



## 2016 STATE OF EDUCATION

### Remarks by Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction Diane M. Douglas

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Mr. Chairman and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today. It is always an honor to address fellow elected officials who share my passion for the education of our children.

The current state of education in Arizona is **hopeful, but skeptical**.

The Governor, the Legislature and I have all advocated for improving funding for the system, getting more funding to the classrooms, supporting parental rights and solving the funding litigation. Proposition 123 and other proposals that will be discussed during session show promise for improving our children's education. However, a lot is still uncertain. The education community is reasonably concerned about the final effect of changes being contemplated and implemented.

Just as in the comic Peanuts, Lucy will hold the ball and then yank it away from Charlie Brown at the last minute. For education, it is too early to tell if we are only spending enough money to settle a lawsuit and temporarily placate the public, or if we are seriously taking the first step to building the best education system in the nation, right here in Arizona.

We stand on the cusp, the precipice, of either taking a bold step forward to restore Arizona to national prominence or stumbling and remaining a system with inadequate funding, federal interference and over-regulation.

During my first year in office I saw firsthand the barriers keeping many of our children from an excellent education.

Last year, I cited Education Week's "Quality Counts" report, which assigns grades to each state based on student achievement, students' chances for success, and school finance policy. Arizona received a D+ and was ranked 47<sup>th</sup> overall.

This year Arizona received a D+ and was ranked 45<sup>th</sup> overall. I'm sure you will agree this is hardly cause to celebrate.

But there *is* reason to be cautiously optimistic. Our actions last year, this year and those included in my *Arizona Kids Can't Afford to Wait!* education plan will move us forward. 2016 will be a year that brings us one step closer to having the best education system in the nation.

## **Arizona Education Highlights from 2015**

2015 was a remarkable first year for me as Superintendent. Let me share some of the highlights that give me great hope for the future of education in our state.

### **Statewide Tours**

For months last spring and fall, I had the privilege of visiting communities across the state on my *We Are Listening* and *We Heard You Tours*. Several members of this committee were able to join me for these events—thank you for your time and participation.

The purpose of these tours was to give Arizona citizens a chance to express their concerns and share their ideas about education in our state and to share my plan for improvement.

We received thousands of comments from parents, teachers, administrators, community members and even students. Hearing from the people I serve as an elected official was an amazing and valuable experience.

### **AZ Kids Can't Afford to Wait!**

This input formed the framework for my major initiative this year, the *AZ Kids Can't Afford to Wait!* education plan. This is the first time in my memory that an Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction has ever issued a formal, comprehensive plan for education.

*AZ Kids Can't Afford to Wait!* turns voter feedback into actionable proposals to improve Arizona's education system.

As elected officials, we cannot merely collect feedback for lip service or visit our electorate only when we are asking for their votes. The thoughts of those we serve must meaningfully impact our work. I am proud to say that *AZ Kids Can't Afford to Wait!* embodies that philosophy.

Still, even after the plan's release, the work has just begun. Now it is time to start chipping away at the issues. Where possible, the Arizona Department of Education is acting to implement these improvements. Several other proposals are moving through the Legislature, sponsored by strong education leaders. Still others may take several years of teamwork to accomplish. Some may never become a reality, yet will serve to frame important dialogues and debates.

I am very grateful to all who participated in the public process, and to this committee for its support. I promise to repeat this process of listening, truly hearing, learning and acting every year I'm in office.

## **Additional Funding for Classroom Teachers**

While on my *We Are Listening* tour, the call for more education funding was loud and clear. Arizonans asked me to fight for more money for our classroom teachers. It didn't matter if the attendees were urban or rural, conservative or liberal, or Republican, Independent or Democrat—no other topic came close in terms of the volume of feedback I received.

In response to that clear message from the people of Arizona, in September I called for an immediate appropriation of \$400 million for this fiscal year to go to classroom teacher salaries and classroom size reduction.

While my initial proposal was modified, I would like to commend the Legislature for coming to an agreement to increase K-12 funding. As a result, Arizona citizens will vote in May for what is now called Proposition 123.

That additional funding will be an important first step to tackling the teacher shortage our state faces. But there is still much work to be done to retain and attract the best teachers for our children. We must not think that our work is done.

## **Severing Arizona's Ties to Common Core**

When I addressed you last year, I made it clear that stopping the substandard and inadequate Common Core was my top priority as Superintendent. That was not always the most popular stance, but I did not waver in my commitment. When I promise the voters something, I mean it.

As part of the *AZ Kids Can't Afford to Wait!* release in October, I called on the State Board of Education to formally reverse the action it took in 2010 when it adopted the Common Core standards virtually sight unseen and without the benefit of public hearings or meaningful parental input.

Less than one month later, the Board did exactly that when it voted 6-2 to sever Arizona's ties to Common Core. The vote was a victory for all Arizonans and returned control of our standards to Arizona parents and teachers.

I remain committed to the idea that Arizona children deserve the very best standards and that only Arizonans should decide what those standards look like for Arizona children. I will do everything possible to ensure that the standards reflect the unique needs of our students.

## **Working Together in 2016**

I know that *Arizona Kids Can't Afford to Wait!* will address the issues keeping our state from realizing its potential as a leader in education. But it will not be successful in a vacuum. I will work with this committee and the rest of the Legislature, along with other leaders across our state, to see it become a success.

Today I will share some of the proposals that will have the greatest positive impact on student achievement.

### **Secure Student Data that Works for Arizona**

I have worked tirelessly to ensure the privacy and protection of students' most personal information. I have reviewed the Department's data governance policies and process and significantly increased the security.

It is important to me and the parents of Arizona that student data be used *only* to improve academic achievement and classroom instruction.

To that end, third parties requesting data from the Department of Education now go through a more stringent review process. They must demonstrate how their secure use of the data will benefit Arizona's students.

We will take every step to prevent the identification of individual students and the use of data for commercial purposes.

The Department's teacher dashboards, part of its nationally-recognized AELAS technology initiative, are a powerful example of how data can be used responsibly to support students.

In addition to empowering teachers, AELAS has the ability to save the state and taxpayers millions of dollars every year. I am proposing legislation this session that would allow the Arizona Department of Education to contract with interested parties for the sale of its intellectual property rights, including components of the AELAS system.

AELAS is looked at by states across the country as a model they would like to replicate. It only makes sense that we should capitalize on its success and recapture state-invested resources that made it successful.

## **Expanded Rights and Resources for Parents**

One of my deeply held beliefs is that the only people who truly impact a child's educational development are parents and classroom teachers.

To support parents in that vital role, I announced this week the release of a new Parent Gateway on the Arizona Department of Education web site. This area currently provides parent-friendly resources on a variety of education issues. In the near future it will be home to informational videos and tutorials that cover topics of interest to parents.

Under my guidance, ADE is expanding its efforts to actively engage parents by inviting them to be frequent participants in important education policy discussions.

Parents who want to play an active role in their child's education should not be faced with legal hurdles that have no business in our schools. I will work with members of this body to see that basic parental rights, including the right to opt children out of testing, are returned to the people of Arizona.

I would like to thank Chairman Boyer for his leadership in that fight and I encourage this committee to support opt out legislation when it is presented this session.

## **The Zip Code Project**

At the Arizona Department of Education, I have implemented a program to target assistance to disconnected youth in the highest need zip codes in Arizona. This project, envisioned by my predecessor, is now seeing fruition.

Disconnected youth are teenagers that are neither attending school nor working. Their futures are often bleak and they lack the supports needed to succeed. Early interventions to reengage these children in school can save an entire generation that we have largely ignored.

The Zip Code Project leverages public-private partnerships to identify, fund and implement solutions for these children so that they can get back on a path for a successful, happy and productive life.

## **Title 15 Working Group**

Our education code over time has vastly grown as many of you have seen firsthand. I strongly support more funding for Arizona's classrooms. One way to do that is to free up existing resources by making sure our schools avoid spending vital funds on unnecessary burdens and outdated statutory provisions. Just as deregulation of business works, so does deregulation of all our schools. Both traditional public schools along with public charter schools should be given as much flexibility as prudent so that we can reduce administrative costs and increase classroom resources.

To achieve this goal, I created the Title 15 Working Group. The working group is comprised of a team of unpaid public volunteers. None of the members are lobbyists, representatives of organizations, or employees of the Department.

The members have diverse expertise and knowledge of Arizona's K-12 education system and have met over the past year to come up with deregulation proposals to help remove outdated sections of statute. Every year I intend to have this review.

The Working Group presented the findings from their first year of work in early December and staff at the Department has since worked to draft proposed legislation. We will work with you this session to put their recommendations into place.

## **Closing Remarks**

As we look to accomplish so much this year for education, it is also important to look back. In particular, I would like to share an article from the Arizona Republican. Yes, you heard that correctly, the Republican. It was published on June 14, 1920.

The article, which was recently brought to light by one of our state's retired history teachers, proudly noted that Arizona had been named the third best education system in the nation. And how was it that Arizona achieved such a high ranking among its peers?

The answer is simple. To quote the article, "When the eastern states and coast states paid very low salaries to teachers Arizona paid big salaries....Arizona's standard of men and women demanded the best, regardless of the cost."

I heard that exact same commitment from Arizona voters on my tours last year.

I said last January that we were at a turning point in Arizona's education journey. I know that Arizona's people and leaders have what it takes to keep us on the path to excellence. It will be no small effort, but as a state we must rise to the occasion.

Last year in Appropriations we were asked how the state could afford to properly fund education without tax increases. We made clear that good fiscal policy would grow us out of our problems and that I will never support tax increases. I once again commend the Legislature and the Governor for establishing a sound fiscal policy. The results have already been dramatic and exceeded expectations.

We need the federal government to give back much of our land to bolster our state land trust revenues. In addition, as the General Fund revenues grow with the economy, I ask each of you to remember that out of all the things you decide to spend money upon, nothing is more vital than the education of our children.

By bringing the proposals in *Arizona Kids Can't Afford to Wait!* to life, we will:

- Encourage great classroom teachers to choose Arizona and stay here by providing them with the funding and support they need;
- Use data to empower parents and teachers while protecting student privacy and creating a positive return on investment for our state; and
- Ensure we are giving all children equal access to an excellent education, regardless of where they live.

This state has proven it can be a leader in the past, is doing many great things now and together we will make it a national leader in the future.

The purpose of Arizona's education system should not be simply to create a long line of college applicants and worker bees. Our children are not a source of human capital that exists only to feed the economy. They are our heritage and their education should prepare them to keep bright the flames of the torch of liberty and preserve the Republic for future generations.

We must focus on creating a well-educated populace of informed citizens with the knowledge and skills to make their own decisions and pursue their own dreams, God-given talents and aspirations.

I know you stand with me when I say we must not tire in our efforts. Our children are our most precious gifts from God. We must put them first. They deserve nothing less.

It is my privilege to work with all of you. Thank you again for this opportunity.

May God continue to bless the great State of Arizona and the United States of America.