

Arizona's Funding Crisis

By Dr. John Pedicone

Recently, funding for Arizona's public schools has been the topic of virtually every news outlet in the state and even nationally. As the statistics on Arizona's per pupil expenditures and a comparison of teacher salaries across the country reveals Arizona at or near the bottom of all other states, many people find themselves asking how we got to this point. How could a state that has built its reputation on growth and quality of life allow one of the most critical factors in attracting people to not be a top priority? If you ask any parent what they want for their children, they will always include quality schools and a good education. If you ask any business leader for what she or he believes is a primary condition that attracts young executives or detracts companies from considering a location, quality of education is always at the top of the list. So, what happened?

To understand the answer to that question, you have to focus on leadership, both at the legislative and Gubernatorial levels where funding decisions are made. You also have to ask how school, community and business leadership have allowed education to be ignored and funding to be decreased over time to the point where as a state we have reached a crisis level.

Clearly, the current condition of low teacher and staff salaries, lack of funding for capital maintenance and improvements, deficit funding for student support personnel including counselors, librarians, nurses, and the professional staff required to support underserved children did not happen overnight. This was the **"boiling of the lobster"** metaphor in its purest form. And, in the same way that during the boiling process the sounds of that delectable sea creature are often muted to avoid public outcry, so have the screams and warnings from virtually every corner of our community been suppressed and ignored. When the process of creating priorities is placed in the hands of people who value an ideology of low taxation and market-driven natural selection principles which contend that competition will eliminate failing schools and cause the best to rise the top; who boldly argue that, in spite of the reality that social services, by their nature, are designed to support those who cannot compete without a level playing field, they provide funding to the schools with the lowest levels of poor families; who promote the narrow metrics based on academic assessments used to measure success and favor children who are more fortunate; who accept that schools that serve underprivileged students are penalized by labels that measure demographics more accurately than quality of classroom engagement; and who favor the high-achieving wealthier institutions at the expense of the others, the answers to how we got here are not difficult to understand.

When the legislature and the Governor move a deficit agenda forward, arguing that the economy is the only thing that matters, educational and business leaders find themselves at the mercy of a political structure that has reduced and in many cases eliminated their influence. When a legislature and a Governor act only when litigation forces their hands or they wait for citizens to create propositions to force action, people should react. When that same legislature refuses to abide by the rule of law, forcing citizens to vote to accept concessions like Proposition 123 that settled a lawsuit aimed at addressing the

legislature's failure to abide by the requirements of Proposition 301, public outcry should be high. When these realities result in the crisis we face today, the truth is that we all must take the blame. These people are making these decisions because we put them there. If this legislature and Governor refuse to eliminate this crisis by identifying the right goals and creating a plan to reach them, let's remember that in November when our goal should be clear and our influence does matter.

Dr. Pedicone serves on the Board of Directors for Why Not the Best Public Education in Arizona Foundation.