

## **EXPLAINER: Curriculum in K-12 Public District and Public Charter Schools in Arizona**

*An examination of curriculum and the controversies surrounding it in Arizona K-12 public and public charter schools*

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This brief serves as an introduction for state policymakers, lawmakers, and citizens on K-12 curriculum and what it includes for students in public district and public charter schools in the state of Arizona. This explainer provides a baseline knowledge of the subject that can facilitate informed debate on education policy, regulations on curricula, and other requirements and standards set by the state.

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### **What is curriculum?**

The definition of curriculum given by the [Arizona Revised Statutes](#) is “a complete course of study for content areas or grade levels, including any supplemental materials required by the curriculum approved by the department.”

Curriculum serves as a set of learning materials that are used to educate students. The Arizona education system offers distinctive curricula unique to each school district for primary schools.

According to the Arizona Department of Education, all school district curricula share [common competencies](#) which include arts, computer science, technology, English language, health, history and social science, mathematics, physical education, science, social learning and world native languages.

So long as Arizona school districts operate in alignment with the state’s effort to regulate and maintain public schools, school districts and public charter schools have discretion when making decisions about their curriculum. The Arizona State Constitution says that “[t]he general conduct and supervision of the public school system shall be vested in a state board of education, a state superintendent of public instruction, county school superintendents, and such governing boards for the state institutions as may be provided by law.”

### **What does curriculum include?**

Because curriculum is designed to meet the standards for what will be taught to students in a program of study, curricula vary as school districts prioritize different values, different practical and theoretical skillsets, and different models of historical narratives, all of which involve the use of different resources and learning materials.

The Arizona Department of Education has created standards applicable to all schools regarding core competencies. These are broken into grade categories for cognitive ability in grades K-12. The grades 6-8 [Standards for Mathematical Practice](#) include:



For English Language Arts (ELA) the Arizona Department of Education created [anchor standards](#) that should be met at each grade level. These 32 anchor standards apply for literature and information text, writing, speaking and listening, and basic language.

The History and Social Science anchor standards are broken into civics, economics, geography, and history. For these two subjects students are required [to learn that](#), “Historians and Social Scientists gather, interpret, and use evidence to develop claims and answer historical, economic, geographical, and political questions and communicate their conclusions. Thinking within the discipline involves the ability to analyze relationships among causes and effects and to create and support arguments using relevant evidence.”

### **Standards vs. curriculum**

As shown above, curricula across the state of Arizona are subject to certain base standards. For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that curriculum reflects certain standards – but does not constitute “standards” in itself. It is rather a document which applies those standards to the resources available for educators in a certain jurisdiction.

A [brief](#) written by the Arizona Department of Education explains this dynamic: “While standards are adopted at the state level by the Arizona State Board of Education, curriculum (the resources used for teaching and learning the standards) and instruction (the methods used by teacher to teach their students in their classes and help them master the standards) are made at the local level.”

By way of illustration, both Honda Civics and Ford Broncos have seatbelts and conform to basic safety standards. Similarly, curricula across the state share base standards but vary widely in what materials they use, and how they instruct students.

### **How is curriculum currently made transparent and available to the public?**

Today, parents of K-12 children in Arizona have the right “to review learning materials and activities in advance” according to [A.R.S. 15-113](#). Legally, parents may object to learning materials on the basis that they are harmful to their child(ren). Parents can also request the removal of their child(ren) from learning environments that they deem harmful to their child(ren), for the duration of instruction.

[A.R.S. 15-730](#) grants additional rights to parents to observe the information that their child will be learning in K-12 schools. This statute gives parents the ability to request “instructional material” to review. This includes the ability to take “printed textbooks, printed supplementary books, and printed subject matter” off school property for a duration of 48 hours. Learning material which is digital in nature or not able to be made tangible for transportation is to be reviewed on school premises.

Lawmakers have taken steps in the last few years to address the issue of curriculum transparency. [SB 1459](#) was signed into law by Gov. Doug Ducey on May 4, 2021. Among other provisions, SB 1459 mandates that all Arizona K-12 public district and public charter schools provide their curriculum and other related documents to parents prior to the beginning of each school year. Compiled into a “curriculum information form,” this document is to be provided to the parents of pupils in each school. This form will include:

- Text of the Parents’ Bill of Rights as prescribed in [1-601 and 1-602](#)
- Mandatory and optional reading materials
- Digital learning materials including websites and online applications
- Procedures by which parents may further learn about course study for their children
- Procedures by which parents may object to learning material on the basis that it is harmful
- Acknowledgements that the school district or charter school has reviewed learning materials provided

Gov. Doug Ducey also signed [HB 2035](#) into law in 2021, which creates new regulations regarding sex education. The legislation offers parents more discretion in choosing which lessons parents want their children to take part in. The bill establishes that students may not receive any sex education instruction before the fifth grade. HB 2035 also creates an approval process for both public and charter schools to have the curriculum approved through public hearings. Additionally, Arizona parents now have the right to remove their children from any instruction or use of any learning materials that relate to sexuality and sex if they choose.

### **The current debate over curriculum transparency**

Parents, legislators, and community leaders [have increasingly called](#) for “curriculum transparency.” The premises behind curriculum transparency are twofold: firstly, that curriculum variance has lasting effects on the future generations of citizens and their function in democratic society; and secondly, a belief that basic information about school curriculum ought to be disclosed by schools so that parents, legal guardians, taxpayers, and legislators can have a chance to examine what publicly-funded institutions are teaching the next generation of workers, business leaders, and policymakers.

At the base of this controversy is a concern that parents are unable to access the materials and information their child is being taught. Proponents of curriculum transparency argue increased transparency is a legitimate way of bringing to light any divisive or inappropriate ideologies or subjects being taught in the classroom. Opponents, however, argue that the transparency movement will result in greater interference in educators’ ability to their job.

The Arizona Education Association made such an assertion about [SB 1058](#), a bill introduced in 2021 that did not reach the Governor’s desk.

The [legislation](#) would have strengthened A.R.S. § 15-113 and A.R.S § 15-730 by mandating more specific public disclosure guidelines for learning materials and activities, and making curriculum information more easily accessible to parents of children in K-12 public district and public charter schools in Arizona.

The AEA [argued](#) that “SB 1058 will limit the ability of teachers to use their professional judgment in order to do their jobs in the classroom.” The bill’s requirement that a course syllabus be provided before each school year begins could potentially limit the ability of teachers to adapt to the needs of their students throughout the year. Additionally, many opponents cite this sort of legislation as an overreach by the government and critique it as a heavy-handed policy.

States like Arizona have a greater wealth of curriculum variability district-to-district due to the state’s expansive public charter network (more than 15% of Arizona students [attend a charter school](#)) and an [open-enrollment system](#) that allows students to attend district schools other than the schools assigned to the student’s neighborhood.

Ultimately, parents in Arizona are empowered to choose which style of education and what sort of curriculum they want their children to be formed by.

### **Relevance to enterprise and skilled labor**

According to a [report drafted by the Arizona Board of Regents](#) released in 2019, a “lack of educational attainment is a primary limiting factor not only on individual prosperity, but also the economy of the entire communities where college enrollment and completion rates remain low.”

Having an educated workforce makes a large impact on both [local and national economies](#). As the number of educated workers increases in an area, an economy’s productivity rises as more skilled workers can take on and carry out tasks more efficiently. *Ceteris paribus*, the more

educated and skilled that the labor supply is in a certain area, the more likely businesses and the economy will grow and succeed.

Poor quality curriculum can lead to poorer education outcomes, but variance in curricula can also produce a more robust workforce. Uniform standards can provide a baseline – like the Arizona Department of Education’s standards set forth for key competencies – but certain regional, district-wide, and school-specific variations in curriculum could synergize with the state’s school choice system to produce an even more rigorous and relevant education for students.

Parents in Arizona are empowered beyond their peers across the nation to choose what sort of education their children ought to receive. If schools compete for students and the education market is transparent, the next generation of workers, leaders, and policymakers might benefit from curriculum that adheres to baseline standards but varies in instructional material and modes of instruction.

Quality curriculum at a bare minimum meets standards, but the instructional material which makes up curricula varies by district. Robust curricula which not only meet, but exceed standards have the potential to enhance choices in the educational marketplace, garner support from the taxpayers who generate the resources necessary to fund the enterprise, and position the broader economy for greater success.