



2015 STATE OF EDUCATION Remarks by Superintendent of Public Instruction Diane M. Douglas

Mr. Chairman and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today. It is my honor to address fellow elected officials who are focused on educating our children.

The current state of education in Arizona is **poor**.

Too many Arizona children are not receiving the education they deserve—one that will prepare them to contribute to our great state and nation as active citizens and allow them to pursue their dreams and ambitions.

Education Week recently released its annual “Quality Counts” report, which rates all 50 states on overall student achievement, students’ chances for success, and school finance policy.

Arizona received a D+ and was ranked 47th overall.

This is hardly news to Arizona’s parents or its education and business communities. As a former school board member who has talked with countless parents and teachers and has visited innumerable classrooms, it isn’t news to me either.

Challenges Facing Education in Arizona

Let me give you specific examples of the problems we face, here and now.

State Standards and Assessment

Our Arizona state standards were discarded and replaced with the unproven Common Core Standards, which came to Arizona as a de facto federal mandate—only to be renamed Arizona’s College and Career Ready Standards.

The continual disruption of standards, accountability, assessment, and educator evaluations has caused uncertainty and stress in the education community as well as among Arizona parents.

This is not the first time Arizona has changed its entire education system to reflect the latest fad, top-down approach, or cure-all sold as the solution for student achievement.

Common Core is just the latest, and it was implemented virtually without public communication, input or support. This constant roller coaster of dramatic changes has shifted the focus away from educating children and placed it on change for the sake of change itself.

Parents, students and teachers are exhausted and districts are broke from rewriting curricula and lesson plans every seven to ten years. Just as some stability is reached, everything is changed once again.

And now we will be subjecting our children to the brand new, unproven, inaptly named AzMERIT test—the name is the only thing Arizonan about the test—which was hastily chosen just 11 short weeks ago behind closed doors, once again without public discussion or vetting.

It was created by a self-identified, self-described behavioral and social research organization—not by education experts.

Our dedicated assessment staff at ADE has the daunting task of rolling out this new test in the next 10 weeks. Make no mistake, that team and districts all across the state are working diligently to fulfill this mandate.

A mere 21 weeks from adoption to implementation—let me repeat, 21 weeks, less than half a year, to prepare a test for students at almost every grade level. Once again, our precious children are being used as guinea pigs to advance some education agenda.

I call on this Legislature and the Governor to stop the madness and put our children first.

Graduation Rates and Success in College

Arizona's education system also is lagging behind in graduation rates.

Graduation rates dipped slightly last year, with about 75 percent of students graduating in four years and just over 80 percent of students graduating in five years.

Sixty percent of high school graduates entering our community college system require remedial instruction. This delays their progress toward a degree, uses up much of their student loans and savings, and places an undue burden on the taxpayers funding this system.

Additionally, of the 50 percent of high school graduates who directly enter universities, less than 19 percent graduate from a four year institution within six years.

One third of high school graduates enter college, but leave without a degree. They bear the costs of an incomplete college education without receiving a degree to obtain better employment opportunities.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Arizona currently is unable to attract and retain high quality teachers for all students, and nearly one quarter of Arizona's education workforce is eligible to retire within the next four years.

Additionally, new teachers are leaving the profession at alarming rates. In fact, 24 percent of first year and 20 percent of second year teachers in Arizona quit after the 2013-2014 school year.

Arizona's average teacher salary is ranked 42nd in the nation and salaries are a major obstacle when recruiting outside Arizona.

Without experienced, highly effective teachers in **every** Arizona classroom, our students will struggle to succeed.

Our business community complains that Arizona graduates are not ready for the jobs of today much less the jobs of tomorrow. Every Arizona job should have a qualified Arizona graduate ready to fill that position.

However, merely training students for a job is insufficient. We must also provide them the civics education necessary to become successful citizens of our great state and nation.

Improving Arizona's Education System

As Superintendent of Public Instruction, I will take an honest and realistic approach to addressing these issues.

Let me be clear—responsibility for the issues we are facing cannot be laid at the feet of any one person, board or organization.

We were not placed in our current situation by uncaring policy makers or educators.

I fully realize the strain that previous expenditures and tight budgets have placed on all involved. Our current fiscal environment does not make our job of putting education on the path to improvement any easier.

However, it is our duty to put our children ahead of ideology or trendy education theory.

Today, we start on a collaborative path so others will look to Arizona as an example of education excellence.

Continuous Improvement of Arizona Standards for Arizona Students

First, Arizona’s children deserve high standards in education.

I intend to establish an annual deliberative and ongoing process for standards review by a broad spectrum of Arizona classroom teachers, colleges, businesses and, yes, parents to ensure continuous improvement. It is long past time that we start asking parents what they expect for their children’s education rather than telling them what they must accept.

Our continual improvement process will allow us the flexibility to make whatever changes are needed—without asking permission from Washington, D.C. or seeking agreement from more than 40 other states.

We can make moderate changes in a transparent process each year. This will allow students and teachers to absorb changes without disruptions and without major costs to districts.

Support for Our Teachers

Standards and assessments cannot take the place of effective teachers connecting with individual children. Make no mistake, standardized and high stakes testing measure demographics, not student achievement or teacher performance.

For many children, the personal confidence shown in them by a caring teacher is something they will remember as a key moment in their life.

Our teachers’ content knowledge and skills must be built upon, rather than erased and replaced with new fads.

I know first-hand just how hard our teachers work and how much they care about their students. We must commit to work just as hard to support them.

We have an opportunity to build upon the teacher preparation programs that are training the next generation of Arizona educators. By enhancing the quality of these programs, we can positively impact teacher retention and work to stabilize the growing need for highly qualified teachers.

For many years teachers have been asking for additional support. I intend to listen and come to their aid.

Safe and Meaningful Education Data

Next as Superintendent, I will build on the information technology progress the Department of Education made during the previous administration.

Our first step is to complete accurate data systems. But data is not useful, unless it can be distributed to teachers as information they can actually use to improve classroom instruction.

In addition, I am committed to strengthening our data security. Every child should have their data collected only if necessary, and it should be protected with the care that parents expect and deserve.

Accurate and Inclusive Arizona History

Finally, all children should be taught accurate history, which requires the inclusion of the rich cultural heritage of Latino-Americans, African-Americans, Native Americans and every other group of immigrants who has come to Arizona and suffered through challenges and tribulations to make our state great.

As part of this effort, the department in the past has reached out to these communities for advice.

Now it is time to take this input to the next level. All ethnicities will be properly represented in history, language arts, music, civics and all other appropriate areas of study.

Teaching children by ethnicity is academic segregation, reinforcing in young minds that somehow we are different and separate from each other.

These standards changes will allow children statewide to look at each other not by color or ethnicity, but as fellow Arizonans, respected for their own unique history and culture which has contributed to the state.

Closing Remarks

Arizona will be a model and a leader in education. Today we will put away the failed tactics of the past and start Arizona on a road to excellence. This committee, this legislature, this Superintendent, the Governor, along with the dedicated educators, parents, and children across our state will look back and realize today was the turning point.

By fostering statewide collaboration and building new partnerships we will:

- Create high, academic **Arizona** standards for Arizona students through public meetings that accept input and provide feedback.
- Create accurate and inclusive history and civics standards to prepare students for citizenship.
- Protect personal, private student data while also protecting parental rights.

These efforts and a commitment to supporting the great teachers who work tirelessly for our students **is the only way to move Arizona forward.**

Of all the programs in the entire state, giving our children a world-class education should be the one thing we can all agree upon. The children of Arizona are our future.

I know everyone in this room cares about providing our children the best education. My commitment is to work tirelessly with all of you to achieve that goal. I look forward to the challenge. Those of us who went through the gauntlet of primaries and general elections did so for a purpose. To do what is right. To make a difference. Let's impress the voters where it matters most — helping our children be successful by any measure.

I take the confidence shown in me by the voters very seriously. I will not stop until we have the best education system in the nation—right here in Arizona.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I am deeply honored to work with all of you.