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Fewer graduates hurt Central Texas' chances for greater economic prosperity

Graduation week in Central Texas is one of the most exciting times in the lives not only of students and families, but also for educators and school administrators. It's an occasion to celebrate our young people's success as they move forward to colleges, careers and future roles as leaders.

Unfortunately, too many of our young people didn't cross the stage to get their diplomas. Across Central Texas, about 7,000 students who could and should have graduated this spring won't be part of the celebration. As a community, we should be alarmed by the number of students who fail to make it to graduation.

There are several reasons why so many young Central Texans aren't able to reach the critical goal of high school graduation:

Some students are struggling academically in areas linked to key work force skills, such as math and science. Those who are most challenged early in math are much more likely to drop out.

Many students already are part of the work force. More than one-third of our high-schoolers work 15 hours a week or more. For many, earning an income is a necessity for their families, but it takes a great toll on their ability to excel in school.

More than 42 percent of Central Texas students are considered "at risk" of not being able to graduate.

These are students facing a variety of academic and social barriers, such as homelessness, pregnancy or failing a previous grade. As educators working with limited resources, we can't always do what it takes to address students' individual needs.

That means that we all — educators, parents, business and community leaders, politicians — have an important role to play to make

every student a success. Each of our graduates is one of our fellow citizens. Each one is now or soon will be a taxpayer, a coworker and a customer. The students who don't graduate often are unable to succeed in those roles, leading to costly burdens on the community.

The problem is not that the people of Central Texas don't care about student achievement or the economic equity and prosperity that it creates. Most of us do work hard, as individuals, to help our students. But how can we work together to make all of our efforts more effective? How can we truly share best practices and use our resources better?

Since May 2006, education, business and community leaders in Central Texas have joined together in the E3 Alliance (Education Equals Economics), which crafted "The Blueprint for Educational Change." It is our community's strategic plan, a commitment to building the most successful educational pipeline in the country. You can find it at: www.TheBlueprintForEducationalChange.org.

The Blueprint 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, career and lifelong success. It defines critical leverage points for the systemic alignment of our education systems, from early childhood to workforce prosperity. The blueprint also provides action strategies for all of us to be involved in reaching every student's potential.

When all of us are on the same page, investing in each child's future together, we can create in Central Texas the most successful educational pipeline in the country.

Graduates are made, not born.