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San Antonio Focuses on Brainpower and Collective Impact to Improve its Economy.

Municipal and community leaders understand that education is a driving force behind economic development, but in San Antonio it is “brainpower” that’s fueling the entire city.

Clifford Johnson, executive director of NLC’s YEF Institute, talks with Mayor Castro at the annual Mayors’ Education Policy Advisors Network (EPAN) meeting in San Antonio. Mayor Castro urged EPAN members to continue putting education at the forefront of their mayors’ agendas.

From cradle to career, San Antonio is focusing on education to develop and harness skilled talent to improve its economy. The city serves as a model to other cities looking to do the same. For this reason, the city is not only a guiding example to NLC’s Mayors’ Education Policy Advisors Network (EPAN), but was also host to EPAN’s 2014 annual meeting.

At the EPAN meeting, education advisors explored education as a means to ameliorate poverty and foster citywide collaborations. Advisors from across the nation descended on the Alamo City, where an array of experts – pediatricians, principals, career and technical education specialists and foundation partners – presented different ways education can serve to reconcile the economic and academic achievement gaps.

For example, Dr. Meggan Goodpasture, director of the Child Abuse and Neglect team at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem, N.C., explained how exposure to trauma and toxic stress affects brain development and social behaviors. Darnell White, principal at Sam Houston High School in San Antonio, complemented this presentation by explaining how he was able to change the trajectory for Sam Houston – a high school on the brink of closure when he took over as principal. White was able to increase test scores, high school graduation and college enrollment rates by establishing an environment with present, attentive and consistent faculty.

In 2009, Julián Castro, Mayor of San Antonio and recently nominated secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, worked with local leaders and community partners to create and implement a comprehensive community agenda. The agenda, known as SA 2020, is comprised of 11 community causes ranging from arts and culture to environmental sustainability, and was heavily informed by residents’ vision for their city.

San Antonians envisioned a culturally rich, environmentally sustainable and economically booming city by the year 2020. In order to make this vision a reality, Mayor Castro and the people of San Antonio understand that “brainpower” must be at the heart of all of the decisions the city makes moving forward.

After establishing SA 2020, San Antonio received \$25 million in federal funding in 2010, through the U.S. Department of Education’s Promise Neighborhood grant. (The city’s Eastside neighborhood was also designated as one of five Promise Zones earlier this year.)

Alongside the targeted efforts in the Eastside neighborhood, the city was able to put in place a

number of education initiatives: Café College, Pre-K 4 SA, SERVE SA and Student Aid Saturdays. And all of these initiatives have had standout success, serving well over 10,000 students and enlisting the help of more than 1,000 volunteers.

This year's convening allowed advisors to learn what has worked for San Antonio from a panel of Pre-K 4 SA leaders, Café College advisors and SA2020 directors. The panelists didn't just paint a picture of what it was like to implement these initiatives though. Participants were able to talk to parents whose children have participated in Pre-K 4 SA and got to hear from current students who utilize Café College (San Antonio's "one-stop-shop" for college access, advice, guidance and workshops) and its resources. EPAN members also had the opportunity to visit Café College and observe students interacting with advisors and getting excited about their futures.

"The reality is that to become more competitive in this global economy we must focus and focus and focus like a laser on education," Mayor Castro said to the EPAN members. "All of that is to say that I think many folks have brought a lot of energy to the entire education ecosystem. And we have challenged everyone in that ecosystem to do more."

In San Antonio, education efforts are influenced by its citizen, bolstered by the business and nonprofit community, spearheaded by the mayor and made to last by the collaboration of all three parties. Leaders like Priscilla Camacho of San Antonio's Chamber of Commerce and Eyra Perez, executive director of San Antonio Education Partnership are working together towards a common goal: improve access and success in education for every student in San Antonio.

"The Chamber of Commerce became involved with education efforts because my predecessor was asked by the mayor to get involved," Camacho said. "He said the business community needed to step up. Without educated talent there will be no workforce in the future."

This effort to step up and work together is known as collective impact. Jeanne Russell, chief strategist at SA2020, explains in her blog how this collaboration works. "The Eastside Promise Neighborhood, along with Wheatley Choice Neighborhood and the Promise Zone in the same EastPoint area exemplify place-based collective impact, bringing together the school district, the city, the housing authority and key nonprofits such as the United Way to focus on improving health, educational, housing and economic outcomes for the people who live in some of our poorest census tracts," she said.

"The biggest reason we adopted this model was because we noticed a similar structure to the work in the areas where we could really see the needle moving — such as teen pregnancy," Russell continued. "These collaboratives had clear goals, strategies they sought to measure, support from an effective organization such as Metro Health, and continuous, proactive communication — all pillars of successful collective impact work."

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