

Sánchez: Keeping a promise in East Austin

Juan Sánchez, Local Contributor

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I have read much recently in the pages of this newspaper about the efforts of the organization I lead, Southwest Key Programs, and the community we serve with regard to our Promise Neighborhoods grant application, our East Austin Children's Promise and the Austin Independent School district's decision.

I'd like to take this opportunity to clarify some of that reporting and set the record straight.

Our East Austin Children's Promise builds from the accomplishments and work we already have started and, being a grassroots effort, enjoys widespread support. We enjoy the backing of more than 40 community and neighborhood associations, nonprofits, corporations, arts and faith-based organizations and elected officials.

This all can be found on our website, swkey.org. After reviewing the list, I will leave it to the readers to decide whether our effort "lacked broad community support outside of Southwest Key's boundaries," as reported by this newspaper.

Regarding AISD and its decision not to support our efforts, we feel it is unfair for AISD to pick and choose which community to prioritize when all of Austin's students deserve a quality education and attention.

Southwest Key Programs moved its national headquarters into the heart of East Austin for a reason — the community here challenged us to relocate. It asked us to help its kids get a quality education and to help the parents find jobs.

The center we built, our El Centro de Familia, acts as a hub for our efforts. By working with the community, we have increased voter registration, empowered residents through our East Austin Leadership Development Program and provided opportunities for community dialogue by hosting judicial candidate forums and a speaker series. Along with committed partners, we operate many after-school activities, including a Boys and Girls Club, Austin Community College-sponsored GED and English as a Second Language training and support cultural arts through the Latino Arts Preservation Program, Hip Hop for Youth and Xenogia Spoken Word programming.

In addition, we opened a charter school serving middle school students, the East Austin College Prep Academy. Preliminary results for the TAKS tests for our school indicate it received an "acceptable" rating in its first year of operation and now has a wait list for the incoming sixth grade. We are providing numerous employment and training opportunities for local residents and are investing another \$3.7 million, on top of the \$8 million already invested, to build a social enterprise complex.

We are working hard to change the dynamic in East Austin, to give the children and families here the same opportunities to prosper as the rest of Austin. I urge anyone reading this to come and visit our community center, school and Boys and Girls Club. See change for yourself, and help all of Austin by becoming a part of the East Austin Children's Promise, a promise we intend to keep.

Sánchez is founder and CEO of Southwest Key.

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