



Achievement Gaps Deliberative Dialogues Final Report

December 18, 2007

“I’ve been in this district and this community for 30 years, and never seen excitement like this. I think we finally have the opportunity to make the changes we need to make.”

1. Summary

In May-November of 2007, the E³ Alliance, Texas Forums, and Austin Voices for Education and Youth held a series of deliberative dialogues on the impacts of education achievement gaps on communities throughout the Central Texas region. Over 600 people participated in an ongoing series of dialogues to examine the issue and the objective data on the gaps we see, analyze potential approaches for improving gaps, and develop action plans to create a better future for our children and our economy.

These dialogues, branded **Too Many Children Left Behind: *Closing the Education Gaps in Central Texas***, were created to provide a mechanism for community change, a platform of understanding across communities for *regional* solutions, and a set of grass roots input from parents, students, teachers, and community members into the strategic planning process for systemic education reform in the region.

By the numbers:

- 6 communities
- ~120 moderators, each trained for 5 hours
- 35 planning and organizing meetings
- Over 600 total participants
- 17 dialogues sessions, ~3875 volunteer community participant hours

While there are many lessons learned, the overwhelming response from participants, moderators, leaders, and staff was that it was a huge success. We are confident that this process can and should be expanded to other communities in Central Texas as well as across the state and country.

This document describes the background, process, and outcomes of these deliberative dialogues. It is meant both as compilation of results for all those who so diligently participated in the process, as well as a guidebook for others who might want to undertake a similar exercise in the future.

Interspersed throughout the document are a few of the voices we heard directly from participants.

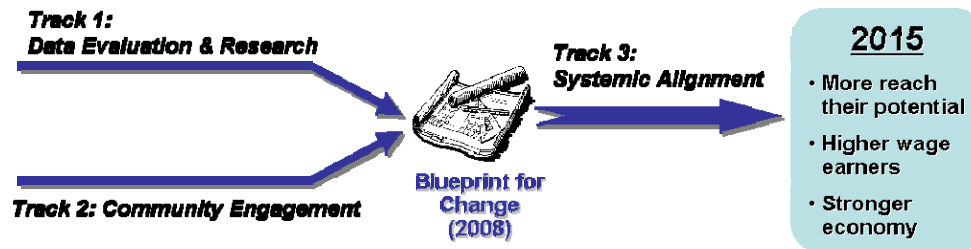
All appendices to this document, including detailed results of the forums, will be posted on the E³ Alliance web site in January 2008 at <http://www.e3alliance.org/dialogues.html>.

2. Background

The E³ Alliance is a regional collaborative established to create a research-based “blueprint” to align our education systems to better fulfill the potential of every citizen and in turn, increase economic outcomes and build a stronger economic future for our region.

The Model for Change of the E³ Alliance combines three interrelated tracks of effort:

1. An objective performance framework that demonstrates where the best leverage exists in allocation of time, money, resources and practices
TRACK 1: DATA EVALUATION AND RESEARCH
2. The community will to drive change – a “tipping point” in all major sectors of the community (business/government/education/non-profit/students & families)
TRACK 2: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
3. Effective alignment of institutions and activities to act as a coordinated system that can best serve our students rather than a collection of individual parts
TRACK 3: SYSTEMIC ALIGNMENT



The achievement gaps dialogues are part of the Community Engagement track, but pull heavily from our ongoing research and were designed to feed into our Blueprint for Change – the strategic plan for education in the region.

2.1 Why

Too many well-intentioned and well-planned efforts at education reform have been stymied by a lack of sufficient community buy-in. To raise the standards of educational success for all student populations, we will need not just top-down leadership and good ideas, but the will of the community.

“Kids aren’t saved by programs. They are saved by relationships.”

Since the start of the E³ Alliance effort, we have had significant one on one and group outreach, media exposure, public presentations, and other outreach. But we were looking for much more. We were looking for a community engagement process that could produce:

- A truly interactive experience, where the voice *from* the community was more important than the explanation *to*, and people were confident that their voices would be part of the process for change
- A forum that could provide a *depth* of understanding with enough people to start a “tipping point” for change, rather than the typical outreach effort that may hit a breadth of many people but not spur action
- A platform for systemic change based on exposing common values held by people with *diverse* perspectives: students, parents, teachers, business and community representatives, retired people, DINKS (dual income, no kids), etc.

- A *regional* understanding across different parts of the community, where different socioeconomic and ethnic groups could recognize that we all have an interdependent economic future – it is not enough that *my child* is doing well – *all of our children* must do well to build a strong future for each of us
- A concrete set of actions and objectives that could be fed to business, political, and education leaders to support a strategic *Blueprint for Change* for the region.

2.2 Project Goals and Objectives

The goals of this project as stated in the original project proposal were to:

1. Draft a plan to close achievement gaps across the region and develop the capacity for people within local communities to work together to address the gaps within their own communities.
2. Create a basis for region-wide consensus on over-arching educational system goals.
3. Develop a self-sustaining infrastructure of volunteers in local communities able to bring people together to deliberate and decide how to act together on other community issues.

The objectives of this project were:

- To strengthen the capacity for communities to engage in *deliberative* forums on education policy and possible actions, and to move from individual opinions to sound and reasoned public judgment that supports systemic change.
- To collect the hopes and concerns that people express when they consider the costs and consequences of education policies, and provide information that the public, the media, experts and policy-makers can use to make decisions and set policy on education issues.
- To identify, based on the deliberative forums, additional opportunities to support communities in planning for and addressing local or regional issues.

2.3 Who

The E³ Alliance initiated this project by looking for a process to develop a depth of community engagement that could provide the groundswell for change. After much investigation, we met with Texas Forums and learned that the Kettering Foundation, a public policy research organization based in Ohio, was launching a nationwide research project on the role of deliberation in helping communities address education achievement gaps. The project would follow the format of the National Issues Forums, a model for deliberation that grew out of the well-respected research of the Kettering Foundation. Texas Forums, an initiative of the LBJ Library, has a local network that uses a process for deliberation based on the NIF model. We also enlisted Austin Voices for Education and Youth, which has a mission of engaging communities, especially youth, in education reform. With an eye toward building the civic capacity in our partner communities, Texas Forums and Austin Voices developed a proposal for regional dialogues far beyond what we had originally envisioned. The plan called for local trained moderators, a commitment from community leadership to implement action items, and teams of community champions to steer the process. We developed a plan and budget for managing a large scale community engagement process, and defined roles and responsibilities. The simplified version of responsibilities:

- E³ Alliance: manage the overall project and secure funding for it, provide research and present all data, connect with community leaders, coordinate forum and results
- Texas Forums: adapt guide materials, secure and train all moderators in the dialogues process, primary liaison to Kettering Foundation
- Austin Voices: provide facilitators, coordination, and technical assistance to all local teams, grass roots outreach, recruiting and placement of moderators, data synthesis

- Local Champions Teams: plan local dialogues logistics, identify and recruit participants, provide local in-kind support.

2.4 Where

The E³ Alliance has based its platform for change around the Central Texas region, consisting of the 5 county Austin-Round Rock MSA as well as the areas covered by the service area of the Austin Community College District. Together, this represents a population of about 1.6 million people, with ~275,000 public school K-12 students in 35 school districts ranging from a rural district of 32 students to Austin Independent School District, the large urban district with about 83,000 students. There are about 100,000 academic college students in Central Texas, who attend The University of Texas at Austin, Texas State University, 4 private universities, and Austin Community College.

In launching this community engagement effort, we went to six communities around the region, centered around partner school districts of the E³ Alliance. We purposefully included urban, suburban, and semi-rural communities with varying socioeconomics. They were: Austin, Bastrop, Eanes (Westbank), Manor, Round Rock, and San Marcos.

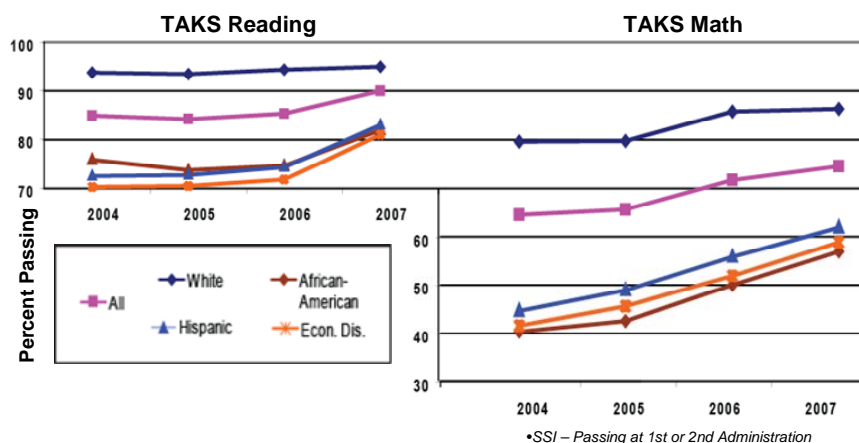
*“It’s time to change from teaching as something you do **to** students to teaching as something you do **with** students.”*

2.5 How

2.5.1 Data-Based Approach

Through its data evaluation and research efforts, the E³ Alliance had already developed a very comprehensive data set about regional achievement gaps, including trends and outcomes on a variety of measures (standardized test passing rates, high school and college graduation, advanced placement and college going, etc.) disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. This data was also analyzed by school district. This rich local information on gaps in academic achievement provided communities with specific data, and reinforced the need for these dialogues. Just a few example data sets are shown here:

Central Texas Gaps: 8th Grade TAKS



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Source: TEA Division of Performance Reporting, Ad-hoc Report

K12-10

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Central Texas, Austin at a Glance

	Central TX Region	Austin ISD
K-12 Population	260,000	81,003
% Non-White	55%	72%
% English Language Learners	23%	24%
% Economically Disadvantaged	44%	60%
Student Growth Rate	15%	6%
ELL Student Growth Rate	41%	27%

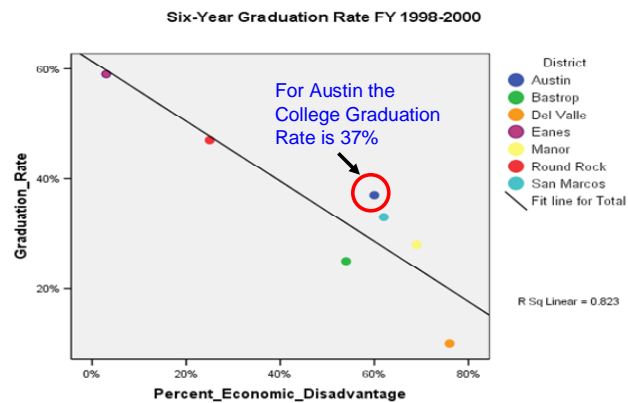


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TEA 2006 Data; Growth Data 02-06
Source: TEA Division of Performance Reporting, Ad-hoc Report

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Economically Disadvantaged Populations Map to Low College Graduation Rates



Source: THECB Aggregate Data Request

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2.5.2 Dialogue Structure

Based on its research on community deliberations, the Kettering Foundation launched a research project and developed discussion guide for national dialogues on the education achievement gap. The Kettering guide provides three research-based approaches to dealing with achievement gap issues, pros and cons on each of those approaches, and a method for gaining insight into common values people reveal in discussing the issue.

However, the demographic trends in the national guide were quite different than those of the Central Texas region, and so the data sets and stories did not resonate well with a Central Texas audience. So, using the Kettering guide as a template, we developed a local 28 page Discussion Guide based on Central Texas data. In addition to incorporating local data into our adaptation of the Discussion Guide, we interviewed dozens of stakeholders and included their stories as a way of personalizing the issues.

The Discussion Guide takes participants through three research-based approaches for dealing with education achievement gaps:

Approach 1: Raise Expectations and Demand Accountability

Approach 2: Close the Resource Gaps

Approach 3: Address Root Causes

Because the goals of the process included creating regional unity and a regional action plan for change, we outlined a much more comprehensive process than many traditional Kettering Forums. The dialogues would take place over multiple nights rather than the typical two hour forum, to allow time for people to develop relationships and fully investigate impacts of various options for closing education achievement gaps. We incorporated resources from Study Circles Resource Center into our guide, including a template for developing an action plan for the community. Also, we held them in communities throughout the region, rolling up to a regional forum with delegates from each community represented. This allowed for local ownership and action, with a common regional plan.

2.5.3 Budget and Funding the Work

In order to engage the community in a meaningful way, develop action plans, and support their roll out, we developed a comprehensive project plan with an overall budget of ~\$133,000. Major categories of expense included:

<i>Expense Category</i>	<i>Example Costs</i>	<i>App. Budget</i>
Staff Management Time	Event and meeting planning, presentations and presentation development, recruiting community leaders, coordination of teams, budget management, etc.	\$27K
Research & Development and Collateral	Data analysis and research to support dialogues, development of the Discussion Guides, all marketing collateral	\$23.5K
Staff Facilitation	Time facilitating the six Champions teams, development of preparation materials, tracking action items, etc.	\$29K
Moderators	Recruiting, training and stipends for ~120 moderators to guide small group discussions	\$18.5K
Support Materials	Printing of Discussion Guides, data sets, and related materials	\$7K
Dialogues Materials & Expenses	Flip charts, markers, food at meetings, mileage, childcare at meetings, etc.	\$18K
Synthesis	Evaluation and synthesis of all input, final report	\$10K

In addition to the budgeted items, hundreds of pro bono support hours were provided by a number of volunteers helping in the process.

The E³ Alliance led the effort to develop a complete project proposal and secure funding. The initial challenge grant was provided by the United Way Capital Area, who was interested in including this work as part of their Community Impact model, and in developing a sustained capacity for grass roots community change across the region. Other funding support for the project was provided in part by the Buena Vista Foundation, Wachovia, Bank of America, the Austin Community Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Media sponsors were Univision and KEYE-TV.

3. The Dialogues Process

3.1 Launch & Planning

In late Spring of 2007, we identified and met with “launch teams” consisting of (at least) the school superintendent, a higher education leader, a business leader, and a political leader in each of seven different communities around the Central Texas region. These leaders were asked to kick-off the project, provide support, “own” the dialogues process in their community, and to bring together the right “grass tops” Champions to plan dialogues in their community.

One community worked with us through the launch process but then opted not to participate in the dialogues. This community is centered around a mid-sized, very low socioeconomic district with relatively low student achievement that is experiencing fairly rapid growth. The small district central staff was concerned about having the bandwidth to take on a new process in addition to their current efforts to support higher student outcomes, and may have been concerned about negative public perceptions to achievement data.

Together with the six remaining launch teams, we then created a “Community Champions” team of 8-20 people in each community. Each Champions team was assigned a facilitator from Austin Voices to coordinate team meetings and manage logistics for the planning process. Each of the six Community Champions teams met at least 5 times over the summer and early fall in order to plan the dialogues in their local communities and design local collateral materials. The most important role of the Champions teams was to get a broad cross-section of the community to commit to taking part in the series of dialogues.

Also during the summer, we recruited about 120 dialogue moderators, both from local communities, university students, and students and educators from the target communities, as well as from networks of facilitators and moderators from Texas Forums, Austin Voices, and the E³ Alliance. Texas Forums provided four training sessions of 5 hours each to prepare moderators and recorders.

In order to effectively market the effort, the E³ Alliance developed a customized Central Texas logo based on the same Kettering theme, “Too Many Children Left Behind.”



We also created extensive collateral materials including a web site, community-specific posters, moderator requests, local and regional press releases, etc. Materials were available in both English and Spanish. Approximately 23% of Central Texas K-12 students are Limited English Proficient, and the relative growth rate of immigrant Spanish Speaking families in Central Texas is three times the overall student growth rate, so Spanish language materials were important to the effort. We also recruited Spanish speaking moderators.

The series of dialogues were scheduled to take place in each of the six communities in October – November, 2007.

Dialogues Schedule					
Community	Day	1st	2nd	3rd	Time
Round Rock	Tuesdays	10/2/2007	10/9/2007	10/16/2007	6:30-9pm
Manor	Tuesdays	10/9/2007	10/16/2007	10/23/2007	6-8:15pm
Bastrop	Mondays	10/15/2007	10/22/2007	10/29/2007	6-8pm
Austin	Thursdays	10/18/2007	10/25/2007	11/1/2007	6-8:30
San Marcos	Mondays	10/22/2007	10/29/2007	11/5/2007	6-8pm
Eanes	Tuesdays	10/23/2007	10/30/2007		6-9pm

3.2 Dialogues Process

Between 55 and 110 participants per night (plus moderators, district staff, and volunteers) in each of the communities met for a series of 2-3 discussions over 6-9 hours. These “deliberative dialogues” were different from typical public hearings where citizens are given a two minute window to speak their peace. There was a great deal of interchange, following a structure that helped participants think about pros and cons of different approaches, and how to prioritize action steps.

The first dialogue night started with a plenary session where a Champion team member and the superintendent welcomed the participants, followed by a brief introduction to the process. The E³ Alliance then shared data on achievement gaps (differences in test passing rates, graduation rates, etc.) specific to the Central Texas region and also *localized to that particular district/community*. With this background in hand, the forums were divided into tables of 8-12 people in small teams. The tables were – to the degree possible – pre-assigned so that each one had a mix of students, parents, teacher/administrators, community and business members. A dialogue group might include a high school drop out with kids now in school sitting next to a grandmother or business representative with no children in school, sitting next to a college Dean and a current student. Each table had at least one trained moderator, and usually a trained moderator and a scribe.

Each table/team spent about an hour with various introductory/grounding exercises, then launched into the first approach. Subsequent approaches were addressed on the second and third nights. For each approach, the moderators asked the teams to look at how that approach might best address achievement gaps, what the strengths and weaknesses and unintended consequences might be, and action steps they might want to take. Participants stayed with their group for all meetings, and we found that teams quickly “jelled” and became very supportive of their other team members – even if they came in with very different perspectives. On almost every night we literally had to push people out of the building after the designated end time because participants were so engaged in their dialogues!

“We need to not wait for permission anymore.”

3.3 Dialogues Outcomes

On the last night, after the third approach had been discussed, each group developed action items according to three key stakeholder groups. The moderators led them in a discussion about what actions would require *community* involvement, *school and district* involvement and what actions *individuals* could take on their own. We then reconfigured the groups putting at least one person from each small team together to consolidate and prioritize the action steps according to key stakeholder. These were captured for the whole community and presented in plenary session. The

action steps ranged from personal and immediate (“I’ll start a midnight basketball league at the high school so our students have a place to go to stay out of trouble at night”) to changes in mindset (“We need to help more students and parents understand why being ready for college is so critical.”) to broad reaching plans (“Develop a community-wide definition of success that we measure and work together on, and is not personality dependent so it doesn’t change whenever a new principal or superintendent comes in.”)

We also asked each small team to nominate 1-2 delegates to represent the thoughts of the whole community at a regional forum of all of the six communities.

The results of each approach, as well as final action steps for each community are contained as an appendix document on our web site at <http://www.e3alliance.org/dialogues.html>. The prioritized action plans from each of the six communities were compiled and analyzed for Common Themes, as well as Creative Ideas. From this analysis we developed a core set of recommended actions:

Aiming toward a Blueprint for Change Consolidated Action Plans from Community Dialogues

Common Themes		
Community	Schools	Individuals
Hold more of these dialogues in our schools, businesses and communities; get people more informed and involved	Stronger Communications from schools - more often, more direct outreach, translators at all meetings (some meetings Spanish only.) Provide community education classes.	Volunteer as a Tutor or Mentor at your school and other schools where the need is great
More business support for schools - internships, career speakers bureau, pay for parent time in schools, messages in paychecks	Better teacher communication with parents - off campus home visits, calls with good <u>and</u> bad news. How to make more convenient?	For those already involved : establish stronger relationships - serve as role model and "matchmaker" for other parents and community members
University partnerships that are rationalized and efficient- "near peer" tutors, marketing college to high schoolers, etc. Give college students credit to volunteer?	Managed, centralized volunteer pool for each school so volunteers can be allocated where and when needed (w/ listserve, master lists). Expand volunteer opportunities and cut red tape to getting involved.	Students acting as peer-to-peer mentors , especially across transition points (e.g. high schoolers to middle schoolers)
Collaborate with other organizations more effectively. Connect to city & county, churches and use church facilities; better links between libraries, clubs, transportation systems, fine arts centers and schools	Have high expectations of parents and help parents identify the right expectations for their kids (including importance of higher ed)	Have higher expectations of ourselves (volunteering, engaged, parenting - are we doing enough?) and that all students can be successful in college/career
Communications/Marketing/ outreach - what's working, getting more involved, awareness of issues, what resources are available, regular forum in media, billboards & PSA's, through businesses and churches. English & Spanish	Allocation of resources - willing to not fund what isn't high priority for our students or doesn't work. Be more creative in best use of school \$ we have.	Build and share positive stories about our schools. Enlist media as a voice.
Develop a Community Plan/framework - "definition of success" created by district and community that guides actions, strategies and doesn't change when leaders do. Publicize goals and report.	Additional counseling support - especially social workers who can address non-academic needs of students, and counselors who can help students with transitions to next level, including college	Provide student financial support - help with grants for college, education foundations, fundraising
"One Stop Shop" community center - or use a campus as a community center - homework help, sports, computer lab, volunteering, clubs, education foundations, etc.	Want more engaging curriculum with many more interactive, hands-on learning opportunities, service learning, more "real world", bring business into schools and create "business labs"	Use citizen rights! Be better informed; vote; know your representatives and use them; lobby for policy changes
Parents teach parents (peer to peer) - business skills, homework skills, teach each other English and Spanish, etc.	Smaller class sizes. Personal relationships with small groups of students.	
Stronger community college presence and linkage to provide pathway for students (need local taxes approved in some communities)	More focus on teacher retention , determining why teachers leave, incentives for strong teachers (\$ and other), do an analysis of working conditions in schools	
Support funding for Pre-K and broader/better Pre-K programs	More parent support specialists ; esp. who can support Spanish speaking parents' needs	

Creative Ideas		
Community	Schools	Individuals
Better communicate what businesses need (skills, knowledge) to students, schools, counselors	Align instruction better ; rotate teachers or assign differently so newer teachers don't always get most challenging classes and highest needs students	Start a men's program - get more men engaged with students as role models, mentors, etc.
Communicate policy and legislative decisions/changes (how to do objectively?)	Send our resources (master teachers, unique courses, students) to other districts to share limited resources and create strong ties across the community	Organize midnight basketball where parents and kids can be organized around positive activities
" Sister schools " - a school partner with a school in a different district and volunteer/help/fundraise there	Parents without transportation able to ride school buses to volunteer & meetings	Make 529 plans a priority; help parents understand how to start 529 investment plans to pay for college
Stronger medical community partnership with schools - prenatal care access, learning differences screening, etc.	Parent Help Line - "how do I help my kid with his homework?"	
"When's the last time you were in a school?" - tours & "principal for a day" to Chambers, Lion's Clubs, etc- let them know what school is like today.	Establish year-round classes to better meet needs of students	
Give extrinsic rewards for students to do well - education achievement, attendance	Consolidate districts to be more efficient with overhead	
Corporate sponsorship for specific events (e.g. theater, talent show)	District "career day" with business speakers bureau. Include college skills requirements and vocational careers for those not headed for college	

Common Themes Color Key:

Communications and Marketing
Community Outreach
Business and Community Collaboration
Student Futures
Best Use of Resources
Stronger Student Relationships
Big Strategies

What We Didn't Hear

One of the most interesting findings was what we *didn't* hear in the Dialogues or Regional Forum. These topics are common in the media and general perceptions, but were not brought up in any forums:

- Need to narrow the academic focus to help students succeed in core subjects
- Concerns about safety
- Need for more testing and student data
- Facilities and environmental issues

"We always assume constraints bind us. Instead, we need to break some rules."

Our interpretation of these missing elements is that communities feel that their basic needs are being met, but that students need *more* than the basics to succeed. Also, it was interesting that in no case did we hear a school or community wanting what another group had. They did not compare themselves to each other as a benchmark to emulate – they simply wanted their own school or community to “work better.”

3.4 Regional Delegates Forum

3.4.1 Purpose

While every community had completed a set of actions that they could undertake as individuals, a district, or a community to address the impacts of education achievement gaps, we had not yet achieved the goal of developing a more common *regional* perspective, as well as input to the Blueprint for Change. What could we do to make the Eanes community care about working for

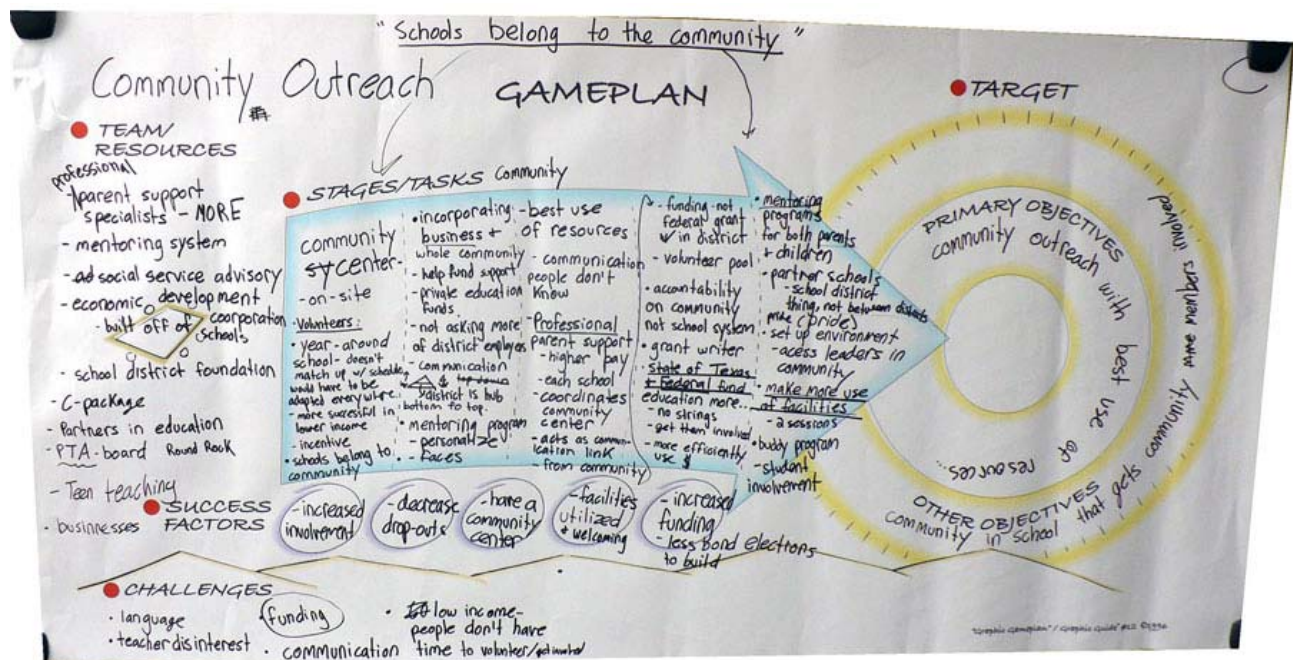
common solutions with Bastrop, and vice versa? Did we have objectives that could feed into a strategic plan for change?

At a regional level, we wanted the actions to be reviewed and brought forward not just by the community delegates, but by “community agents” including political representatives, nonprofit leaders, superintendents from the participating communities, etc. – those who would want to hear directly from the delegates to get a “feel” for community priorities.

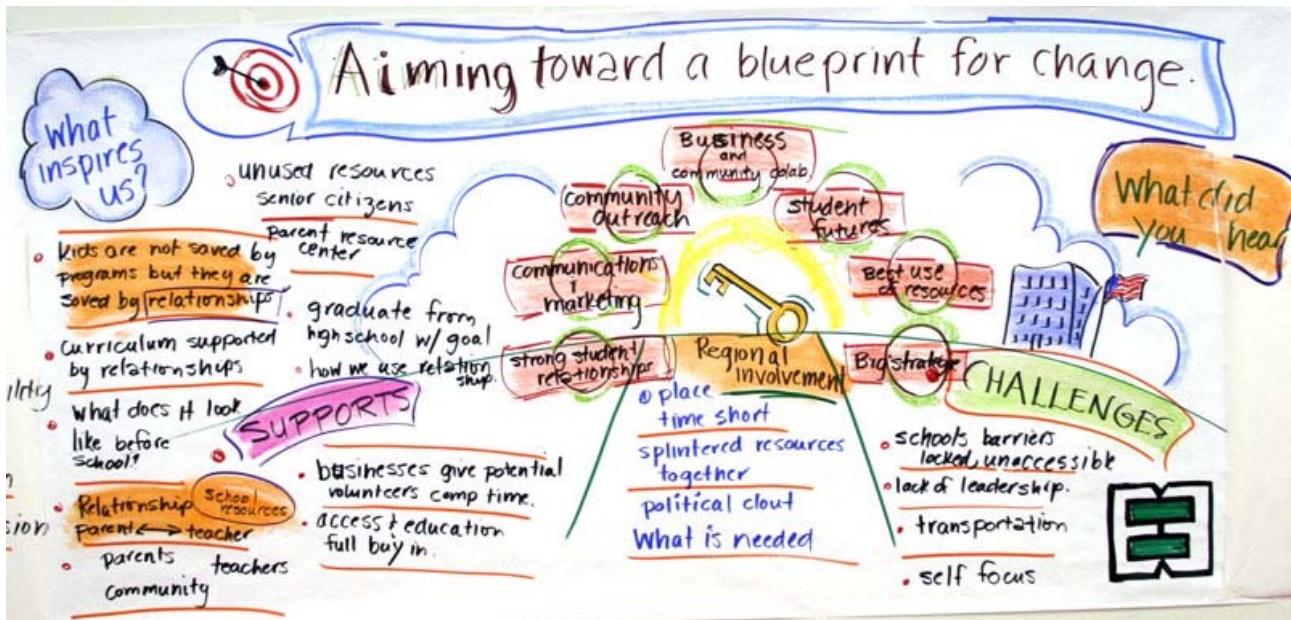
“They tell us about McDonald’s and about Harvard, but nobody ever talks about the options and pathways in between...”

3.4.2 Regional Delegates Forum Process

For the first part of the day, our sixty delegates representing the six communities were assigned to tables with every community represented, given the combined results of all the community dialogues, and tasked to develop a regional Gameplan for a common theme of their choice. These Gameplans were captured graphically to drive more creative thought. An example is shown here:



During this time, the 40 community agents (political leaders, superintendents, state agency representatives, etc.) gathered in the adjoining room and received a debrief of the project. The two groups then came back together so that the community agents could hear the delegates report on their proposed action items and the two groups could plan together. The input of both the delegates and agents was captured graphically to describe a pathway to the future Blueprint for Change:



“The excitement in the room is amazing. I’ve never seen broad segments of the community and educators working together like this before.”

The delegates were also brought back to their own local community plans to describe how they could advance those and fit them into the regional effort. Each of the individual community Gameplans is available at <http://www.e3alliance.org/dialogues.html>.

3.4.3 Regional Delegates Forum Themes

While the community delegates and some agents will be actively involved in the implementation of the ideas that were prioritized from throughout this process, all of this work needs to fit within a regional strategic plan, the Blueprint for Change. That effort will be formally kicked off in January. The overall themes and input that we heard from the regional forum that will be taken forward to the Blueprint for Change Summit were:

- Prepare our students for success *in real life*
- We give you and ourselves permission to break the rules and be bold – don’t be held back by perceived constraints
- Relationships between schools, parents, and community entities are critical for success and need to be the center of any change effort, rather than on the margins. We also need more robust measures of parent and community involvement.
- We can use our resources better than we do now
- What we do needs to be measured and communicated through transparent *leading* indicators

*“The biggest thing about these meetings is the **empowerment**. I just saw a notice and walked into the Dialogues and felt listened to – I was given the power to speak and be part of the process. That’s what will truly make the difference; **when ALL of our community feels empowered** like that.”*

5. Achievement Gaps Dialogues Process Outcomes

5.1 Did the Process Work?

The responses to this process were overwhelmingly favorable. In fact, when we combined all the action steps from every community together, the number one input from all the communities was to hold more of these dialogues with more participants from across the region.

Most importantly, the output from the community dialogues and the regional forum provided the basis for action and change.

We captured six overall success indicators of this project and this approach:

- 1) People learned and care about the issue. In our evaluations, ~90% of participants said that they significantly improved their knowledge about achievement gaps and their impact on our communities, and ~96% said that they agreed or strongly agreed that it is “a very important issue.”
- 2) Dialogues were complex and nuanced. Whether groups included knowledgeable educators or lay people or both, we did not hear many polarizing perspectives. Instead, participants were thoughtful and creative in their dialogue and open to new ideas. We often heard participants say, “I never thought about that.”
- 3) The small groups became quite cohesive. Almost everyone commented on how great their group was and how, despite different perspectives, they shared common values. Our attempts to re-adjust groups after they started meeting were quickly nixed by the groups because they wanted to stay together.
- 4) The dialogue process did not spin out of control. Some school boards were concerned going in that the process could become just a big griping or finger-pointing session. Some Champions teams were concerned that a few irate voices would take over the process. Funders worried that the community plans might not be a rational use of resources and we would be at risk for having committed to supporting their action. None of these concerns actually occurred. We attribute this to three important components: 1: the structure of the Discussion Guide, which kept people focused on the issue and approaches, 2: the training of the moderators, who could guide discussions constructively, and 3: splitting up into small groups, where people got to know each other, so were less likely to simply place blame.
- 5) Superintendents have been pleased with the input they have received. Every participating superintendent has expressed great pleasure in the breadth and depth of input and specific ideas that they have received, and many have said that they got input that could not have received any other way or in any existing forum that they had. Even when they were already doing some of the ideas suggested, they expressed gratitude for the affirmation from the community.
- 6) People made commitments beyond the Dialogues process. Many community members were inspired to take on personal commitments to help educators serve students better. Many agreed to keep meeting in their own communities, and to develop community-based structures to continue talking and working together. The process has started to sustain local community champions.

*“We are not trying to build another program;
we are trying to build a culture.”*

5.2 Success Stories

There are many “success stories” of positive activity already happening because of these dialogues. Here are just a few examples.

Students in two different communities who participated in the dialogues were so impressed by the power of the process that they sponsored dialogues for students at their schools around the same topic. Dozens of students across three school districts have already taken part in engaged discussion about addressing achievement gaps in their own schools through student action.

In one community, some in the Champions team wanted to be moderators, but they also wanted to be able to participate actively in the dialogues about their schools. In the end, they decided to volunteer to moderate in another community so they could do both!

Participants were the best recruiters, helping to expand the dialogues and in some cases starting their own “spin off” dialogues in other communities. Here is an example of one invitation that went out:

“Friends: Even though I don’t have a child, educating our children is important to me. I participated in the forums in RRISD. It was one of the best dialogs I’ve had about ANY pressing issue in Central Texas and it happened with a group of strangers. I encourage you to participate and spread the word.”

One young woman, a senior at UT Austin, participated in the dialogues as part of her class assignment to take part in a community engagement activity. As a result of participating, she has become so passionate about contributing to positive change in education that she has decided to apply to Teach for America.

One participant was a parent who dropped out of high school and had two children in the school district. She had always wanted to be a nurse, but didn’t think she could get the necessary credentials or afford it. A local adult education program heard about her need through other delegates, tracked her down, and got her into an adult GED testing program at significantly discounted rates, so she’s now moving toward a brighter future.

5.3 Lessons Learned

We learned many lessons from this process that we hope to apply going forward, and that we anticipate that others who are taking part in these dialogues around the country can learn from. Here are some primary lessons:

- A localized Discussion Guide, while time consuming and expensive, was critical to giving relevant data and resonant voices to the process.
- Strong involvement from students was absolutely critical. The “we’re experiencing it now” voice was seen as important by all participants. It was even more powerful to have some students acting as moderators.
- Having well-trained moderators was important to keeping on track and balanced.
- Groups need help from moderators in moving to action. It is easier to talk about concerns and issues than talk about tangible actions to take.
- Be careful using school district personnel. While we had many personnel (superintendents, principals, administrators, teachers) involved both as participants and moderators, and their input was very positive, in some cases community members either deferred to educators or were less forthcoming around them.
- Consistent attendance mattered. In this format, having the same small teams week to week made a huge difference. In most communities, we added some new people each week, and just a few had conflicts for the second or third meeting. This was not a problem because the group history was well established. In one community, we had high turnover week to week and the dialogues and conclusions were much more disjointed.

- Direct outreach filled more seats than media. We worked hard on providing collateral and getting the word out, but in the end most people who showed up did so because of direct contact from a Champions team member.
- More time for action planning at the local and regional levels is needed. When we came to capturing and prioritizing actions, participants felt they needed more time.
- Using small groups was critical –the level of dialogue and output that we achieved could not have been possible in a single large group.

A Word on Time:

From the start, we planned these dialogues as a series of three 2 – 2.5 hour meetings (one community chose two 3 hour meetings) with a ½ day regional forum to follow. Every community that we talked to was concerned that this was too big an investment of time, and we would never get the level of participation we wanted by asking for that large a time commitment. However, we felt that the topic could not receive justice in a single meeting. After much planning discussion, every Community Champions team agreed to go with the longer format.

A number of teams at almost every session were not finished at the end of the evening and wanted to go longer. Especially the last night – when we re-formed teams around different stakeholder groups to develop the final action lists – every single community said that they would rather have had more time to develop a more complete action plan. And at the regional forum, one community stayed more than an hour after the forum was over, still working through their plan! This tension must be addressed in any dialogues process: we no doubt lost some participants who were unwilling to commit to the level of participation we requested, yet those who came wanted even more.

5.4 Where do we go from Here?

1. Blueprint for Change

Input from this process will be compiled and provided to a Summit in early 2008 where political, business, education, and community leaders from across the region will come together to set goals to drive a Blueprint for Change in education in Central Texas. These leaders will have “the voice of the people” in hand to help guide their decisions.

2. Community Activities

The community and regional action plans have already been provided back to every community, and are being posted on E³ Alliance and district web sites. Each of the communities has held at least one local follow up meeting after the regional forum. Four of the communities have decided to continue their work on closing achievement gaps through an ongoing task force. San Marcos and Bastrop have new local “P-16 Council” structures to help provide continuity. For Manor, we have arranged for a team of UT graduate students to work with the Manor Education Foundation to help roll out the action plan. Austin has decided to take the results and roll them into ongoing district efforts rather than continuing a separate task force.

3. New Dialogues

Four Central Texas communities who did not participate this time but heard about these dialogues have asked to take part in a future round, and at last two of the six who already participated would like to expand the dialogues to include new participants. We are putting in a grant application to continue and expand this activity in 2008.

“My mom finished high school. My father did not. All their kids went to college because their expectation was, “We didn’t, but you WILL.””