

DENISE M. TRAUTH | PRESIDENT, TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY-SAN MARCOS

Promote a lifetime of learning

A high school diploma is not what it used to be. When our parents and grandparents were young, a high school diploma was the ticket to a good job. No longer.

Today, 90 percent of the fastest growing jobs in the country require education beyond high school — some form of post-secondary education — and two-thirds of the new job types we create over the next decade will require a baccalaureate degree or higher.

In a 21st century economy, our high schools are still the vehicles to successful, living wage careers for graduates — not as ends in themselves, but as gateways to higher education. If our state and nation hope to be competitive in the global economy, we must expect our high schools to prepare graduates for college, careers and a lifetime of learning.

This idea — refocusing the goal from granting a diploma to preparation for further education — is a significant change in expectations. Of course, some high schools do this very well already, but Central Texas as a whole is hurting. More than 7,000 Central Texas students were freshmen in high school four years ago, but did not receive high school diplomas this year. And of the ones who did graduate, only 41 percent went on to enroll in two- or four-year colleges in Texas.

As the economy hits a rocky road, the goal of leading more students to post-secondary education faces obstacles. Colleges and universities themselves can help by cultivating even more options for earning college-level credit while still in high school, by supporting the use of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid that provides financial assistance for college expenses and by streamlining the transition from two- to four-year institutions.

This enormous challenge is the reason Texas State University is part of the Blueprint for Educational Change for Central Texas. Launched in May, the plan is unprecedented in Texas and provides the basis for building a vital economic future based on a strong talent base.

The Blueprint for Educational Change is the Central Texas community's commitment to building the strongest educational pipeline in the country. It lays out four broad goals, with action strategies and a coordinated team structure to achieve each one, including the third: "All students graduate from high school college-and-career ready and prepared for a lifetime of learning." The blueprint includes measurable college-and-career readiness standards, methods to improve success rates, triggers for early intervention to keep students in school and plans for maintaining focus on the long-term outcomes.

The plan also includes a role for industry, a critical component for providing experience in the "real world," for showing students the relevance of the core subjects they must master, and for giving a glimpse of the opportunities available and the skills required.

The key to the economic future of Central Texans and their quality of life is education. We must prepare our youth for education beyond high school, and that preparation is going to take all of us — educators, business leaders and the community — working together.

I know firsthand that without this preparation our college-bound students are set up to fail. And failure is not an option.

Graduates are made, not born.