Horace Mann, the great public educational reformist of the mid-1800s, has shaped my thinking about education and its transformative power on individuals and society. Mann believed that education is the great equalizer of society. As did Mann, I believe that education fundamentally is a public good.

The emergence of the community college system in the early 1900's was built on the foundation provided by Mann's work in developing K-12 education as a public good. We as a nation must stay committed to this fundamental principle of education for all that Mann promoted in the 1800s.

The California Master Plan (1960) for Higher Education as a public good evolved as part of Mann's landscape in the mid-1800's.

A looming challenge facing thinkers, leaders and educators of today is determining how to equitably spread our limited resources and to maximize the return on investment. There is no doubt in my mind that the answer to this question is by further expanding and investing in education as a whole and the community college system in particular. It is the most bang for the buck in education. That is because the community college system serves as both a skills based education environment and a vehicle to help shape and mature students' minds as they become players and contributing members of society and the workplace.

Simply put, community colleges cost the tax payer a whole lot less per student than four year universities. In terms of modest investment, two-year schools receive about 1/2 of the aid per student in the California State University system and 1/5 of the aid per student in the University of California system. Eight out of every 10 undergraduate students in public and private California higher education are enrolled in community colleges while only 1 out of every 17 Cal grant dollars goes to a California Community College student.

Yet, the rate of employment of community college grads today, even in these difficult economic times, is higher than that of four year university graduates. (Dept of Labor Study quoted in USA Today) And the reason is clear. When you graduate with a degree from a community college you emerge with a marketable skill. Of course, students should continue on to get a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Science degree, but the proof of the success of an Associate's degree is right here and indisputable.

Community colleges have the largest percentage of first generation students (for example, 80% at Bakersfield College) the largest percentage of Latino students and African-American students. A recent California Community College Leagues communication indicated that there are more Latino students in California community colleges than total undergraduate students enrolled in all other public and private colleges and universities in the state.

Different students come with different skills and backgrounds. Regardless of the population, our institutions of higher learning must bring each student through regiments of learning that in the end equalizes their chance for success in America.

Getting back to Horace Mann. Not only was he the first person to serve as secretary of a board of education (in Massachusetts), he was the founder of common education. Common education was based on six principles and included among them was the principle that the public cannot remain ignorant and the principle that everyone is entitled to a quality education. Mann believed that education is a public interest; he believed that a variety of backgrounds in an educational environment enhances education.

He succeeded John Quincy Adams as congressman from Massachusetts. Adams, one of the most influential thinkers in our early democracy, asserted that, "there are two types of education -- one to teach us how to make a living -- and the other how to live." Community colleges today do both. They teach quantifiable trades while developing thinkers with transferable skills and knowledge. They inject skilled, trained and educated workers directly into the workplace bolstering the economy while inculcating values of civic engagement and commitment to the larger society. Without knowing it, Adams was preparing the blueprint for our Community College System.

In this spirit it is essential to see that it is not enough to simply learn or to understand theories. It is essential to apply them and to activate what one learns. It is the development of this approach to education in community colleges that makes them intellectually and fiscally successful. Our job is to influence leaders to invest in the places best situated to help shape the future. We should encourage leaders to continue to invest in varied educational institutions, specifically to community colleges.
since the return on investment is unquestionable. Horace Mann set a high bar for our education and for our educational systems. He set a significant bar. And we can dream. We should dream! It is through dreaming and working hard to achieve those dreams that society progresses.