

Education in Central Texas: A worrisome portrait

By Michael May

The **Community Action Network**, a public/private partnership that produces reports and builds coalitions, has released its **Education FAQ**, a document that pulls together information about education in Central Texas. The result, for anyone who cares deeply about local schools, is a call to arms that paints a picture of local schools overwhelmed by rapidly changing student demographics and unequipped to meet the challenge.

"Education is a community issue," says **Sam Woollard**, CAN's associate director. "The school districts can only do so much. We need to bring all parts of the community together to identify the key pressure points where we can make a difference."

It's obvious to anyone who's driven on I-35 lately that the Austin population is growing. But the CAN report illustrates that the student population is not only growing, it's growing poorer – and fast. For example, **Travis County** population grew 13% from 2001 through 2005. During the same period the number of economically disadvantaged students grew 41%. This trend holds throughout Central Texas, not only in urban areas. Most dramatically, **Williamson County** grew by 28% since 2001, while the number of economically disadvantaged students there increased by 90%. Not surprisingly, the number of students classified as **Limited English Proficient** has also grown; in Travis Co., it was up 41%. "It's a result of immigration patterns," Woollard says. "The majority of immigrants are making less than \$25,000 a year. They're coming to the area to fill the large number of low-paying service-industry jobs."

This trend could have a significant effect on the local economy when these students enter the work force. There are stark differences between the **TAKS scores** of wealthy students and poor students, as well as between white students and minority students. The achievement gap is highest on TAKS math scores, where the spread among different demographic groups is more than 30%. The problem is not simply that these students are arriving at school less prepared. These needy students aren't receiving the same level of education as their wealthier, whiter counterparts. The CAN report shows that at Central Texas schools where less than 25% of the students are poor, the percentage of math teachers who haven't been certified to teach math is 5.5%. At schools where more than 75% of students are economically disadvantaged, the number of teachers instructing out of their field grows to 32.3%. A similar trend holds true for science teachers.Ê

The report is being looked at closely by the recently formed **E3 Alliance**, an organization created by **Austin Community College**, the **Austin Area Research Organization**, and the **University of Texas**. The E3 Alliance is working to identify what programs are working in the schools, and hopes to better align local colleges and universities with K-12 education. E3 Alliance director **Susan Dawson** says it's important to identify goals that all Austin-area families can get behind. Still, she admits there are some

Austin Chronicle
Thursday, November 17, 2006

challenges. "If you look at the data," she says, "there are difficult trade-offs. We can see that more inexperienced teachers are going to schools with poor students. But it's hard to convince wealthier schools to give up their best teachers. So, where can we find more experienced teachers?"

E3 is bringing people together to discuss these tough issues and to identify the educational programs that have had the best results. Dawson argues that ultimately, we're all in this together. "The middle class is disappearing," she says, "If you look at the country, there's a large number of low-paying service jobs, but there is also a fast-growing segment of the economy that requires highly educated workers. Austin aspires to have that high tech, innovative economy, and it's going to take human capital. If we don't work hard to educate the next generation, we are going to fall to the low end."