

Tony Argiz: The answer to poverty is education

The South Florida we know today was built by people who faced enormous challenges and even bigger odds.

Early 20th century Miamians confronted the stark, un-air-conditioned reality of heat and hurricanes, underdeveloped transportation and frequent bouts of economic turmoil.

Later, as waves of Cuban immigrants arrived, new difficulties accompanied them: They landed in an unfamiliar environment, and many came with nothing at all in hand. But while the builders of our community – the people who fueled its economic growth over many decades – contended with problems, they also found a great deal of help from neighbors and friends, social and religious institutions, and local and federal government programs.



Today, challenges and adversity are no more scarce than they were in times past. It is the job of South Florida's leaders to make sure that the necessary help is equally abundant.

The business community has a big role to play in this mission. One issue, in particular, deserves our special attention: the continued financial struggles that more than half of South Florida households endure.

The United Way's ALICE report, released late last year, offers a telling story of Florida's

communities, noting that almost half of all residents in the state – including here in South Florida – are barely making enough to pay for food, housing, child care and other basic needs. The majority of these struggling families – more than 615,000 households in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach Counties – represent the working poor, or the ALICE (asset limited, income constrained, employed) group.

The reasons for their troubles are complex, ranging from housing costs to a lack of education, but they stem directly from the fact that more than half of all jobs in Florida pay less than \$15 an hour. To change this, we not only need to create more high-paying jobs, we need to give more South Floridians the tools and education they need to land them.

The push to bring more skilled positions to our region is not new. Nor is the move to promote early childhood education, stronger results in our public schools, a wider pursuit of advanced degrees among high school graduates, and more access to vocational training and adult education.

Let's be honest: Companies in our community recognize that an educated, skilled workforce is not just good for the people who comprise it. Better skills are good for business and the economy overall. As a result, several important efforts are under way, including work by nonprofits, programs sponsored by South Florida businesses, unique public-private partnerships, and state-funded training and education.

In addition to producing the ALICE report, the United Way is also at the forefront of efforts to make education a consistent priority. The United Way of Miami-Dade County, for instance, has operated its Center for Excellence in Early Education since 2007, educating and training professionals and parents in early education skills, and advocating for expanded early childhood programs.

Individual companies like Burger King offer scholarships to help high school students move on to college, and through its grants program, Bank of America works with the Education Foundation of Palm Beach County, where AmeriCorps volunteers partner with high school students to help them fulfill their obligations for graduation.

Other organizations have programs designed to boost skills training and adult education, such as the Broward County-based OIC of South Florida's Employability Skills Training program. Florida International University and Miami-Dade Public Schools have joined forces to create The Education Effect, a partnership designed to boost education outcomes in Miami's Liberty City.

And CareerSource South Florida works with public and private organizations to promote and offer training and education. These are just a few of the many ways that South Florida is helping to improve educational opportunities and outcomes.

The task at hand is big. Miami-Dade and Broward counties' school leaders have made critical progress, with high school graduation rates up significantly, nearing the mid- and upper 70th percentiles, respectively, last year. But across Florida, only 27 percent of residents older than 25 hold a bachelor's or other advanced degree.

The stakes are big, as well, with a 2013 report by the Economic Policy Institute showing the clear link among education, higher wages and increased economic prosperity.

South Floridians have a history of overcoming obstacles. But they haven't done it alone, and they should not have to. Now is a good time for companies to join the effort to expand South Florida's push for education.

As someone who arrived here in Florida at a young age, alone and with few resources, but with great support and guidance from the community, I can assure you that a little bit of help can make a difference, and a lot of education can make even more.

Tony Argiz is chairman and CEO of MBAF, a Top 40 accounting and advisory firm with more than 400 employees in offices across the U.S. and India. He currently serves as chairman of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce.