



VIA E-MAIL

July 19, 2022

The Honorable Doug Ducey, Governor
The Honorable Karen Fann, Senate President
The Honorable Russell Bowers, Speaker of the House
The Honorable Rebecca Rios, Senate Minority Leader
The Honorable Reginald Bolding, House Minority Leader
1700 West Washington Street
Phoenix, AZ 85007

Dear Fellow State Leaders,

Last month, like many Arizonans, I was pleased by the passage of a historic bipartisan state budget. Along with school leaders, parents, educators, and students across the state, I am grateful for the investments made in K12 education. I applaud the work that went into such a budget and was proud to support its passage. Each of you deserves thanks for this success.

Like all sectors of our economy, public schools are competing for job seekers in a historically tight labor market. As you know, our state also faces a dire teacher shortage that has only worsened year over year. School leaders report an 'unprecedented' situation¹ as they prepare for this school year. And while the historic infusion of education funding in this year's budget promises to help school leaders recruit and retain educators, I am increasingly concerned about the unresolved aggregate expenditure limit (AEL) issue.

As was the case earlier this year, before the Legislature suspended the cap for one year, this antiquated policy once again threatens to derail districts' plans to spend the funding appropriated in this year's budget. District leaders are wary of overcommitting funds to provide educators with desperately needed pay increases without knowing if they will have the authority to spend the dollars throughout the school year.

These fears appear to be well founded, with a senior lawmaker recently threatening to go to 'war' with public school districts and force existential budget cuts on them if a citizen-driven referendum on the Empowerment Scholarship Account expansion is successful.² I would note that 80% of Arizona students attend public district schools, and parents across our state make this choice even though hundreds of thousands of students were eligible for an ESA before the recently passed expansion.

¹ <https://www.12news.com/article/news/education/arizona-school-districts-in-mad-scramble-hire-teachers-spending-cap-goes-unsolved/75-1393623c-04be-444c-ba30-f8bc7e8edf0b>

² <https://www.12news.com/article/news/politics/arizona-lawmaker-threatens-school-funding-war/75-e02e4e4f-e60d-4208-8f43-821539d0efb6>



The Department is actively working on implementation plans for HB2853 should it take effect in September, but the educational choice made by the parents of 80% of our state's students must not be jeopardized because of ongoing political debates.

The AEL is an overly technical policy relic enacted by voters over forty years ago before charter schools existed or classrooms had computers. In 2022, it serves no legitimate purpose. In fact, 88% of Arizonans now support teacher raises, and 82% support increased public school funding.³ And district schools alone are subject to the policy, yet another reason to scrap it altogether.

School leaders and educators are hard at work preparing for the new school year so they can support the continued academic recovery of students after the past few tumultuous years. Passing a budget in June only to make district leaders turn around and fight for the authority to spend appropriated monies because of an outdated and unfair policy is a waste of everyone's time – time that would be better spent supporting Arizona's students, educators, and families.

As district leaders warned earlier this year, if schools are ultimately forced to make budget cuts because of the AEL during the upcoming school year, it will mean closed schools and teacher layoffs – students and families will be harmed. These cuts would be felt even more acutely in our rural counties where school districts serve as major employers. And the blame for these cuts will lie with lawmakers, not school leaders simply attempting to spend the funding appropriated to their schools last month.

I urge each of you to repudiate talk of retaliatory budget cuts, schedule a special legislative session as soon as possible to resolve this issue in the short-term, and refer a permanent repeal of the AEL to the 2024 ballot for voters to have the final say.

I look forward to your prompt attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,

Kathy Hoffman, MS, CCC-SLP
Superintendent of Public Instruction

³<https://www.arizonafuture.org/the-arizona-we-want/arizona-voters-agenda/#anchorEducation>