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Educational alliance develops plan to fight privilege gaps

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Posted: 11/16/07

Students, parents, educators and community leaders exchanged ideas Thursday to develop a plan to close gaps in educational achievement and create an educational system that will serve the needs of Central Texas in the 21st century.

The event was hosted by E3 Alliance, a partnership between the University, Austin Community College and the Austin Area Research Organization, started in March 2006. The alliance was formed to create a "Blueprint for Change," a plan to fight achievement gaps between privileged and disadvantaged students.

The populations of both economically disadvantaged students and students with limited English proficiency increased 40 percent from 2001 to 2006 in Central Texas, despite only a

14 percent increase in total enrollment, according to Texas Education Agency demographics. These students are far less likely to pass standardized tests, graduate high school and go to college. According to the alliance, Central Texas must graduate more students to remain economically competitive both nationally and globally.

"We are a clearinghouse of data and a catalyst for the community to come together," said Rick Olmos, spokesman for the alliance. "All of these communities have great ideas. By getting together like this they were able to share."

Parents, students and educators representing six different districts were split into groups to discuss solutions for the challenges facing Central Texas. Each group presented its proposal and received input from a group of politicians, school board members and business leaders.

A common theme in many of the proposals was a renewed focus on relationships between student, parent, teacher and community instead of standardized test scores, which many say are overemphasized in the educational system.

"There is tremendous pressure that you have to take care of these content matters," said Pat Pringle, executive director of the Region XIII educational service center. "Here, people are talking about relationships. What are our priorities?"

Many delegates called for increased cooperation among districts in the region.

"I would like to see a lot more outreach on our school's part," said Meredith Norris, a senior at Westlake High School. "We have programs that work, that we could help other people to do."

Norris favored creation of college and career counseling centers, modeled after the one at her school, that help students research and apply to colleges, vocational schools and other post-secondary opportunities.

Preparing economically disadvantaged students for college achievement is another major goal of the blueprint. Donetta Goodall, vice president for academic transfer and general and developmental education at Austin Community College, says that many students who come from public schools are not well-prepared for success in college and must take remedial courses that cost the student too much time and money.

"If higher education can get involved, they will be prepared," Goodall said.

Many delegates encouraged community leaders to take action on their ideas instead of just talking about them.

"A lot of parents and educators are saying they have great ideas, but no one is getting it done," said Shonda Thompson, whose three children attend schools in the Manor district. "We can talk about it, but we don't have the resources or means."

Thompson wants educators and politicians to think about what can be improved today, not just in the years to come.

"There's a sense of urgency because there are kids going through school today," she said. "Twelve years from now, I'm going to be a senior citizen, and I want people in charge who know what they're doing."

Olmos said the input will be presented at a leadership summit in January that will include university presidents, prominent legislators and CEOs, and that he hopes that the achievement gap will someday be just a piece of history.

"Hopefully, someday we'll be out of a job," Olmos said. "That's my goal."

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