

Real public education crisis is leadership, not funding

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OPINION

Much attention has recently been paid to the funding of Arizona's public schools and the growing crisis of teacher shortages, crumbling infrastructure, and an overall lack of resources to ensure that students are prepared to thrive in the 21st century.

Traditional schools are struggling to overcome what is arguably a decade of neglect driven by policymakers' intentional disregard for the clear mandates within the state Constitution and the vision of our founding fathers. In spite of this sobering reality, Arizona is home to some of the most efficient and productive school systems in the nation. School districts and local governing boards have successfully stretched resources and masterfully managed declining revenues to avoid punishing children and limiting opportunities, especially for those students in impoverished and minority communities.



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This effort appears to go unnoticed as lawmakers focus on “elite schools” that find ways to twist the law and only enroll and keep high achieving students and characterize themselves as great schools. The very students who require additional resources and whose struggles are eased by the intensive support offered by and legally required of traditional schools, are the children denied access to the elite charter schools.

Until we begin focusing on the real challenges that confront the schools that educate over 85 percent of our state’s children, we will continue the downward spiral that promises to cripple both our schools and our economy. The recent passage of Proposition 123 settled a lawsuit that occurred because of the Legislature’s unwillingness to do its lawful duty. The proposition was nothing but a settlement whose success was built on the desperation of citizens and educators who begrudgingly accepted that something was better than nothing. Unfortunately, as predicted, Proposition 123’s nominal increases in inflation funding and enrollment growth funding have been an insignificant improvement on years of budget cuts and unlawful legislative action.

Proposition 123, which was originally billed as “a good start,” is now being paired with Governor Ducey’s 2018 budget proposal and characterized as “the solution” to Arizona’s education crisis. At best we have achieved “a good next step,” but the work ahead cannot be underestimated or ignored. Nothing has been done to dissuade the tide of people rejecting teaching as a desirable profession.

The governor’s proposed investment in capital improvements is not enough to protect our aging school facilities or allow for the explosive growth happening in several parts of the state. In fact, even with Proposition 123 and overrides, traditional schools are still funded at levels lower than 2008. Furthermore, most school districts are operating with capital budgets less than 85 percent of what they needed a decade ago.

The debate over the impending reauthorization of Proposition 301 further demonstrates the lack of commitment to supporting our state’s public schools and amplifies the real crisis that we confront as citizens – that is a crisis in state leadership, where people elected to represent our best interests base their success on promoting their personal interests and seeing how much they can demand for as little financial support as possible.

No amount of money spent on public relations and the marketing of a flawed approach to public school support will change the reality that we are being led down a path that guarantees more of the same. If we expect improvement in the condition of education in Arizona, we must demand it of our state lawmakers, as they are the only people who have control of the decisions to make it happen. It certainly is not in putting more resources into exclusive schools while ignoring the needs of the most vulnerable, nor is it the selective starvation of traditional public schools to support a political ideology that uses choice as a weapon rather than an opportunity.

Educational excellence cannot be achieved if we continue to allow our elected leaders to legislate by litigation and ballot measures rather than assuming the responsibility of making the difficult and just decisions that benefit the majority of Arizona's students. If the voters believe that public education is important, each of us must recognize our personal responsibility to demand more of those who we entrust to act on our behalf. Anything less is unacceptable.

— *Debra Duvall is president of Why Not the Best Public Education in Arizona Foundation.*

The views expressed in guest commentaries are those of the author and are not the views of the Arizona Capitol Times.