



July 15, 2016

Mr. Jim Swanson, Chair
Classrooms First Initiative Council
Governor's Office of Education
1700 W. Washington
Phoenix, Arizona 85007

Dear Classrooms First Initiative Council:

Arizona Schools Now appreciates the opportunity to provide this input into the important work you are doing to recommend changes to the Arizona school finance formula. Arizona Schools Now is a coalition of organizations representing parents, teachers and citizens from across Arizona formed to advocate for the next steps for public education funding. In that regard, we will be very engaged in the work that you are doing because it has the potential to so significantly impact the future of public education in Arizona.

We have reviewed the various proposals that have been submitted for your consideration and members of our group have attended your previous meetings. Our feedback in this letter is based upon that information that has already been presented to you, as well as additional recommendations that we would like you to consider.

The fundamental message we ask you to adopt as you continue your work is that Arizona's school finance formula cannot be effective without including significant additional revenue for public education. It is simply not feasible to adopt a new school finance formula that is equitable and fair without ensuring additional revenue is available for every Arizona public school, district and charter. While we agree that the current funding formula can be improved, it is the inadequate amount of revenue invested, combined with the fact that the existing formula has not been fully funded in recent years, that causes the most strain for Arizona's public schools. The current discussions you are having would have been much different prior to 2008 when schools were receiving funding for classroom support, excess utilities, full day kindergarten, building maintenance, textbooks and technology that they are no longer receiving today. To disregard the impact of those cuts or to neglect to fill the revenue gap from those lost resources, will result in a school funding formula that is neither equitable nor fair.

We believe that one of the most significant steps that needs to be taken to make the school finance formula more equitable and fair is to provide an additional funding weight for students based on poverty. As you have already heard, there is substantial evidence to show how poverty impacts a student's ability to achieve academic success. Students in poverty typically face barriers relating to transportation, housing, and levels of support in their communities and families for which additional resources are needed to help them achieve success. Adding a B-weighting for students in poverty is an important and needed change to our current funding formula.

We also support the implementation of fair, stable, statewide structures to pay for additional investments needed and provide district and charter schools equal access to total revenues per students. A statewide property tax, which has been discussed, is one example of a structure that could contribute to this, ensuring taxpayers in different geographic areas of the state are not disproportionately burdened in generating those revenues. We also ask you to look at maintaining some options for those school districts whose voters are willing to tax themselves to go over and beyond what the state funding provides.

Finally, we ask you to more thoroughly question and consider whether a school funding formula that includes an "achievement weight" is consistent with your goal of a formula that is equitable and fair. The "achievement weight" approach suggests that lower performing schools should not receive the higher level of funding because they are somehow not working as hard to educate their students. But, as you have discussed, there are many other barriers to success that districts and charters face based on their geography and student characteristics.

Certainly, our system should facilitate school improvement and efforts to replicate, if possible, best practices that the higher achieving schools are utilizing to achieve their results. But if the higher performing schools need greater funding because of the "time and talent required to reach excellence," then it follows that the lower performing schools will need that same level of funding, if not more, in order to replicate the success. With an achievement weight, we will only be creating an uneven playing field and greater distance between the high performing and low performing schools, and it will be the students who attend the low performing schools who will suffer the consequences. It is hard to see how such an achievement weight promotes equity or expands excellence. We believe the dollars would be better invested in other ways.

We appreciate the thoughtful and collaborative approach that you have taken to get to this point. As you continue, we hope that you will continue to seek robust input from the public. We look forward to the opportunity to further engage with you in this work that is so important to the future of Arizona.

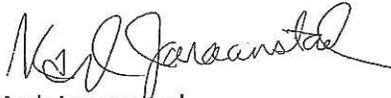
Sincerely,



Dick Foreman
President and CEO
Arizona Business & Education Coalition



Joseph H. Thomas
President
Arizona Education Association



Mark Joraanstad
Executive Director
Arizona School Administrators Association



Kathy Knecht
President
Arizona School Boards Association



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Christine Marsh
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Dana Wolfe Naimark
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Rev. Martha Seaman
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Dr. Jennifer Johnson
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