Drinking coffee and reading the News and Observer before heading into work on Monday, November 10, my attention was drawn to an editorial entitled, “In an NC Child’s Face: Poignant Dreams for the Future.”

It was several paragraphs in before I realized that the editorial was about the Dream Awards program, one of the innovations we heard about during our very first Align4NCWorks learning summit at Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute back in February.

The Dream Awards Program is a unique scholarship awarded to sixth-graders in Caldwell and Watauga counties. The students are first-generation college students who excel academically. Provided through the Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute Foundation, it is an incentive for college completion. Dream scholars who maintain good grades, graduate from high school and enroll at Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute are guaranteed two years of fully paid tuition. More than 1000 Dream scholarships have been awarded since 1989, and 70 percent of the Dream scholars old enough to attend college are currently enrolled at Caldwell.

As was evident from the observations of the editorial writer, the power of the Dream Awards was visible in the faces and expressions of the sixth-grade recipients. Here’s some of what he wrote:

*My heart ached as the sixth-graders walked one by one to the microphone at the J.E. Broyhill Civic Center, gave their first names and said what they wanted to be when they grow up.*

*Most appeared nervous. In some, that translated into a stiff gait, gaze locked forward. Some walked as if they were on a high wire, so conscious of the eyes on them that they perhaps feared stumbling. One gangly girl’s nerves made her long limbs jiggle as she walked, and she flashed a broad, self-conscious smile.*

*Some, like that girl, had begun the physical growth spurt that soon will make their parents feel much older. But most, even the taller ones, still had a child’s voice.*
As each one, still brimming with a child’s energy but not yet a teenager’s bravado, spoke into the microphone, that child’s voice announcing a career ambition stabbed at the place in my heart where I keep sentimentality locked away.

“I want to be a technology designer,” a boy said, and the sweet earnestness bored into me.

These 41 children were this year’s recipients of Dream Awards from the Foundation of Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute. They were nominated by their teachers and guidance counselors because they show great potential to achieve these goals – or others that may replace them in the coming years.

“I want to be a paleontologist, vet or author,” a girl said, and the broad range of options she is considering swept me along like a river. She believes in these, I saw it in her eyes, she believes she can do it, and hearing that child’s voice speaking it, I wanted to pick her up and help her along.

The many individuals and businesses that contributed to the Dream Awards have provided those sixth-graders with the gift of higher education, something that may not have been within their reach. In fact, thousands of community college students were helped along last year thanks to the generous contributions of the State of North Carolina and private donors.

Just to be specific, last year 27,995 North Carolina community college students benefited from more than $16 million is state provided need-based assistance through the North Carolina Community College grant program. That program provides an average award of $579 to students who receive little or no assistance through Federal Pell grants, and also fall below the Hope Scholarship Tax Credit. In addition, you received a report today about $728,000 in private funds awarded last year to more than 2,000 North Carolina community college students through the generosity of the Golden LEAF Foundation, Duke Energy and Wells Fargo.

The investments our state makes to keep community college tuition low, while providing scholarship support to those struggling to make ends meet, are more vital today than ever before. A recent report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development was highlighted in a New York Times editorial, indicating that U.S. higher education now has the dubious distinction of being the most expensive in the world at an average annual cost of $26,000 per year. Perhaps that is a major reason why college enrollment for low-income students has been declining nationwide since 2008.
The contributions made by the many private donors, companies and individuals, giving to community college foundations and programs such as Caldwell’s Dream Awards help close the financial gaps that too many students today still fall through. For many students and their families, that gap is the difference between poverty and the middle class. Students today from families in the lowest 40 percent income brackets have a two-thirds chance of escaping poverty if they have a college degree, but chances are, will most likely stay poor without one.

The editorial writer clearly appreciated the magnitude of importance of the donations that made possible the opportunity being presented to the Dream scholars when he closed his op-ed by writing:

*These are all children who could become the first members of their families to attend college. Sixth-graders surely don’t realize what a barrier that is, but it is one, as adults come to understand. The understanding is part of what creates the ache when you look into a young face full of life and energy and dreams. An adult knows how many obstacles will come along.*

A lack of money to pay tuition may be the least of the problems a child will confront before graduating high school, but unlike so many of those problems, it’s one that is easily addressed.

*Not easily enough, of course. The 41 recipients of this year’s awards are not the only students who would be worthy of this attention. The money the foundation has raised goes only so far.*

“I want to be a pediatrician,” a girl said, and I thought about how many other girls might have said that but weren’t lucky enough to be chosen and brought to this room.

*During their 25 years, the Dream Awards have helped hundreds of students take a critical step closer to achieving their dreams.*

*It’s not enough. It’s not nearly enough.*