

COMMENTARY: Arnold Garcia

Garcia: The business of education

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We have talked for years about the state of the Texas education system: How it is funded, how effective it is and how it can be improved. We have talked about the dropout rate and what can be done about it.

There have been sporadic successes, but a community that professes to love change hasn't moved the education needle much. There is still an achievement gap between minority students and white ones, and the dropout rate — even at 10 percent — is simply too high.

Educators are quick to point out that the blame for dropouts is a shared one and, of course, they are right. Parents should be involved, but we're at a point where we need to stop fixing blame and focus on fixing problems. If it were easy, we would have done it by now, but moaning about difficulty won't get us to a solution.

To be blunt, we tend to think of schoolchildren as warm and fuzzy abstractions. When students and their schools don't fit our fanciful Dick and Jane notions of how they should look and behave, we are quick to write them off.

We should dump that thinking and approach schools as an economic development tool, because that's what they are. Where do you think your future co-workers and employees come from? Where do you think future employers come from?

That brings us back to the dropouts. Though there is some complicated accounting involved in calculating the dropout rate, the Austin school district reports that 473 students dropped out in 2006. The actual number is probably higher, but taking that at face value, that's 473 lives headed for a bleak economic future. Odds are high that many of them will resort to crime. Arresting, trying and convicting them is costly, and that's only the beginning. The cost of incarcerating a Texas inmate is \$40.06 a day and that meter doesn't stop for weekends and holidays.

We pay for that. We also pay for the wages that they don't earn and taxes they will never pay and for the lives they wreck in their wake. So the costs keep adding up. We either do something about it or open our wallets wider.

That's the message being delivered by group that calls itself Education Equals Economics. The organization represents efforts of the Austin Area Research Organization, the University of Texas, Austin Community College and others.

They are not wasting time making moral arguments about children being left behind. Executive Director Susan Dawson and others in the group, including Ed Sharpe, a professor of educational administration at UT, are preaching a pragmatist's gospel of self interest.

"Closing the gaps to education across all groups would benefit the Central Texas region by almost \$52 billion by 2030," Dawson says. But they are not just talking; they have been hosting meetings in Round Rock, Manor, Austin and San Marcos trying to get people in those communities involved in mapping an education strategy.

They are looking to the communities to tell educators what will work for their kids for the simple reason that we're not so rich we can afford to throw people away. A demographic bomb has exploded in Texas, adding to the urgency of finding ways to keep young people in school and educating them to compete in a global economy.

Public education has picked up more than its share of detractors and critics, but public education is still the principal source of learning for a vast majority of youngsters.

That means public education and educators are going to have to learn to compete on a variety of fronts. They must compete with private schools, and they must compete for the attention of students.

We don't have a whole lot more time for navel-gazing either. Everything, Sharpe says, has to be examined for effectiveness. He's right. Education has to learn to compete because if it loses, we'll all pay and we'll keep paying.

For information about E3 and a schedule of meetings, visit www.e3alliance.org.