

The free-market case for district schools

Andrew F. Morrill - AEA president: *Despite a wealth of choices, more than 80 percent of Arizona parents still choose neighborhood public schools.*

Over the last six years, Arizona has suffered some of the largest education funding cuts in the country. Now our governor proposes cutting more while prioritizing private prison expansion over public education investments. Is this the path to an Arizona that offers opportunity for all?

In this choice-rich state, more than 80 percent of Arizonans with school-age children still select neighborhood public schools as their education choice.

This is a staggering majority with so many options available. Where is the support for parents who make this choice? Can a governor truly claim to uphold parent choice when he is not supporting the choice that the majority of parents annually make?

Gov. Doug Ducey and the GOP leadership have negotiated a budget that proposes to cut more than \$100 million from district additional assistance. The only increases our schools will see come from Arizona voters in a formula driven by student growth and inflation, in which our state's leaders still fail to fund at the appropriate base level.

Are those parents wrong, or is this budget out of touch with true parental choice?

8 things to know about the budget:

Arizona leads the country in school choice options. In the 1990s we pioneered the charter school movement on the promise of better education delivered more cost effectively.

It is troubling, then, that at least two prominent national studies — including one out of Stanford University — show that Arizona charter school students lag behind district students in academic achievement, despite charter schools receiving more state dollars per student than district schools, according to the Joint Legislative Budget Committee.

Charter supporters will argue that school districts receive money through bonds and overrides not available to charters. But many districts cannot get these passed in their communities. School districts also get federal funding because they serve special-needs students.

Charters need oversight

The number of new charter schools continues to grow at taxpayers' expense while neighborhoods watch their public schools close due to budget cuts from the state Legislature.

According to the Washington Post, charter schools have become a booming industry for hedge fund investors who use federal tax credits to double their investments in seven years. Many charter schools are run by for-profit out-of-state corporations, putting their profits ahead of children's well-being and classroom learning.

Without doubt, there are in Arizona many quality charter schools with committed teachers and leaders working in them; however, a quick review of headlines from other states reveals the waste, fraud and abuse committed by too many charter school operators, including some who operate several schools in Arizona.

CHARTER OWNERS: Budget cuts go way too far

In 2012, The Arizona Republic described the conflict of interest of many charter school board members, who provide vendor services to charter schools and pay themselves and family members with taxpayer money. In other states this practice is illegal, just as it is for those elected to district governing boards. But it is permissible in the charter structure. Are Arizona taxpayers aware and approving of this use of their money?

The Center for Popular Democracy and In the Public Interest recently released surveys that show the American people overwhelmingly favor common sense proposals that strengthen charter school accountability and transparency, improve teacher training and qualifications, prevent fraud, serve high-need students, and ensure that neighborhood public schools are not adversely affected by the charter industry.

Common sense dictates that schools receiving public money should be open and transparent to the public, require open board meetings, release financial reports with annual budgets and contracts, submit to regular state audits, require teachers and principals to be certified and serve all students, especially those with high needs.

Arizona's parents should be included in the decisions made about their children's education; the state should ensure schools provide that access.

Foundation for democracy

Our country was founded on the value that we are all created equal and that everyone has the opportunity to achieve the American Dream, regardless of race, religion or socioeconomic status. One of the mechanisms our founding fathers supported as a foundation for democracy was a public education system funded by the public for the public.

America's neighborhood, public education system is as expansive as our country's Constitution. Our inclusive system means that all — not just the wealthy and privileged — should receive a free, quality public education. This mandate is based on the belief that an educated citizenry benefits communities and our country. It is, therefore, the responsibility of those we elect to support our public education system.

The very term "public schools" means that they are funded and owned by — and accountable to — the public. Taxpayers own the public school system. Locally elected school boards provide oversight for the education of our children and hire district administrators to lead our schools.

Parents and community members attend and speak at public school board meetings. And the public interest in academic and financial accountability requires districts to hire certified teachers, report annual financial records and submit to state financial audits.

Community members know that strong public schools mean strong local neighborhoods. Schools hire professional, degreed teachers and administrators. Dozens of essential support roles mean hundreds of jobs for those who live within a school district. District employees spend money in their local economies; further, a majority of the money spent by school districts remains in Arizona since districts contract for services with local and state businesses.

Research by national economists shows that personal income increases as a result of investments in a state's public education system; in fact, tax cuts often underperform school funding increases in measurable job growth. Well-educated students today mean an able and robust workforce tomorrow. And businesses often cite quality-of-life indicators, including public school quality, as more important than low taxes as criteria for relocation or expansion.

If tax cuts, rather than education funding, provided a lever for state economic growth, Arizona would certainly know it by now.

Sadly, the education choice of our elected leaders differs sharply from the majority of voters.

We talk a lot about education reform, but that talk focuses almost exclusively on district public schools. Arizona must expand that conversation to include all schools that receive public funds and hold them to an equal standard of accountability and transparency. Consistent with America's promise, we must ensure that public dollars are invested in high-quality schools owned by and accountable to the public.

Andrew Morrill, AZ I See It 3:09 p.m. MST March 6, 2015

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