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Louch: Ask candidates what they'll do to help Austin's middle class

Russ Louch, AUSTIN INTERFAITH

On Sunday, 750 Austin Interfaith leaders will hold an accountability session to challenge candidates for the City Council and the Austin school district and the Austin Community College boards of trustees to support strategies to build and strengthen the middle class in Central Texas. Though Travis County is the one of the wealthiest regions in the state, its median income has decreased 11 percent since 1999, and its poverty, child poverty and uninsured rates are higher than the national average.

Recently, the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce's economic development arm, Opportunity Austin, announced its next five-year plan to create 117,000 jobs, which will add \$10.8 billion to Austin's payrolls. The strategy focuses on economic development in the areas of technology, creative media and design, health care/biotechnology and green industries.

Though we support the chamber's goal to bring top-tier jobs to Austin, we hope candidates commit to addressing at least three structural problems in our local economy.

Creative education for a creative economy: Parents and employers have the same bottom line — parents want their children to gain the skills to compete for the best jobs, and employers want workers with those same skills.

If the local economy is innovative and thrives on creative talent, then the culture of our local schools ought to encourage innovation, creativity, rigor, teamwork and analytical thinking. Instead, we measure our schools based on a limited set of skills demonstrated on a state-generated standardized test.

To hold school districts accountable, we need a broader range of indicators, such as high school completion rates, college preparedness, successful placement in the work force and the creative skills necessary for employment in a global economy.

We will also ask Austin school district officials to support Austin Interfaith's Alliance School Initiative, which **a recent study by Annenberg Institute for School Reform recently showed to have increased student achievement, professional culture and equity for low-income and minority public schools.**

Investment in local talent for critical work force shortages: According to major employers, shortages exist in Central Texas for nurses, teachers and engineers, and talent is being recruited from outside Texas and the United States to fill those jobs.

The problem is not lack of demand or lack of supply of candidates for training, but the

bottlenecks that exist in training capacity and funding for effective programs. Bottlenecks also exist for medical technicians as well teachers for bilingual and special education. But it's easy to fix. We just need the political will to invest in programs like Capital IDEA, a work force strategy developed by Austin Interfaith that takes people earning, on average, \$11,000 before entering the program to earning, on average, \$38,000 after graduation in fields such as nursing, medical technology, network administration and teaching.

Support for local workers: Members of Austin's middle class traditionally have held public sector jobs with benefits, working for the state, the University of Texas, area school districts and local governments. Some also work in trade professions such as electricians, plumbers and pipefitters and sheetmetal workers. Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly difficult for workers to afford to live in Austin, and many are moving to surrounding counties.

We support a solid investment in wages and benefits for public sector and trade professions. The middle class in the United States has been an economic engine, providing a solid base of home ownership, savings and investment, and consumer spending. Without this base, the nation risks creating a two-tiered economy.

We challenge business, political and education leaders to join us in building a strong middle class and securing an economic future for all Central Texas families.