

EDUCATION

Town hall meetings to focus on improving education

Closing achievement gaps is vital to a strong local economy, educators and researchers say.



By [Laura Heinauer](#)
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The economic well-being of the region depends on boosting the quality of education for all Central Texas students and closing achievement gaps among racial, geographic and other student groups, education advocates say.

Math scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills among low-income eighth-grade students in the region were, on average, 24 percentage points lower than those of their wealthier peers.

Fewer than 30 percent of Hispanic high school graduates will go directly to Texas public and private colleges after graduation, compared with more than half of white graduates in Central Texas. And the high school graduation rate for women is up to 19 percentage points higher than for men in Central Texas.

Closing those gaps will take cooperation from schools, businesses and the overall community, according to a coalition of area colleges and researchers. The E3 Alliance is holding 17 town-hall meetings on the issue over the next several weeks.

Improving education is vital to a strong local economy, according to the alliance, which by 2009 plans to roll out a list of data-driven, community-supported reforms to attack the roots of problems that keep students from succeeding.

"There's been millions and millions of dollars that have been put into education reform and into ideas that just withered on the vine because there wasn't community buy in," said Susan Dawson, the group's executive director.

A regional discussion is important, Dawson said, because by aligning educational strategies and sharing

best practices, Central Texas can produce the kind of work force needed for a strong regional economy in the future.

"Manor, where we've already had one meeting, is the bellwether district for the demographic changes that are happening across the region," she said.

The number of students in Manor who don't speak fluent English has grown 127 percent in the past five years.

"This is the population that our region really hinges on," Dawson said. "If we can make them truly successful, we build a sustainable bilingual, globally competitive work force. If we don't, then the earnings capacity and tax base of the region fall drastically."

Shonda Thompson, mother of three Manor students, attended a city meeting and said she was surprised by the level of interest and engagement.

"I never thought there would be that many vocal parents," Thompson said.

She and other parents talked about several issues, including problems with teacher retention, early interventions and the TAKS test. "If we can get (parents) to continue to come out like that, I think it would make a huge difference."

In addition to school officials and parents, Manor business leaders, developers, senior citizens and high-tech professionals were invited to attend.

Tim Eubanks, a community organizer with Austin Voices for Education and Youth, said he is looking forward to participating in the discussions that start in Austin this week.

Problems that need to be addressed, he said, are potential school closures and graduation rates, particularly those of African American and Hispanic male students.

"Often, we rely on the community leaders to come up with the solutions, but there's a lot to learn from the parents who have a kid who is failing out of school, the businessman who is looking for qualified employees and the kids themselves," Eubanks said.

Patty Shafer, the new superintendent of the San Marcos district, said she is looking forward to getting input from other communities as well as her own about how to deal with problems of perception.

She said the district, which has a high number of low-income students, has been struggling to overcome the view that its public schools are weak.

"I'm interested to see where these perceptions are coming from and whether other communities have the same problems. And what they're doing about them," Shafer said. "Maybe it will even help us work together as a community and a school district in a more productive way."

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Town hall forums on education

Austin: 6 to 8:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 25 and Nov. 1; Reagan High School, 7104 Berkman Drive

Bastrop: 6 to 8 p.m. Monday and Oct. 22 and 29; Mina Elementary School, 1203 Hill St.

Eanes: 6 to 9 p.m. Oct. 23 and 30; Hill Country Middle School, 1300 Walsh Tarlton Lane

Manor: 6 to 8:15 p.m. Tuesday and Oct. 23; New Tech High School, 10323 U.S. 290 East

Round Rock: 6:30 to 9 p.m. Tuesday; McNeil High School, 5720 McNeil Drive, Austin

San Marcos: 6 to 8:30 p.m. Oct. 22 and 29 and Nov. 15; San Marcos High School, 2601 E. McCarty Lane

To RSVP, for more information or to volunteer to be a moderator, visit www.e3alliance.org.

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