

# A capital idea

We can't think of a more valuable initiative than one that responsibly assists residents.

Houston's booming economy and relatively low unemployment rate mask a pervasive human problem.

Thousands of residents yearning for a middle-class life and better income, many of them single women with children, are trapped in dead-end, low-paying jobs because they lack the education to qualify for higher-paying positions.

While community colleges are designed to provide that boost, all too often these potential applicants do not have the finances, academic skills and social support to persevere to graduation.

A program called Capital Idea began in the San Antonio area 25 years ago with the goal of finding people locked into what's called the secondary labor market at hourly wages of \$11 or less and supporting them on a journey to educational gains that can produce lifelong financial security.

It provides stipends for child care, housing and even cash for car repairs. Key elements are case workers who monitor student progress with weekly mandatory meetings and a developmental academy to make sure they have the academic skills to handle community college courses before they enroll.

The program spends about \$5,000 per student a year. Long-term studies indicate every dollar spent generates a 500 percent payback in enhanced earning power over 20 years.

In Houston, The Metropolitan Organization, an alliance of religious organizations and other institutions dedicated to empowering citizens to take control of their lives, is working with the business community and local government to expand the four-year-old effort.

Bob Fleming, the director of Capital Ideas Houston, says Houston Community College and Lone Star College are key partners in the

effort to educate students upward, but they can't do it alone.

"You have to understand the realities these people face," Fleming recently told the Chronicle editorial board. "The notion that they can walk into a community college and sign up and successfully negotiate their way to a diploma is not happening." That's verified by the fact that 70 percent of students applying at HCC fail entrance exams, and only 17 percent of entrants eventually graduate with degrees necessary for professional success in teaching, nursing, technology and other professions.

The first harvest of 35 graduates from the Capital Idea program in Houston occurred this month, and organizers say all will be placed in positions with local employers paying at least \$17 a hour with benefits. While that should encourage the 150 or so participants currently working toward their degrees, those numbers are only a fraction of the enrollment in similar, much older programs in Austin and San Antonio.

While Capital Idea Houston has a budget of more than \$1 million and has received a \$500,000 state grant and \$250,000 in federal dollars through Mayor Annise Parker's administration, Harris County has yet to pitch in with requested funding. TMO officials project that with a \$5 million budget the program could be assisting a thousand Houstonians in an age range from 25-40.

We can't think of a more valuable initiative than one that responsibly assists residents to improve their lives and strengthen their families through education, while addressing the growing lack of skilled labor for our expanding economy.

We urge local government, businesses and foundation leaders to act in their own self interest by supporting Capital Idea.