

my perspective on: education

Expecting more for a strong Arizona

BY PAUL J. LUNA



As the chairman of Expect More Arizona and a native Arizonan, I am both optimistic and concerned about the future of our great state. I am optimistic that Arizona will continue to be recognized for its natural scenic beauty, incredible climate and the passionate spirit of its people. My concerns, however, are rooted in our long-term ability to develop the kind of talented individuals and diverse industry that will fuel our economy and improve our overall quality of life.

Over the past year we have faced tough economic times as individuals and a state. We have had to make difficult decisions about our limited resources, often cutting corners where little to no corners remain. Arizona's educational system has been one of those places, with more cuts projected throughout 2010.

Although it's difficult to see beyond the current economic crisis, for the long-term good of Arizona, we must. Education is the best investment in our future and it desperately needs to rise in priority in our state. And that means it needs to become a priority for all of us.

The benefits of a strong education system have a far-reaching effect. Young children enter school ready to succeed; students successfully transition from one grade level to the next, prepare for college and ultimately graduate to begin their journey into rewarding careers. We also know that where a strong education system exists, there is more often a skilled and knowledgeable workforce, innovation and market leadership.

Arizona's education challenges began long before the current budget situation and extend beyond simply dollars and cents. National and international comparisons show that Arizona students are falling behind

their peers in academic performance, high school graduation rates and postsecondary degree attainment. Comparative rankings and indicators consistently reinforce that across the education continuum – from birth through career – we are failing to fully prepare our children to succeed academically, much less in today's global economy.

The recently released State of Latino Arizona report by Arizona State University and the Arizona Latino Research Enterprise reinforces that Latinos are a growing force in our state, now constituting 30 percent of the state's population. It also highlights that our students are at even greater risk of falling behind in the global race. In fact, statistics show that only 59 percent of Hispanic males and 70 percent of Hispanic females in Arizona are completing high school, compared with 78 percent of white males and 85 percent of white females.

In order to change our current course, we must raise the bar higher for all students, including young Latinos, and collectively work to achieve the highest standards as students, parents, educators, business leaders, policymakers and concerned Arizonans.

Some of the solutions to Arizona's education woes include increased standards, rigorous and relevant curriculum, more high-quality teachers, competitive levels of investment, highly engaged parents and communities, and unwavering advocates in our legislature. Arizona has the potential to have an education system that is recognized as a model of excellence, but it will take dedication and persistence to get there. It will take expecting more.

Expect More Arizona is a statewide movement of Arizonans working to make education the state's top priority by keeping it top of mind with every Arizonan. It is different than any other effort in our state because it focuses on the importance of the entire education continuum: early learning, K-12 and postsecondary.

Nonpolitical and nonpartisan, Expect More Arizona's priority over the next year is to motivate more Arizonans to get actively involved in strengthening education for all students and at all levels of education. Involvement comes in many forms, such as volunteering in local schools or at education-supporting nonprofit organizations; being a voice for education by writing to editors, calling policymakers and joining advocacy groups; writing a check to support educational programs, and perhaps most importantly during this election year, voting for people, programs and policies that prioritize education.

"The Arizona We Want," a Gallup Poll commissioned by the Center for the Future of Arizona, clearly conveyed that Arizonans care about education in our state and want to see it effectively preparing our students to compete and succeed in the knowledge-based workforce of the future. As a people, we also understand the importance of education in keeping Arizona's economy diverse, competitive and robust long term.

With a better understanding about Arizonans' stand on education, it is now up to groups like Expect More Arizona to galvanize the pride Arizonans have for our state and their interest in making it even better by having them focus on the most powerful investment we can make – ensuring our children are effectively prepared to succeed in college, career and life.

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