

DAVID BALCH | LOCAL CONTRIBUTOR

A plan for educational success

There is enormous passion for "community" in Central Texas. We are blessed to be able to say that more than 38 percent of Central Texans are active volunteers, making us third among major American cities. Austin has the highest number of nonprofit groups per capita in the state — 10 per 1,000 people — many focusing on education and the needs of our youth. Though much is achieved, these efforts are often independent of one another and efforts are often duplicated. Not only is the community need much greater than what our combined forces can address, but issues are not being tackled collaboratively. As nonprofit organizations, we should align our work and increase our overall effectiveness.

Consider the facts: We have gaps in educational achievement between different groups of 40 percent or more. In Central Texas, about 7,000 students could have graduated from high school this spring but didn't. The cost to our region of just one year's number of high-school drop-outs is more than \$425 million over the course of their lifetimes. We lose too many of our students along the way — they never get the solid educational footing it takes to be financially stable members of the community.

That's why education and financial stability are two of the three focuses of United Way Capital Area. They are the foundation for life success, and they cannot be addressed by our schools alone. Some studies show that more than 50 percent of what leads to a student's academic success are factors outside of school, such as family life, social activities and economic barriers. It's not merely our teachers, principals, superintendents or college presidents who are accountable; we,

as a community, must be accountable for every student's future if we are going to make Central Texas the place we know it can become.

That's why United Way Capital Area is part of the Blueprint for Educational Change (www.TheBlueprintforEducationalChange.org). This strategic plan is unprecedented anywhere in Texas and provides the basis for all of us to work together to build the strongest educational pipeline in the country. The Blueprint lays out four overarching goals with action strategies and a structure to achieve those goals. This is not an exercise in rhetoric: The Blueprint is "boots on the ground" in the battle for educational opportunity and success. It represents the community's promise that all Central Texas children will start school ready to learn, have equal levels of academic potential and be fully prepared after high school graduation for college, careers and lifelong success.

The Blueprint for Educational Change allows us to concentrate our collective efforts. We will address the root causes of our shortcomings, not just symptoms. We will use common indicators and targets to learn which investments are successful and which aren't. We will act strategically so our volunteers and nonprofit organizations can help strengthen our education pipeline in a way that fits their interests and skills.

Donors, community-based organizations and volunteers will align their resources to help all our students graduate ready for college and careers in the 21st century.

Balch is president and chief professional officer of the United Way Capital Area.