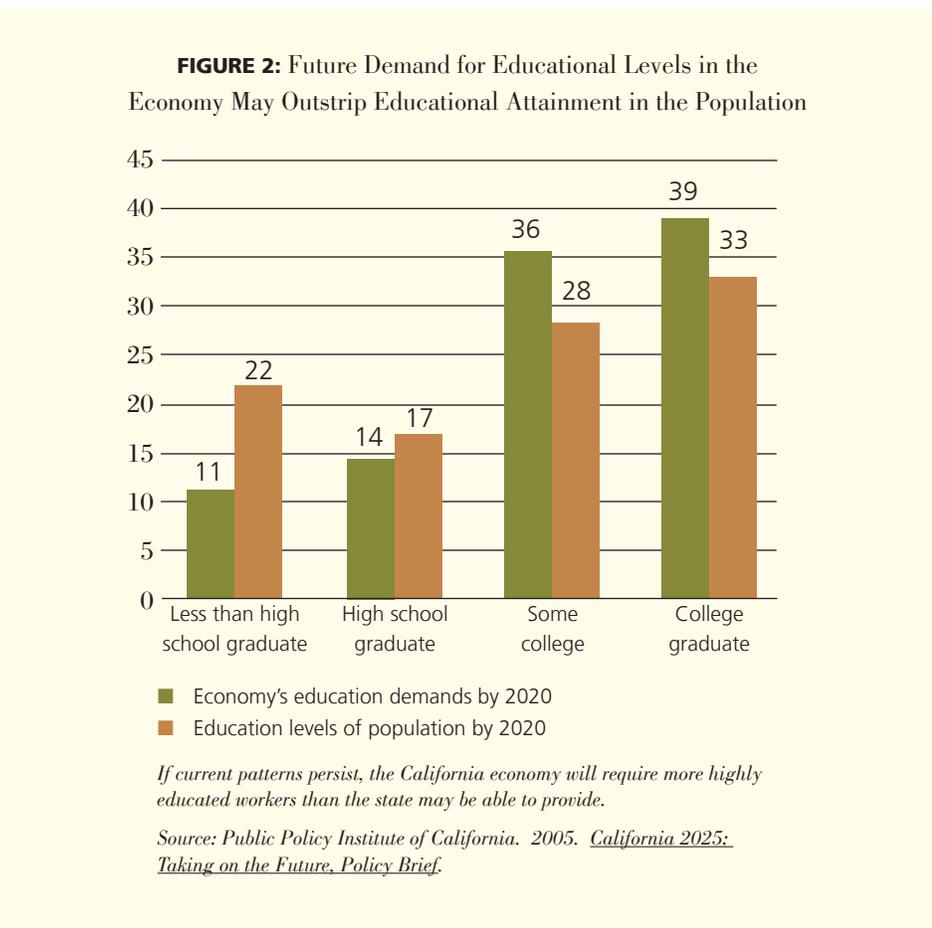
This proposal seeks to improve educational attainment, as measured by high school completion rates, academic achievement, college-going and completion rates of low-income students. It takes programs that a student may learn about at the tail end of their high school career and informs them of those as an incentive for academic preparation at the front end of their middle and high school years. Early College Commitment is a powerful communication tool that would motivate students and families to understand that college is within reach, affordable, and that early academic preparation is critical to success.

**Specific Elements of the Early College Commitment Proposal**

**Voluntary Tool for School Districts:** The program should be voluntary for school districts; however, districts that choose to take advantage of the program will need to provide certain services to their students.

**Eligibility:** The program should be targeted to all students in the 3 deciles of schools with the greatest levels of poverty, as well as other low-income students and foster youth in all other participating schools. These students would be able to sign the Save Me a Spot in College Pledge and receive its benefits. To reach all other students, we propose that the Governor and Superintendent of Public Instruction develop a formal letter outlining the State’s postsecondary opportunities and provide that to school districts for distribution to students and families.

**Student and Family Responsibilities:** The Early College Commitment tool would give eligible 6th through 9th graders and their parents or guardians the chance to sign the Save Me a Spot in College Pledge declaring a commitment to do the following:



1. Meet all graduation requirements to finish high school in California.
2. Take challenging coursework, which can include college preparatory and career technical classes.
3. Achieve proficiency in math and in reading and writing in English.
4. Complete a FAFSA and submit their GPA to the Student Aid Commission by March 2nd of their senior year.
5. Meet application requirements for university admission or enroll directly in community college soon after high school.

**State Responsibilities to Eligible Students:**

The State in return promises:

**A Spot in College:** A guaranteed spot in a California Community College to pursue career technical education, a degree, or to transfer to four year

*“[The Master Plan was the] first time in the history of any state in the United States, or any nation in the world, where such a commitment was made – that a state or a nation would promise there would be a place ready for every high school graduate or person otherwise qualified. It was an enormous commitment, and the basis for the Master Plan”*  
(Greenwood 2005).

~ Clark Kerr, former President of the University of California  
(pictured below on the cover of Time Magazine, October 17, 1960)



university; or a spot in the University of California or California State University to pursue a degree provided the student meets the admission requirements set by each system.

**Financial Aid** for students who are eligible and demonstrate need to help cover the costs of fees, books, and living expenses. Specifically, the program would commit, based on the existing Community College Fee Waiver, to provide two years of community college tuition free, provided the student meets residency requirements and demonstrates financial need at the time of college enrollment. The program also makes available the CalGrant entitlement and access to the federal Pell grant, which can be used at both public and private colleges.

**Recognition:** At the time of enrollment, each student will receive a Certificate of Participation with his or her name, and bearing the signature of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Governor.

**Roadmap to College Services:** School districts would provide assistance to students to 1) plan their courses to prepare academically, 2) visit at least one community college (including exposure to career technical programs) and at least one 4-year college, and 3) take necessary college admissions tests, apply for financial aid, and apply to university or enroll in community college. School districts would also need to collect and report data to the Superintendent of Instruction to evaluate the program.

**Implementation:** The Superintendent of Public Instruction would have the principal responsibility to administer the program, in collaboration with local school districts and public and private higher education institutions. In addition, individual colleges could enter into supplemental agreements with local school districts, which could include a guarantee of admission to a specific campus.

**Costs and Savings:** We expect costs to be relatively small since the effort aims to craft a tool to be used by existing programs, rather than creating a large free-standing program. These costs include 1) costs for the state Superintendent to administer

the program, 2) costs to local school districts who choose to adopt the program and its benefits, and 3) future costs of increased college enrollment and financial aid, which will likely occur at a time when the college-age population is flat. The proposal should lead to savings due to reduced remediation in college and improved time to degree. In addition, the benefits of a more highly educated population should result in a three-fold return on investment to California taxpayers.

### Models of Early Commitment

Early college commitment can serve as an essential tool for improving college access; it can also be sustained on a statewide scale.

#### Twenty-first Century Scholars (Indiana):

Started in 1990, the Twenty-first Century Scholars program has helped to improve Indiana's in direct college-going from 40th in 1986 to 9th in 2002. Low-income students who enroll in the program sign a pledge in the 7th or 8th grade to complete high school and meet certain expectations. The state promises four years of financial aid equal to tuition at a public university or the equivalent at a private college.

**Compact for Success:** Founded in 1998, the Compact for Success promises admission to San Diego State University to all Sweetwater Unified School District students who meet educational benchmarks. In 2004, it received the Golden Bell Award from the California School Boards Association for most outstanding instructional program. A recent evaluation has shown dramatic improvements in Sweetwater students being prepared for and admitted to San Diego State.

**Passport to College:** Passport to College, a program that started at Riverside Community College and replicated at San Joaquin Delta College, provides support services and financial aid equal to two years tuition to fifth graders. San Joaquin Delta College has made the commitment to over 7,000 students and parents.

**Reservation for College:** A partnership between UC Davis, PG&E, and several school districts, Reservation for College focuses on preparing underprivileged students for higher education beginning in the 4th grade. Students who graduate from Reservation for College high schools and who are admitted to UC Davis receive financial aid to help pay for college.

**Oral Lee Brown Foundation:** Oral Lee Brown is an Oakland realtor who in 1987 adopted a first grade class at Brookfield Elementary School and promised that if they stayed in school, she would put them through college. Today, her foundation continues to adopt a new class every four years. Brown cites two factors as critical to success: a focus on preparation for college and a commitment to financial aid.

### **Conclusion**

Early College Commitment gives low-income students the opportunity to sign a Save Me a Spot in College Pledge committing to prepare themselves academically, in return for a State guarantee of a place in community college or university, as well as need-based financial aid to help them cover the costs of their education. The proposal renews the State's historic promise of college access made in the 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education and, for the first time, makes it directly to students and families beginning in middle school.

### **BENEFITS TO CALIFORNIA**

**For Students and Parents:** A roadmap to prepare for college and a guarantee of need-based financial aid.

**For School Districts:** A tool to motivate students to achieve and to coordinate services with colleges.

**For Community Colleges and Universities:** Improved college participation and preparation of low-income students.

**For Taxpayers, Voters, Local Government, the Legislature and Governor:** Improved educational attainment, tax revenues and economic opportunities.

**For Business and Industry:** Improved workforce preparation and overall per capita income to support economic activity.