

E³ Alliance to target workforce training

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A group of high-profile education, nonprofit and business leaders has a formula it wants Central Texans to memorize.

"Education Equals Economics," they say — and that's the motto of a new alliance that they hope will shape Central Texas education from prekindergarten to graduate school. The E³ Alliance aims to break down barriers in the area's educational systems and ensure a qualified future workforce.

Its proponents expect it to look similar to Envision Central Texas, a regional effort seeking to organize growth and development.

Susan Dawson, who has sat at the helm of such groups as the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, is leading the effort. Dawson left her technology consulting firm, Athens Group Inc., last fall and now serves as executive director of the alliance.

The E³ Alliance is housed at Austin Community College. In the next five years, Dawson ex-



Dawson

pects to raise \$5 million from private foundations, businesses and national education reform advocates. The group has already received \$50,000 from the Austin-based RGK Foundation to start developing a process for receiving local input.

The effort has two main prongs.

On one side, the alliance will pull together reams of raw data and research to form an objective "map" of student achievement.

For example, Dawson cites a statistic: A student who can't read at grade level in third grade is much more likely to drop out of school than his peers. That suggests educators should funnel money into third grade reading. But other factors might be more important, she says. For example, funds might prove more effective if they're spent on prekindergarten services before any problem ever surfaces, or on middle school mentoring programs.

A data map could show where to target that money and time.

On another track, the alliance will gather a variety of constituents — including university officials, parents, education experts, school district leaders, business CEOs

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and nonprofit service providers. Through a series of town hall meetings, surveys and summits, the alliance hopes to share best practices and develop a community vision about what direction local education should take.

Right now, the groups have no incentive to share their methods and resources, Dawson says. For instance, she points to universities, which historically have felt a need to compete for top students. But some local schools have successful programs for recruiting and retaining Hispanic students that could benefit all universities if they shared methods, she says.

Dawson and alliance members have spent the past four months charting the group's future. It now starts an 18-month execution phase, in which it will conduct its research and gather information. The entire effort could easily take a decade.

The alliance will hire a handful of people, but Dawson purposely wants to keep the group relatively small, she says. She wants it to act more as an organizer of current groups, rather than growing too large and replacing organizations that already exist.

"We want this very much to be 'of the people,' a grassroots effort that is owned by the region," Dawson says.

Charles Barnett, CEO of the Seton Healthcare Network and a member of the alliance's steering committee, says he already sees the need for a better-educated workforce. In the next 15 years, the network expects to need about 3,500 new nurses.

He hopes to help educational institutions gain a firmer grasp on what workforce skills his and other companies will need. And, he says, the groups can institute some businesslike practices to cut overhead costs. For instance, he says school districts should work together to order large quantities of supplies, which could save money and open up funds for more teachers — something his network has done to reduce the costs of surgical materials.

"For us, every dollar we can save in medical supplies gives us great capabilities to invest in medical personnel," Barnett says.

"Schools have the same opportunities."

Jason Sabo, vice president for public policy at the United Ways of Texas, says the effort could benefit nonprofits, too.

As schools try to work with tighter funds, Sabo says nonprofits are picking up more of the responsibilities traditionally held by government. Ranging from prekindergarten meals to adult literacy tutoring, nonprofits offer services that fill gaps in the school system.

"Until we figure out a way to begin to root out the causes of the social illnesses we have," Sabo says, "we'll continue to spin our wheels."

For her part, Dawson says she's committed at least five years to the E³ Alliance. But the move from the private sector came with some trepidation.

Early this year, she says she vacillated between thinking the organization could change lives and wondering whether it might be "an extreme case of tilting at windmills." But in January, she had two lunch meetings on consecutive days that persuaded her to move forward — one with the superintendent

E³ ALLIANCE STEERING COMMITTEE

STEVE KINSLOW: Austin Community College
president

DENISE TRAUTH: Texas State University-San Marcos
president

ED SHARPE: Austin Area Research Organization
higher education chairman

PAT PRINGLE: Region XIII Education Service Center
executive director

MARINA WALNE: University of Texas System Institute
for Public School Initiatives executive director

CHARLES BARNETT: Seton Healthcare Network
CEO

GREG VINCENT: University of Texas vice president for
diversity and community engagement

JASON SABO: United Ways of Texas vice president
for public policy

JESUS CHAVEZ: Round Rock Independent School
District superintendent

of the region's richest school district and another with the superintendent of the region's poorest. Both were thrilled about the idea.

Ultimately, the effort's possibilities convinced Dawson.