

Policy Proposal: The Cuyahoga Commitment to Education

*The fifth of an on-going series, this proposal outlines the principles and priorities to be pursued by the first County Executive, and highlights one approach towards “**Creating Jobs and Promoting Economic Growth**,” and “**Human Services – Putting People First**.” FitzGerald’s Five Point Plan for Cuyahoga County government is available at www.EdFitzGerald.org.*

This policy proposal addresses the following policy priorities enumerated in the County Charter:

1. Focused, effective and accountable leadership;
2. Job creation and economic growth as a fundamental government purpose, thereby helping the County do a better job of creating and retaining jobs and ensuring necessary and essential health and human services;
3. Collaborative leadership with Cleveland, suburbs and others within the public and private sectors;
4. An improved focus on equity for all our communities and citizens;
5. Long-term regional and global competitiveness; and
6. Significant taxpayer savings by streamlining and eliminating unnecessary expenses.

SECTION 3.09 (11) To establish...a program to provide scholarships, loans, grants and other forms of financial assistance for residents of the County that will enable them to participate in post-secondary education, including vocational education and job training and retraining; for the funding of the program from money determined to be saved by the operation of the County government...

The Opportunity

It is impossible to talk honestly about economic development without addressing its foundations in human development. Successful economic development cannot occur in a vacuum; a comprehensive strategy is needed that incorporates the means to ensure that our citizens have the opportunity to succeed and contribute to our region’s growth.

We have a long way to go. According to The Literacy Cooperative, nearly half of Cuyahoga County’s adults have literacy levels below the required minimum to write a brief letter or read a bus schedule. *More than half a million Cuyahoga County residents lack the skills to obtain jobs that lead to improved standards of living and support regional economic goals.* The achievement gap starts as early as age 5, with 20 percent of Cuyahoga County children falling well below target school readiness levels.

The Cuyahoga Commitment

Every student will enter the K-12 system ready to learn and have the opportunity to pursue their higher education goals.

- Seat the administrator of the Cuyahoga Commitment on the Economic Development Commission
- Design and implement a higher education scholarship program for Cuyahoga County residents
- Take the UPK program to scale countywide

Increasing the education level of Cuyahoga County's workforce is crucial to driving our growth; occupations that require a college degree are growing twice as fast as other occupations. The county should strengthen the efforts underway in the formal classroom by building "bookends" that buttress that education. Committing to assist children under age 5 to prepare for school, and improving high school grads' access to higher education or transition into the workforce is the charge of the Cuyahoga Commitment.

The Cuyahoga Commitment

As County Executive, Ed FitzGerald will lead the county to make a promise: every student will enter the K-12 system ready to learn and have the opportunity to pursue their higher education goals.

To keep this promise, FitzGerald proposes the Cuyahoga Commitment, an endeavor to increase funding in early childhood education and higher education, building a higher education scholarship program for county residents, collaborate with corporate and foundation leadership for education, and align the Cuyahoga Commitment with other economic development initiatives. The endeavor will require collaboration well beyond county government, but FitzGerald commits to lead Cuyahoga county government to:

1. Include the Cuyahoga Commitment administrator on the Economic Development Commission

The new County Charter establishes an Economic Development Commission (Section 7.04) that will work with the County Executive and Development Director to set the economic development agenda for Cuyahoga County. There are nine appointments to that position, selected by a host of sources ranging from the Executive to the Greater Cleveland Partnership.

Although appointing authority is established in the Charter, the appointing members should make inclusion of a representative of the Cuyahoga Commitment strategy a priority for inclusion. As one of the major economic development initiatives of Cuyahoga County, the work of the Cuyahoga Commitment must be aligned with the broader economic development agenda to ensure the most effective use of county resources and best results for workforce development.

2. Design and implement a higher education scholarship program for Cuyahoga County residents

Communities across the country are investing in college scholarship strategies as an economic tool to improve workforce quality, renew neighborhood vitality, and significantly increase business attraction and retention. These programs offer scholarships to high school graduates within a defined geographical area to create "education communities" that attract new residents and expand an educated workforce.

In Kalamazoo, Michigan, a higher education scholarship program implemented in 2006 resulted in more than 400 families from other Michigan communities relocating to Kalamazoo, increasing public school enrollment by more than 1,000 students after years of steady decline, improved test scores, and real estate values in the city rising 8 to 10 percent while the rest of

the state declined. *These results were achieved in only the first two years of the program's operation.* Other communities have experienced similar positive results.

Ultimately, location-based scholarship programs rapidly increase the number college graduates in those communities. It is a fitting solution, as the rapid growth of knowledge-based jobs poses a challenge for Cuyahoga County, where only 25 percent of the population 25 and older holds a bachelor's degree.

Cuyahoga County can and must do better. In order to rapidly retool Cuyahoga County's workforce to meet the growing demand for a skilled workforce, the new county government must align our current education resources, corporate community, and new revenues to increase opportunities for residents to pursue advanced degrees and training, and put Cuyahoga County on the map as a community that invests in its future.

Specifically, the Cuyahoga Scholarship Program will be structured to:

- Increase the number of families attracted to buying a home and putting down roots in strategic Cuyahoga County communities;
- Increase K-12 enrollment and achievement;
- Significantly increase college enrollment and completion;
- Support Cuyahoga County's higher education institutions, and;
- Build a well-trained workforce to attract new business and grow Cuyahoga's economy.

A location-based higher education program requires the commitment of the county and partnerships with city schools, higher education institutions, existing financial assistance programs and other resources. Those partnerships will include the beneficiaries of an improved workforce. Ed FitzGerald will challenge the private sector to adopt high schools to both help fund opportunity and set workforce expectations for those still in school. When elected, FitzGerald will work with the broad stakeholders in education to design and phase-in a program using all available resources to provide higher education scholarships to county residents.

3. Increase access to Cuyahoga County's Universal Pre-K (UPK) program countywide in partnership with the corporate and community partners

Advances in brain science tell us that investing in a child during the first five years of life- the period when 85 percent of a child's brain development takes place- is more effective than any other workforce development strategy in delivering long-term results. Economists have calculated the return on investment for high-quality early childhood education to be as high as \$7 to \$17 for every \$1 invested.

In 2005, the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland demonstrated these high returns are a result of children entering school prepared to learn, delivering positive results, including:

- Overall increased K-12 academic achievement;
- Decreased need for costly special education and grade retention;
- Increased high school graduation and college participation rates;
- Decreased criminal justice activity and welfare dependency; and
- Increased overall lifetime earnings.

In order to garner the compelling return on investment and workforce development results of early education investments, the research shows that programs must maintain a *high level of quality*, including educated teachers, low teacher-to-child ratios, research-based curriculum, and parent engagement. In response to this growing body of research, Cuyahoga County launched the Universal Pre-K (UPK) program in 2007 as part of Invest in Children, an innovative public/private partnership led by Cuyahoga County to deliver comprehensive early childhood strategies for children prenatal to age six.

UPK is designed to enhance the quality of existing early education classrooms for children ages three through five to significantly increase school readiness and child development outcomes. UPK also increases the affordability of high-quality early education by offering pre-kindergarten scholarships to families up to 400 percent of the federal poverty level on a sliding scale.

Currently, only 1,000 of Cuyahoga County's 63,000 children ages three through five are participating in the UPK program. The UPK implementation plan calls for a multiyear rollout that will serve 12,000 children by 2019.

It works. Evaluation of the first wave of UPK graduates shows significant improvements in school readiness. A Case Western Reserve University study showed children emerging from UPK sites outperformed their non-UPK peers. Additionally, sites participating in UPK showed an 18 percent increase in the quality of early education services provided after only one year of participation in the program.

In the current budget, the state eliminated funding to the Early Learning Initiative, one of Ohio's highest quality early education programs for 3 - 4 year olds that served 12,000 children, and reduced access to public pre-school by \$14 Million. Moreover, the state reduced childcare eligibility from 200 to 150% of poverty, further reducing access to early education for working families. In Cuyahoga, 2,321 children have been stripped of school preparedness, and no fewer than 23 early education sites have closed.

This is budgeting in the wrong direction, as we know the return on investment our region receives from investing in UPK and similar programs. As Executive, Ed FitzGerald will build a coalition, beginning with the Cuyahoga delegation, stakeholders and other like-minded counties, to restore and increase this funding at the earliest opportunity. In the mean time, state and federal funding requests will make Cuyahoga Commitment programs a funding priority.

As part of The Cuyahoga Commitment, FitzGerald will work with corporate, community, state, federal, and education partners towards the full phase-in of the UPK implementation plan to ensure that all of Cuyahoga County's children enter school ready to succeed. Additionally, the new County Government will work to increase partnerships with Cuyahoga County's public school districts and local governments to increase local UPK investments and community engagement. Through the County's leadership, every community in Cuyahoga County will be involved in ensuring that Cuyahoga's County's youngest learners have a chance to receive high-quality early education during the critical first five years of life.