

STATE OF EDUCATION SPEECH 2024

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Over the past year, everyone in the Department of Education has been working very hard and very intensely. We have one overriding goal: to raise the academic performance of the students. Everything else is minor compared to that.

We have passed out a list of 16 initiatives that we have begun in the past year. I am involved in every initiative, so I also have been working hard on this. They are not in any order of importance. The sheet is two-sided. I will speak about 7 and then you can ask me about any others that you are interested in, or anything else about education obviously.

1. Teacher Retention

The first I will speak about is number nine on your list, teacher retention and recruitment.

This is by far the biggest and most urgent problem that we have. Currently, we have 60,000 teachers in our classrooms. 8,000 of them are leaving each year. Our educator preparation programs, including schools of education, produce 1,900 per year that actually show up in our classrooms. 2,815 teachers also return to the classrooms. That is a net loss of about 2,300 per year. If that trend were to continue, it would eventually lead to zero teachers. In the meantime, with our current teacher shortage, which under current trends would grow substantially, unfilled teachers' places have to be taken by others, such as long term substitutes with no training. We found one school where all teachers in first grade, where students learn to read, were long term substitutes. To properly teach reading requires a high level of training.

Many of those students will probably not learn to read in first grade. Research shows that, if not, they will still be struggling in 4th grade.

With the trend I described, more and more of our students would be taught by teachers who were not fully trained. If we do nothing to reverse this trend, this could be a major catastrophe for our students and our economy, that needs a skilled work force.

I can tell you the two things we can do to prevent this from happening.

The first one obviously is salary. In the private sector, if a company cannot get the skilled workers that it needs, it is forced by the marketplace to raise salaries. That is the way the private sector works. We need to deal with this public sector crisis as people in the private sector are required to do, to meet an emergency in the private sector.

This is the reason I supported a 10% pay raise for teachers last legislative session, and now supporting the proposal of majority leadership to raise teachers' salaries. Further adjustments will need to be made in future years to reach market equalization, as would be true in the private sector.

The second thing we must do is equally important. In the Department of Education, we polled teachers who had left teaching. We gave them choices for why they left teaching. They could agree with more than one, so the percentages add up to more than 100%. 67% gave salary as one of the reasons. That is obvious.

But a close 61% agreed or strongly agreed with a second reason "I was not supported in the area of student behavior, and discipline".

I believe this is not a problem of the administrators but of school boards that instruct them to be lenient.

In my state of education speech last year, I read to you a letter from a teacher who was told to F off when she asked a student to do her work. The teacher called administration, and they told her to use social emotional learning. Then she was told to document restorative justice. Neither of those two things create a disincentive to misbehavior.

Students want boundaries. But if they see one student getting away with misbehavior, they all start to do it. Students cannot learn in that atmosphere. Working conditions for the teacher become impossible. I would leave teaching if I had to work under those conditions. We have a really serious problem with some of the administrators and school boards in this state, as conclusively demonstrated in the survey.

My top priority for you, because it deals with our most urgent and possibly catastrophic problem, is the following proposed bill: district offices are to be required to keep records of when teachers asked principals for discipline, and whether or not the principals supported the teachers. If the percentage of supporting teachers is less than 75% without a reasonable explanation in an appeal process, the school shall lose 1 level in A-F grades.

This is strong medicine, but it is needed to prevent the catastrophic hemorrhage of teachers continuing. Some people may have a philosophical problem with this remedy. But we will furnish the survey to anyone who is interested to see that it is absolutely necessary.

2. Career Technical Education.

Let's move onto a more cheerful topic. We are undertaking a major expansion of our career technical education program ("CTE"), what used to be called vocational education, to be sure that every student graduates either college or career ready.

This state has a very large number of great companies. But business leaders tell me that the biggest problem we have is that we are hampered by a shortage of skilled workers.

Raising academics will enable more students to go to college. But not everyone will go to college.

We organized a commission called the Arizona Education Economic Commission. We entered into an agreement with the leaders of the major companies in our state: we will provide the skilled workers. In return, the businesses will either teach our career technical education teachers what skills to teach or will provide people to teach those skills.

We started with a core group of 20 industry leaders from this state's largest corporations. Examples of members of this group include TSMC, the Taiwanese company that produces semiconductors, and is making a \$41 billion investment in Arizona; Banner health, Arizona's largest employer; Raytheon, one of the world's largest aerospace and defense contractors; U-Haul international, one of the world's largest logistics and transportation companies; and Lucid motors, one of the nation's largest electric vehicle manufacturers.

Also, participating are all 14 of our state's career technical education districts, and Phoenix union, which is its own career technical education district.

We are now opening up the benefits of this initiative to all companies, provided that they can have a group of companies in the same industry to form a committee.

When I last held this office, between 2003 and 2011, we combined the CTE standards with the academic standards. As a result, the reading proficiency rate is 6% above the other students, their math proficiency rate is 6-1/2% above the other students, and their graduation rate is 94.9%, compared to 74% of other students.

Many CTE students go on to college, using the skills that they have learned to help work their way through.

With the enthusiastic support of all of Arizona's major industries, this Department of Education is going to solve Arizona's shortage of sufficiently skilled workers.

3. Improvement Teams

The next initiative is item 1, improvement teams.

After I had been elected, but before I took office, I received an email from a consultant who specializes in failing schools. He told me that the failing schools had had no help in years. He said that the Department of Education had sat in judgment on the schools but did nothing to help them. The mission statement that we adopted when I took office was that the Department of Education is a service organization dedicated to raising academic outcomes and to empower parents. So, as a service organization, I felt we had to do a major push to help the schools.

I revived a practice we had when I was last superintendent of school: improvement teams. These consist of highly qualified teachers and administrators to go out to help the schools. We have completed 1453 site visits to struggling schools. Much more is to come. These visits included classroom walk-throughs; meetings with principals, teachers, and other staff; improvement planning sessions; leadership coaching; professional development; and other supports.

The school improvement system that appears to be the most successful, based on what schools increase their letter grades the most, and maintained the higher grades, is called project momentum. Project momentum works with school leaders and teachers to develop the skills, leadership, and focus necessary to ensure student outcomes improve. In the schools that have been served so far in Arizona, schools have improved their proficiency scores by more than two times the state average in

English, and more than three times the state average in math. By the end of last year, we had 80 schools implementing project momentum. This year we hope to double that number.

4. Leadership Training

The next initiative is number two, in addition to Project Momentum, another initiative for leadership training.

There is an old saying, show me a good school, and I will show you a good leader. In fact, I know of districts that used to be outstanding, but when their leader retired, their test scores declined substantially.

George Washington has said he would rather have an army of lambs led by a lion than an army of lions, led by a lamb.

We have a separate division devoted to leadership training. Last year, more than 900 school leaders attended in person training. That number will continue to grow. We would ask at the end of the training if they would recommend these trainings to a colleague and 100% of participants answered yes.

5. Paperwork Reduction.

Also related to school improvement is Initiative 14: reducing unnecessary paperwork, so that school staff could concentrate more on educating students. For example, schools in Title I must fill out a form called a comprehensive needs assessment. Over the years, whenever the department needed more information, instead of doing it with an email, they added more questions to the comprehensive needs assessment.

We reversed this. We reduced the number of questions in that form from 154 to 20. This leaves more time for school staff to focus on what they should be focused on: improving academic performance.

Also, to obtain Federal and state grants, schools had to fill out complex budget narratives. A number of schools passed on money available, because the forms were too burdensome. We simplified the forms so the schools will get that money to increase academic performance.

In addition, kindergarten teachers were burdened with a crazy reading readiness test that took 45 minutes per student. We reduced this by 80% so the teachers could spend their time teaching the students.

6. School Safety

The next initiative is number 12, school safety. My nightmare is that a maniac will walk into a school and kill 20 kids, as has happened in other states, and there is no police officer there to protect the students or the staff. If this were to happen, the parents would never recover for the rest of their lives. If they found out that the school could have had a police officer there to protect the students, and the district leadership decided not to, you can imagine how they would feel about that decision making. I have advocated vigorously for more schools to hire school safety officers that we pay for from your appropriation. We have increased the number from 190 to 301 schools.

The legislation that you passed enables schools to choose state funding for school resource officers or mental health professionals. We were able to continue funding all the 565 previously awarded school counselor/social worker positions.

7. Data

The last initiative I will talk about before opening to questions is number 18, compiling and publicizing data, to bring about higher academics.

What you see on the screen is called a scatter diagram. From left to right is increased poverty as measured by free and reduced lunches. From the lower part to

the higher part shows increased math proficiency. There is a separate diagram for reading and writing proficiency.

These diagrams are on our website and available to anyone who is interested. Just click it from the list of hot topics on the front page of our website (Azed.gov). Each dot is a School. If you click on a dot, you get full information on the school. That part is not finished but you can put in the name of the school and get the information. This gives us important information. For example, this dot is Ash Fork Elementary School, and with 80% free and reduced lunch, and almost 50% Hispanic, had 66% math proficiency compared to the state average of 33%. These kinds of statistics show us that poverty is not an excuse, and poor students can learn just as well as richer students if properly taught.

The vertical columns all have about the same poverty rate. Those schools that are dots at the bottom should consult with those schools whose dots are at the top with about the same poverty rate, to get ideas about how they could increase their proficiency rate.

This is an example of how this kind of data, which is now available to the full public, should help increase our overall academic proficiency if used properly.

Also, we need to do a much better job of preparing students to be capable of college work. The national average for people with at least a 4-year college degree is 46%. The Arizona average is 30%. If not corrected, this will disadvantage our economy.

For these reasons my second highest priority of the bills we are requesting from you is the following: to graduate, a student must either receive a reasonable score on the ACT test, that all students take, or alternatively, be certified for a skill in career, technical education. If the student chooses the ACT option, they would have four chances to take the test. The score would be high enough to motivate

students to study, but not so high that it prevents students who are willing to study from being able to graduate. But no one should be prevented from graduating.

That was the experience we had with the AIMS test between 2002 and 2011. Relying on course grades does not work because some teachers are pressured to pass students whether they learn anything or not. One element of proof of this is high schools that have reading teachers because students went through 8 full years of school in elementary and middle school and still cannot read. Can you imagine that? During my first eight years as State Superintendent of Schools, I got to know superintendents from other states pretty well. The smartest was from Ohio. She taught me something I never forgot. She taught me that there are three important elements to a quality education: first, the quality of teacher and teacher leaders; second, the quality of curriculum; and third, the motivation of the students. We often forget about that all important third factor. So, when I left office and the requirement to pass the AIMS test was eliminated, teachers would ask the students to do well on the test, because the teachers would be judged by, and the students would say, why should I? Teachers reported to me that students left early or doodled on the answer sheets rather than answering the questions. We must restore the motivation for students to study. The motivation to study will serve the students well for their futures and will restore the credibility of high school diplomas among employers. Thank you.

I am happy to take your questions.