

“Funding preK-12 Education”

Community Town Hall Report

Tucson, AZ – September 12, 2017



FUNDING PREK-12 EDUCATION

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Participants of the September 2017 Tucson Community Town Hall, make the following findings and recommendations. This report reflects the consensus achieved through group discussions by Town Hall participants.

ARIZONA'S PREK-12 EDUCATION SYSTEM GOALS

Arizona's preK-12 education system needs to create citizens who have the creativity, skills and understanding of the available opportunities that are necessary for them to add value to our community by being good citizens and by adding to the talent of our state.

Our students must be ready to contribute – to both the community and to the workforce – and must be prepared to pursue whatever career path they choose. Career paths include technical school, college and other careers. College readiness and job readiness entail the same skill set. To prepare students to pursue a career path, we should emphasize not just STEM, but Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math, giving students individualized educational plans, and encouraging participation in extracurricular activities.

In addition, we need to provide support for parents to help their students move forward in education and careers. Parents are a critical component in helping their students learn, develop life skills, hone critical thinking abilities, and acquire technical skills. Helping parents to help students requires us to tackle broader issues of poverty, parental literacy and challenges to the young adults in our communities. Education is an economic issue, and ultimately our educational system needs to support our citizens' ability to earn a living wage.

We are trying to create better, more responsible, more engaged citizens who will serve the state as its next generation of critical thinkers and problem-solvers.

IMPACT OF PUBLIC FUNDS

Funding from the legislature for all levels of education, from preschool up, is woefully inadequate. This is critical because the method Arizona uses to allocate public funds for preK-12 schools, and the amount of funds we provide, both directly affect Arizona's ability to achieve our preK-12 education goals. We simply do not adequately fund education in Arizona: The pie is just too small to meet our needs. At the least, Arizona's education funding should be raised to the national median.

Cutting taxes has removed state revenues that could otherwise address disparities in school funding. Inadequate budgets have hurt our ability to meet Arizona's needs for school facilities maintenance and have improperly shifted the demands for providing school supplies and the costs of extracurricular activities to families and teachers. This problem calls for sweeping changes. It also calls for citizens and political leaders who recognize that increased funding for Arizona's schools is a wise investment: It strengthens families and our future workforce.

Arizona's current education funding system has regressed through the past 40 years into a complicated patchwork. The current funding system is difficult to understand and endangers the underlying goal of equalizing funding across school districts statewide. The funding system is not outcome-driven at any administrative level and uniformly fails to assess what financial resources are needed to achieve the educational goals we seek to attain.

Our current funding model does not adequately address the disparities between urban and rural areas or between poorer and more affluent neighborhoods. If anything, the model exacerbates the budgetary disadvantages that poor and rural districts already face. School choice may provide additional options for Arizona students, but some communities have fewer choices than others. Disparities in access to school choices, and the challenges presented by transportation, particularly in rural areas, must be addressed. Similarly, tax credits tend to disadvantage those areas already at a disadvantage – credits tend to flow to more affluent districts instead of those districts that need them most.

In addition, results-based funding has questionable utility: The assessment system is still evolving, and there is simply not enough money to adequately reward successful schools.

Lastly, the imposition of additional regulatory and administrative requirements on schools has further challenged school districts' ability to stretch their limited budgets to meet their needs. These issues all impact Arizona's ability to attract and maintain highly effective educators.

IMPROVING FUNDING FOR ARIZONA'S PREK-12 SCHOOLS

All Arizonans are responsible for acting to bring about an increase in education funding which includes expanding existing and creating new education funding sources: all options must be on the table. First, Proposition 301 should be renewed and expanded to one cent. Legislators should be encouraged by voters and by Arizona's business community to explore ways to increase tax revenue through tax reforms, including closing loopholes and eliminating tax exemptions and corporate tax credits.

Voters are Arizona's most powerful constituency, and they must make their voices heard. First, voters should demand that the legislature fully fund public education. Voters should also use ballot initiatives to improve funding and create new revenue streams. Such revenue streams should emphasize luxury, bed and export taxes that allow Arizona to tax out-of-state buyers rather than just shifting a heavier burden to Arizona's citizens. But we must also consider funding sources such as new excise taxes, increasing income taxes and statewide property taxes. The initiative process should also be used to oppose any expansion of vouchers beyond 2016 levels and to create a revenue stream for high quality early childhood education. Any new tax funds or funding sources allocated for education need to be dedicated to education only and protected against being swept or diverted.

Arizona's voters should be targeted through marketing and outreach campaigns to help everyone understand why education funding is important for all of Arizona's citizens, including people without kids in Arizona schools. Legislators and voters need to hear and understand that education funding will improve Arizona's economy. Voter participation and engagement can be improved if voters appreciate the benefits that can flow from improving our education system.

A key to improving our education system is to increase teacher wages and benefits to help districts recruit and retain talented teachers. Teacher pay should be at a level that allows it to be marketed to businesses seeking to expand or relocate. Teacher pay should become a feature that

boosts Arizona's competitiveness in the global economy. The Arizona legislature should also institute a program to forgive the student loan debt of education graduates who become and remain teachers in Arizona. This benefit would boost the profile of Arizona and help our schools attract and retain highly qualified educators.

Lastly, neighborhood coalitions of businesses, non-profits and other organizations should develop relationships with schools to help not only with funding but also to provide services. Importantly, though, these partnerships must augment, but not replace, full government funding for schools.

SETTING PRIORITIES AND TAKING ACTION

Participants first determined the most important priorities and goals for ensuring the best education future for the Tucson Community. The areas identified (in no particular order) are: early childhood education, support teachers through improved recruitment, retention and pay; voter engagement and legislative change; messaging and communication, and funding. Participants then self-selected into groups to develop outlines of action plans for accomplishing the identified goals. The action plans are set forth below.

- Early childhood education:
 1. Educate parents and the public about the value of preK and kindergarten education. Organizations like First Things First can help engage with people through county health departments, community health centers and schools.
 2. Determine the feasibility of an initiative to require kindergarten attendance and funding.
 3. Unfreeze childcare subsidies with help of organizations like Children's Action Alliance, and Build AZ.
 4. Make preK-12 funding the first priority for the state budget.
- Support teachers through improved recruitment, retention and pay:
 1. Use media such as documentary film to show what the teaching profession actually is and does.
 2. Seek partnerships with higher education to help prepare teachers in training.
 3. Publish op-eds about how education funding impacts teachers.
 4. Examine state and local benefits systems to determine if benefits for teachers and their dependents can be improved by placing them in the state benefits pool.
 5. Campaign for renewal of Proposition 301, because a significant amount of that money is earmarked for teacher pay.
- Voter Engagement and legislative changes:
 1. Support political action:
 - Support the campaigns of legislators and candidates who support education by volunteering, such as knocking on doors, engaging on social media, raising funds, and hosting in home events;
 - Get involved in local political party activities, such as recruiting precinct committee members;

- Recruit new candidates for statewide office
 - 2. Craft key bullet points tailored to specific constituencies (e.g. retirees, busy parents) to convey simply and succinctly messages about why public education is important to each group. This will allow individuals to take talking points out to groups to educate voters/potential voters and candidates and to begin conversations, get people registered to vote, and get them out to vote.
 - 3. Attempt to influence sitting legislators by creating or seeking out opportunities for individuals to speak one-on-one with legislators on a non-partisan and non-lobbying basis.
 - 4. Using a scalable and successful model, help organize and promote workplace group meetings with sitting legislators.
- Messaging and communications:
 1. The overarching message is that education is an economic development issue. The Arizona Legislature has cut taxes 22 years in a row – do you have the Arizona you want?
 2. Engage with voters and non-voters for whom education funding is not a priority.
 3. Identify partners and coalitions (faith-based groups, non-profit and community groups, etc.) to help with messaging and “de-silo” this issue.
 4. Promote civic engagement more generally.
 5. Tailor messages for legislative districts.
- System-wide funding increases:
 1. Renew funding currently provided under Proposition 301. Without action, this funding will disappear in 2021. Funding should be renewed by legislative action. Enlist a broad coalition (including education groups, chambers of commerce, faith-communities, non-profits and local government) to lobby the Legislature and to explain to voters what the consequences of inaction will be statewide. Work to elect Legislators who support renewal, and seek to replace those who do not.
 2. Promote tax-credit reform to close tax loopholes and increase General Fund revenues. We need more data about the size, scope and effect of current tax credits, and an estimate of how closing loopholes would increase funding for education.

INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS

Recognizing that the power to change the future begins with each individual, participants committed to take personal actions based on their experience and discussions at the Community Town Hall. Below are individual actions that were shared.

I WILL...

- Send letters to local business and Industry associations with information and a call to action from the Tucson Community Town Hall on Funding preK-12 Education. It is an economic development priority.
- Write an op-ed to help increase discussion about respecting and valuing teachers; recruit teachers to share their stories through op-eds and blogs.
- Put focus on the 50 percent of children who are not ready to succeed when they start kindergarten; work to fund preschool of quality.
- Help to educate my community on how the school finance system works and the impact of voter issues/legislative changes on our preK-12 system.
- Work on involving college students with Arizona Town Hall.
- Work on convincing the legislature to create loan forgiveness programs for people who want to become teachers and teach in Arizona.
- Put focus on the 50% of children who are not ready to succeed when they start kindergarten.
- Work to fund quality preschool.
- Encourage participation of students at the Tucson Future Leaders Town Hall.
- Advocate for increasing investment in education.
- Continue to advocate for uniting the community (education, government, healthcare, business) to drive data driven action through the cradle to career partnership. 1.) Kindergarten readiness; 2.) Grade level reading; 3.) Middle school math; 4.) High school education; and 5.) Post-secondary attainment.
- Consider champions in the business world that are committed to developing community.
- Continue to talk and engage in these heated and passionate discussions with a focus in providing solutions and using facts not anecdotal evidence while still honoring an individual's personal experience and view.
- Continue as part of the discussion to adequately fund preK-12 education.
- Work to educate others of the challenges schools face with lack of funding.
- Support public education.
- Advance messages about equity in education from a critical moral perspective.
- Work on bringing more global perspectives into k12 schools.
- Talk to influencers about these issues.
- Donate more.
- Try to work out more funding and help getting more resources which keeps motivation.
- Communicate it!
- Consider champions in the business world that are committed to developing community.

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