

**St. Albans Messenger**

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**Editorial points out issue, CSA program part of the answer**

Emerson Lynn's editorial, "Vermont's at the bottom; no excuses" is spot on. Mr. Lynn describes a daunting and growing problem that our state is facing – the low number of Vermonters who have obtained or plan to obtain a higher education degree. The Vermont Department of Labor projects that by the year 2022 Vermont will have nearly 10,000 new job openings that require at least a postsecondary degree. Unfortunately, we don't have the workforce ready to fill these jobs. Currently, only 45.5 percent of Vermont adults have a post-secondary degree.

While many are quick to assume that the reason too few Vermonters are pursuing a higher education is the expense of it, Mr. Lynn's notes that the problem begins way before students are college age. The problem is "aspiration rates." Yes, Vermont must do more to make college affordable but the problem begins in early childhood at which time kids either do or do not develop a "college-bound" identity. Studies have found that children formulate ideas about their future, including college attendance, as early as elementary school.

Fortunately, we have a solution to address this "aspirational gap". In 2015, the Vermont State Legislature passed the Vermont Universal Children's Savings Account (CSA) Program. This program established a higher education savings program for every child born or adopted in Vermont, by providing "seed" money that can be used to pay for higher education. In recent years, many New England states have established CSA programs giving children between \$100 and \$250 and then encouraging families through financial literacy programs to make on-going contributions and watch these funds grow. Research shows that children with \$500 or less saved for college are three times more likely to enroll and four times more likely to graduate (Assets and Education Initiative, 2013). During the last legislative session legislators debated whether or not to fund this program. Unfortunately, they neglected to do so. In the face of many funding needs it is difficult to fund a program that takes 18 years to bear fruit. However, if we are to help kids and their families develop a "college-bound" identity we have to start at birth.

A funded CSA program will result in more parents expecting that their children will go to college; more parents will begin to save for college when their children are young, and most importantly, more Vermont children will view themselves as someone who will attend college.

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