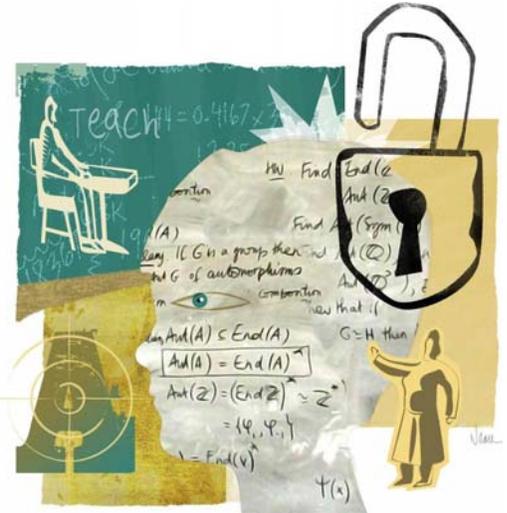


Education is the great equalizer

May 19, 2016 / **By Bernie Navarro**

This week marks an important milestone for the Latin Builders Association (LBA) as it graduates the inaugural class of the LBA Construction and Business Management Academy, a charter high school in northwest Miami-Dade County. The experiment of a business association starting the first business charter school has proven successful; 100 percent of our graduates have enrolled in college.

Educational initiatives like the LBA Academy push the boundaries of traditional education. Students not only receive a solid high school education, but also invaluable business training and experience. That's because LBA membership has eagerly supported this important effort since it was introduced in 2012.



Members of the LBA Board of Directors serve as student mentors. LBA member companies provide internships to current students and employ many LBA Academy graduates while they attend college. Many of the LBA's meetings with elected officials and business leaders occur in the LBA Academy cafeteria, with our students enthusiastically participating.

This has given the students insight on how to interact with business people, further developing their self-confidence. They have also networked with local industry leaders and national political figures at our monthly networking lunches. Students must be on top of their game, which includes having a concise elevator pitch, proper etiquette and table manners, to qualify to attend one of these networking lunches. Students are exposed to the issues and ideas that, quite frankly, have taken me my entire career to experience.

As we celebrate the success of our educational experiment, there is still much to do. A recent poll of registered voters commissioned by the Miami Herald concluded that one of the top issues facing Miami-Dade County is gun violence. It is time to ask the real and tough questions. What are we as professionals, as community leaders, doing to address and remedy the massive disconnect between the future of our youth and the betterment of our society?

We have a responsibility to educate young adults and let them know that they can contribute to the innovation and prosperity taking place in our country. The individuals who are engaged in gun violence do not realize that they are not solving their problem; they are hindering the very progress that would make their lives better.

Education must be treated as the great equalizer to address hard-to-tackle social issues, including family disintegration.

We are confident that the LBA Academy is a successful educational model that can be replicated throughout the community in an effort to move toward achieving that goal. Education will help young adults realize they can participate in economic success, and honestly provide for themselves and their families.

I also believe it is critical that corporations of all sizes become part of the solution, providing opportunities for people of diverse backgrounds, ages and skills. When youth feel hopeful about their futures, then and only then will we have consistent peace, prosperity and unity in our community.

Make no mistake, sustainable economic development in Miami-Dade County is dependent upon training the next generation of leaders. Our youth deserve to have opportunities in their own town and we should all help to pave the way for them to pursue their dreams. We can either work to solve these issues today, or be prepared to deal with them for generations to come.

The time to act is now!

Bernie Navarro is chairman of the governing board of the LBA Academy and president of Benworth Capital Partners, a private equity firm in Miami.