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Viewpoint: Youth need more tools to succeed

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During college, I interned at the Alabama State Ethics Commission, which taught me the lesson of understanding before needing to be understood. What I learned from my co-workers, some whom had marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was far more valuable than showing off how much I knew — or thought I knew. I understand times have changed and technology has catapulted young people into new realms of knowledge, but for me, this lesson is a foundational skill to building relationships that has allowed me to be successful.

Today, not enough teenagers in Austin have this opportunity — the chance to garner learning experiences that equip them



NICK SIMONITE/ABJ

Nikki Salzillo is president of Bank of America in Austin.

with lessons instrumental in determining what they want to do and be in our community. It's these experiences that will also make them more competitive in the workforce.

We all know Austin is witnessing incredible economic growth. Our city is the second fastest-growing in the nation with one of the lowest unemployment rates among metropolitan areas. Yet despite this progress, teens consistently have the highest unemployment rates of any group that the Department of Labor tracks. The average youth unemployment rate in the U.S. is 13.7 percent, but that figure jumps to 21.5 in Texas.

It is statistics like these, and my own job experience, that make me believe we must allow better access to workforce preparedness. Employed teens have lower drop-out rates, are more likely to pursue career goals and show an increase in lifetime earning potential. They are Austin's future leaders, and it's critical that we provide solutions to help them navigate the increasingly competitive waters of the Austin job market.

That's why the Bank of America Charitable Foundation has developed initiatives that are focused on workforce development, which I'm personally proud to support. While we've given more than \$1.2 million in grants addressing this issue in Austin over the past five years, equally important are the collaborative efforts focused on changing the landscape.

Mayor Lee Leffingwell's office and the City of Austin teamed up with the bank to provide paid job opportunities to local Austin teens. Every year, we partner with Communities In Schools of Central Texas, an organization that empowers students to realize academic and life achievements. Through Student Leaders, the bank and CIS offer outstanding high school students paid internships to gain valuable work experience. They also attend a leadership summit in Washington, D.C. So many students come to our nation's capital having never been on an airplane — and they leave connected, inspired and ready to make a difference. We've seen numerous students go on to

leadership positions in various sectors and many attribute Student Leaders as the catalyst for their success.

It is imperative — and our responsibility as local employers and leaders — to ensure that every young adult in our community has access to opportunities that will enhance their chance at job stability. Providing financial education, leadership training and real work experience, along with a paycheck, is crucial to helping young people succeed today and in the future.

Nikki Salzillo is president of Bank of America in Austin.