



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®
OF ARIZONA

MY TURN Submission

Arizonans Need to Hear the Rest of Story – K-12 Education

The old radio announcer Paul Harvey, was famous for his "rest of the story" commentaries. Arizonans need to hear the rest of the Arizona K-12 story. The well-financed "million dollar media" PR campaign by the Arizona Education Project (with backing by the Arizona Chamber of Commerce and Industry, utility company Pinnacle West, and The Arizona Lodging and Tourism Association among other contributors), touts the accomplishments in Arizona K-12 education and presents a skewed picture of the state's education story.

While the public relations' campaign advertises that nearly \$1.5 billion has been added to K-12 education funding in the past three years, you should also know:

- 1) The Governor's FY2019 budget proposal still leaves AZ public schools short by more than \$950 million compared to the level of funding in 2008, a time when Arizona was also ranked towards the bottom of funding levels in all states. The 2016 voter-approved settlement over inflationary funding, known as Proposition 123, only restored 18% of the cuts that had been implemented since 2008.
- 2) Over the five-year FY2012-2016 period, more than \$600 million of taxable revenue was diverted from the general fund to subsidize private education as shown by Dept. of Revenue reports.
- 3) Arizona tax credits are growing far faster than the state budget or economy. Individuals may divert taxable revenue via a tax credit for both private schools and/or public schools while corporations can divert taxable revenue for private education. AZ Dept. of Revenue reports reveal for FY 2016, diverted private school tax credits totaled more than \$150 million while diverted public school tax credits totaled more than \$50 million -- an overall loss of more than \$200 million from the general fund. .
- 4) As noted by the ASU W.P. Carey School of Business, "Substantial amounts of additional revenue could be realized by simply rolling back a portion of the tax cuts that have been put into effect over the last 25 years." The Arizona Legislature and Governors have reduced tax rates and/or increased exemptions and credits every year since 1990, except for 2003. The Children's Action Alliance points out that "the largest cuts were implemented in the last six years when state lawmakers cut over \$1.5 billion in annual state general fund revenues."
- 5) A key source of more than \$550 million in annual financial support for public schools will be lost when Prop 301 ends June 30, 2021, unless it is renewed or replaced.
- 6) Special needs students account for 12 percent of Arizona's school children and are more expensive to educate; however, the Arizona Legislature has not adjusted funding for these students for a decade. The majority of special needs students are educated in the underfunded public district schools.

Although we can all be pleased that on national assessments Arizona showed the nation's largest statistically significant improvements in 4th and 8th grade math, reading and science scores between 2009 and 2015, the scores remain below average due, to a large extent, our high poverty levels. Our teachers have worked extremely hard to see those gains in their overly crowded and underfunded classrooms. In Arizona, as across the nation, the obsession with testing has resulted in many states and schools setting aside visual arts, music, physical education, social studies, world languages, financial literacy and other curricular areas in order to concentrate on math and reading. These deleted or reduced aspects of curriculum have been shown to increase children's success in school, their ability to think critically, and to live healthy, independent and well-balanced lives. And yet, public schools lack the necessary resources to really support them.

While Arizona Education Project's PR campaign touts the attempt to attract an additional 200 students into teaching at the three public universities via a free tuition offer through the Arizona Teachers' Academy, an admirable effort, these efforts must be expanded and accelerated quickly to not only recruit but also retain qualified teachers.

According to a 2017 ASU Morrison Institute study, "Finding and Keeping Educators in Arizona's Classrooms, "Forty-two percent of Arizona teachers hired in 2013 were no longer teaching in an Arizona public school by 2016". The study found that in November of 2016, more than 2000 teaching jobs in Arizona remained to be filled. Big de-motivators are salary and heavy workloads! Arizona elementary teacher salaries rank 50th in the nation, and high school teacher salaries rank 49th. Schools are often forced to fill such vacancies with long-term substitutes, external candidates who don't meet teaching requirements, or to bring in an already-overburdened teacher from the school.

A final issue of note is the increasing workload demands on teachers, due to larger class sizes and cutbacks in support personnel. The Morrison study relates that "Teachers say they expect to work hard, but dislike being asked to work harder for less pay." It is essential for teacher salaries and over-crowded classrooms to be addressed if we are to recruit and retain teachers for our public schools.

A long-term and comprehensive funding plan for Arizona K-12 education is essential. Furthermore, oversight and corrective action safeguards for state funding of charter schools plus Arizona's overabundance of tax credits and tax cuts must also be addressed to prevent further abuse of public funds. Our children and the state citizenry are waiting for positive leadership and action by elected officials to protect public education in Arizona.

Sincerely,

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