

“Funding preK-12 Education”

Community Town Hall Report

Scottsdale, AZ – August 24, 2017



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Global Chamber Community Town Hall

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Introduction

Participants used the Arizona Town Hall process to create the following consensus report of their discussions and recommendations for action on how best to fund preK-12 education.

PRINCIPAL GOALS FOR ARIZONA’S PREK-12 EDUCATION SYSTEM

The environment in which today’s children must function and compete is global in scope and subject to rapid change. In that environment, there will be many individual pathways to success, and traditional assumptions about education may no longer apply. Traditionally education has been depicted as a ladder, which is narrow and competitive. We should reimagine education as a tree, which provides support through a strong trunk with many branches and pathways from which students may choose according to their individual interests and abilities.

The focus of education should be career readiness, which does not necessarily mean college readiness. Instead of focusing on the “what”—the substantive facts that students need to know—schools should teach them “how”. We should be teaching students how to learn and analyze, and develop their problem-solving abilities, so that they can acquire the substantive knowledge that they need in a changing world. For example, instead of teaching students to solve math problems in the abstract we should, use basic math concepts to teach problem solving skills. Students should be helped to develop the soft skills they will need in business and in life.

There is currently a dangerous atmosphere in which fear, prejudice and disunity are working against student success in a global world. To counteract these factors students should be taught to see themselves as members of a diverse and global community, and to understand their situation from a broader perspective. Students also should be taught critical thinking, and encouraged to raise questions as well as learn answers. Schools and teachers should have more freedom to develop curriculum to meet the diverse and changing needs of students.

Successful education will do more than simply prepare students for their careers. Education is essential to prepare students to become voters, to prepare for military service, and to function successfully in life. Because students come from many different circumstances, and some do not arrive equipped to learn, schools need to be prepared to address a wide spectrum of needs and abilities.

IMPACT OF CURRENT AMOUNT AND METHODS OF FUNDING PRE-K-12 EDUCATION ON PRIORITY GOALS

Adequate funding of PreK-12 schools is critically important to Arizona’s future. We should address funding for public education holistically. By some estimates current funding for Arizona’s K-12 schools provides \$1.5 billion per year less than is needed to adequately pay teachers and provide for Arizona students. Just to catch up to Nevada would require an additional \$1 billion per year. Inadequate funding leaves Arizona ill-prepared to compete for business, economic development, and talent in a rapidly changing and competitive world.

Arizona provides virtually no funding for preschool. Other than the First Things First program, which is not a comprehensive system of public preschools, Arizona does not provide funding for preschool education.

Arizona's teachers are underpaid relative to teachers in other states. Although taxpayer groups argue that this is justified by the fact that Arizona is a relatively poor state and teacher pay is commensurate with the low pay earned by other workers, that argument ignores the fact that labor is mobile, teachers are highly educated professionals and they can and do move to other states or other professions to increase their incomes. If we want to attract and retain good teachers we must pay them and treat them as professionals. Using salary increases as a "carrot and stick" is tantamount to treating teachers more like retail sales clerks than professionals. Public sentiment that disrespects teachers, from miniscule increase in teacher compensation to calling teachers "crybabies" for wanting competitive salaries, contribute to Arizona's inability to attract and retain qualified teachers.

The funding system for public education is not readily understood by the public. Discussion about education funding often devolves into mumbo jumbo that does not move the needle on the question of how public funds should be distributed. Although having a clear understanding of our common goals for public education should help to guide investment of public funds so that they are spent more effectively, it cannot make up for the overall significant shortage of funding for public schools. On the other hand, perhaps Arizona should reexamine current assumptions about what schools should provide, and how the money is being spent now. For example, some students may be ready to move on to postsecondary education a year or two sooner than other students, yet we require all students to remain in school for the same length of time regardless of need or ability. We should actively seek ways to assure that the funding we have is being spent appropriately.

The issue of school funding is highly political, which results in policies that are not ideal. For example, Arizona is using the success of its high performing charter schools in response to concerns about the underfunding and low performance of its public schools. However, charter schools do not serve the majority of students. Furthermore, district schools do not operate on an even playing field, in terms of funding or student populations. Although there are charter schools that serve special populations, many charter schools do not proportionately serve students with special needs or low income students. Many students have no meaningful access to charter schools. Charter schools are not necessarily required to follow the same policies and standards that apply to district schools. On the other hand, district schools receive more funding, and different sources of funding, than charter schools. In rural Arizona, there are relatively fewer opportunities for students to attend charter schools. Charter schools do not address the needs of families for preschool education.

The issue of funding for and operation of preK schools is entirely different from the issues affecting K-12 schools. PreK education is essential for both students and parents. Many children who have suffered adverse life experiences are coming to school unprepared to learn, and they may never catch up with other students. Although there is evidence that investment in preK education pays huge dividends, Arizona does not fund preK education. Arizona should provide free public preK education for all students.

We should value public education no matter what building it is provided in. We need to critically evaluate the real costs of education based on actual needs, and fund appropriately to meet those needs. These costs include more than just the physical facilities and teacher salaries. The public education system must cope with a large number of students who have special needs, different language abilities, refugees, and other special populations, and addressing special needs have real costs.

HOW TO IMPROVE THE AMOUNT OR METHODS OF FUNDING PRE-K-12 EDUCATION

Apparently, Arizonans cannot depend upon the state legislature to adequately fund public education. Arizona should look more broadly for monetary and other forms of support for public schools. Business entities often claim to value and support public education; we should hold their feet to the fire and ask them to become more involved in providing financial and other support for schools. We should consider how state agencies other than the Department of Education might contribute to and support public education.

Voters do not have ready access to all information they want or need to make good decisions about education funding. Although the information may be publicly available if you know where to look, the sheer quantity of sources and the amount of data that must be analyzed can be overwhelming. Education funding advocates should figure out how to package that information so that it is more accessible and digestible for the average persons whose busy lives are not conducive to doing that work on an individual basis.

Arizona voters are not likely to increase education funding to the level required if they do not believe and understand why overall funding is inadequate. It may be helpful to keep the message about funding clear and simple: we need to pay for teachers, classrooms, computers, and other education costs, and all students should have equal access to quality education. Instead of taking on too many complex issues and sub-issues, which can distract from the need to provide funding for a general and uniform system of public education, we should focus on the basic functions that must be funded if the system is to operate effectively.

INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS

At the conclusion of the Community Town Hall, participants committed to personal actions they would take as a result of the discussions. Each participant completed a card beginning with the statement "I will..." Participants retained the cards with their individual commitments. Those that were shared are listed below.

I WILL:

- Draft 3-4 sentences that might help communicate the problem, the needs and vision to the public.
- Consider champions in the business world that are committed to developing community
- Communicate it! And attend the November Town Hall.

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