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FRESNO LEADS STATE IN HELPING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS ACHIEVE COLLEGE DREAMS District Celebrates "Save Me a Spot in College Week"; Students Sign College Pledge

This week students in Fresno Unified School District will be joining thousands of middle school students across California who are signing the "Save Me a Spot in College" pledge. These students pledge to work hard, stay in school, and take the steps they need to make it to college. The State of California promises to uphold its end of the bargain – to make sure there is a spot in college and financial aid available when they get there.

"With Early Commitment to College, we are giving California's students the information they need to make it to college, the hope that they can succeed, and the promise from their school and from the state that we will help them to get there," said State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell

Two years ago, the Governor's Partnership on the San Joaquin Valley adopted Early Commitment to College as one of their core values and included it as part of their strategic plan. Eight counties and school districts have been part of the partnership for the past two years, including Fresno.

"Many in our community are working hard to make the Central Valley a leader and a model on how you can turn around college-going rates in a region, give young people a sense of hope, and allow the Valley to emerge as a leader in college-going culture statewide," says Jessie Ryan, Modesto-based Associate Director of The Campaign for College Opportunity.

In a recent congressional report, the San Joaquin Valley's 20th Congressional District – which covers a large share of FUSD – ranked last, 436 out of 436 congressional districts in the nation, for the well-being of its residents. The region is plagued by poverty, poor health, and low graduation rates. Just 6.5 percent of adults in the congressional district have a college degree, making the Early Commitment to College program critical for the region.

ECC creates a new tool for California school districts to motivate and support young people in middle school and high school to achieve academically, finish high school, and pursue career technical or degree programs in community college or university. The bill that created Early Commitment to College, SB 890 was sponsored by the Campaign for College Opportunity and enjoyed broad-based bipartisan support and was passed by the legislature and signed into law by Governor Schwarzenegger in September 2008. Attached is a fact sheet with more background information.

"We are thrilled to provide this Early Commitment to College opportunity to our students," says Fresno Schools Superintendent Michael Hanson. "By making this commitment early, students and their families will have more time to plan and gain access to college-going resources. We are truly fortunate to have state and local partners who continue to support our work in preparing students for college and career success."

The program is run out of the California Department of Education (CDE) in collaboration with higher education and financial aid agencies and is voluntary for California school districts. This program was passed through the legislature with overwhelming, bi-partisan support and signed by the Governor in September.

"Early Commitment to College will provide young people in our community with vital tools for their future success," according to Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin. "More students choosing college means more adults in our workforce with high-demand skills – and that means greater prosperity for our city as a whole. I am very pleased to see this program launching in our city."

Early Commitment to College is simple, because it builds on existing programs, but powerful because it packages these opportunities into one commitment made to students at an early age. It seeks to reverse the significant and troubling trends of declining educational achievement that can hurt the future quality of life and economic competitiveness of the State.

"For the large number of students in Fresno who do not have family members already in college, making an Early Commitment to College can be the difference between knowing they can go and thinking that college is out of their reach," according to Michele Siqueiros, Executive Director of the Campaign for College Opportunity

"The demand for educated workers in California is will soon outstrip supply and if we do not provide education for our citizens, we lose our competitive edge," notes Siqueiros. "Early Commitment to College is an important step for California to take right now to prepare for the futures of our young people and the future of the state as a whole."

Early Commitment to College has the following major provisions:

- It provides participating school districts a communication tool from the California Department of Education to be used with 6th to 9th grade students and their parents/guardians so that they understand the college opportunities and financial aid available to them.
- The core element of the program is the "Save Me a Spot in College" Pledge, to be signed by low-income students and their parents, outlining their agreement to take the steps to finish high school and prepare for college.
- These students would gain access to UC and CSU, if they meet the eligibility requirements and apply. They would be guaranteed the opportunity to attend a California Community College.
- It makes a commitment of the Community College Fee Waiver and other financial aid to eligible low-income 6th – 9th grade students who fulfill the program requirements and are eligible in the 12th grade.
- It is inclusive of career technical and college preparatory classes in middle school and high school, and of career technical and degree programs in college.

Many students do not learn the specific steps they need to take to get to college until it is too late. In the "Save Me a Spot in College" Pledge, to be signed by students and a parent or legal guardian, students would agree to:

- Meet all graduation requirements to finish high school in California.
- Take challenging coursework, which may include A-G and career tech classes.
- Seek to achieve proficiency in math and in reading and writing in English.
- Complete a FAFSA and apply for financial aid by March 2nd of their senior year.
- Meet application and other requirements for university admission or enroll directly in community college soon after high school graduation.

The Campaign for College Opportunity is a statewide nonprofit organization whose mission is to ensure that more students are prepared for college, go to college and succeed in achieving a postsecondary degree. Last year, the Campaign sponsored SB 890 "Early Commitment to College" legislation in Sacramento with the support of over 49 bi-partisan legislative co-authors, 100 organizations, and various school districts. The bill was signed into law by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in the fall.

The four events in Long Beach, Fresno, San Francisco, and Los Angeles launching Early Commitment to College have been made possible by a grant from Citi.