

JOHN SHARP | LOCAL CONTRIBUTOR

Central Texans must work together to improve students' educational future

A school superintendent once told me of three conversations she had in one day with a business owner, a parent and a teacher that went something like this:

Business owner: "Schools don't have a clue how to educate children for the workplace. It's a waste of tax money to support schools that aren't preparing children for real life."

Parent: "The school system doesn't do enough to help my child. Everybody is so busy and focused on test scores that they don't know what my child needs, much less do anything about it."

Teacher: "Society's problems are too big for us to solve in the classroom, especially on a shoestring budget. We do our best to help students meet increasingly high academic standards, but we're not miracle workers."

Though the data show that our students and our schools are doing far better than most of us think, the world is changing around us. And the price of not adapting is shockingly high.

- Hispanics, the fastest growing population group in Texas, are the least likely to complete high school and attend college, according to the Texas Data Center.

- Ninety percent of the fastest-growing jobs now require some post-secondary education, and more than two-thirds of new job types being created require at least a bachelor's degree, according to U.S. Census data.

- Only 39 percent of Central Texas high school graduates are tested as "college ready," according to the Texas Education Agency.

- Central Texas stands to lose 85,000 jobs and \$10 billion in personal income if it doesn't increase the percentage of students who go to college, according to the Perryman Group.

Economist Ray Perryman estimates that total personal expenditures in the Austin area could decrease by more than \$40 billion in the next 20 years unless more students graduate from high school and pursue post-secondary education. Those losses

would have a devastating effect on our economy and on every Central Texan.

Playing the blame game won't build a strong economic future for our region. Instead, we must collaborate to improve our educational system for students from early childhood through college. The reality is that life outside the classroom affects whether students succeed. Some studies estimate that more than 50 percent of a student's performance is driven by outside factors. A student who comes to school hungry, from a broken home or after working an eight-hour night shift may find academic achievement challenging, irrelevant or both. Efforts to create systemic improvement in our schools must incorporate factors and players outside the classroom as well as our educators.

It takes parents, businesses and community groups, working together, to support education and create a culture of learning inside and outside the classroom to boost the performance of all students and strengthen the education system.

Creating a culture of collaboration among these diverse players is a core goal of the Blueprint for Educational Change, Central Texas' strategic plan for building the most successful educational pipeline in the country, and we want you involved. View the plan online at www.TheBlueprintForEducationalChange.org.

We all share the responsibility for supporting our educational system, and we will all live with the consequences of our actions — or our failure to act. Central Texas, as a community, must prepare children to succeed. Get involved in education and you could improve life not only for a single student but for all Central Texans.

Remember, the future of the economy of Central Texas depends on how well our educational system works for all our children.

Sharp is a former state comptroller.