

Educating Arizona

Assessing Our Education System (Birth–Grade 12)

Our challenges ... and opportunities

Arizona is a young, vibrant and diverse state with great potential. We enjoy a spirit of optimism, a beautiful physical environment and a dynamic population. More than most states — indeed more than most nations — Arizona is poised to thrive in the fast-paced 21st century. But to get there, we will need an education system that accomplishes what no other state has done: ensures that all of our children and youth succeed in school and are prepared to succeed in life.

A high school degree alone is no longer sufficient to assure a middle-class income. Nationally, more than two-thirds of *all* new jobs will require some level of postsecondary education — college, technical prep, apprenticeships or military training. In Arizona, about 85 percent of *high-growth, high-wage* jobs between now and 2013 will require at least a two-

year college degree. These are the kinds of prosperity-creating jobs the state wants to attract and retain. Fewer than 2 percent of these jobs will be open to applicants who do not have at least a high school diploma.

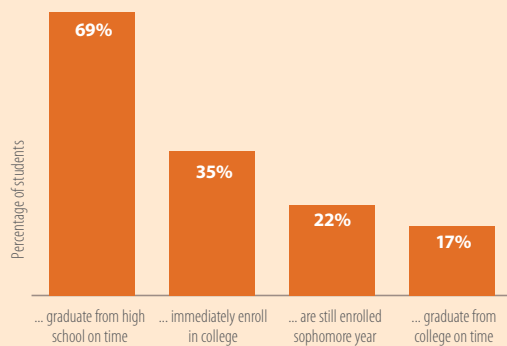
Compare these new economic realities with Arizona's educational reality. On too many academic measures, we are in the bottom tier of states, while the United States itself is falling behind many other nations. Just as significant, Arizona compares unfavorably on most system indicators that explain the conditions under which our children, especially low-income children, are being taught: inadequate early childhood learning opportunities; difficult conditions for teaching and leadership, especially in certain locales; standards that fall short of what business and university leaders say are required for success; and a funding system that spends less per student than 48 other states.

The good news is that we can fix these conditions, and there are promising signs that we are starting to do so. Arizona also has many advantages that other states and nations only dream about. While other states are losing jobs, closing schools and shutting factories, we are adding them. Other states and nations are just beginning to confront the demographic, social and cultural challenges that are commonplace to us. Our pioneering legacy should serve us well going forward.

Step one is to be clear about where we are ... and to recognize what it will take to prepare all children for a future of excellent choices and boundless opportunities.

Only 17 percent of Arizona's 9th-graders graduate from college on time

Of every 100 Arizona 9th-graders, the percentage who ...



Source: The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems Information Center for State Higher Education Policy and Analysis, 2003–04



Arizona's Student Performance and System Conditions at a Glance




Student Performance

Elementary School — Reading	Based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 24 percent of our 4th-graders are “proficient” in reading, which is in the bottom tier of states (46th). Although grade 4 Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) scores have moved in the right direction, only 67 percent of students meet or exceed reading standards, and our minority and English language learners (ELL) remain 20 to 30 percentage points behind the state averages. Nearly 6 in 10 low-income students are “below basic” on NAEP.	
Elementary School — Math	Thirty-one percent of our 4th grade students are “proficient” on the NAEP math test, placing us 43rd nationally. More than three quarters of our 4th-graders — 76 percent — meet or exceed standards based on the AIMS tests. Again, gaps among student groups are large on both tests. On NAEP, 4 in 10 low-income students score “below basic.”	
Middle School — Reading	Twenty-four percent of our 8th-graders are “proficient” in reading on NAEP (42nd nationally). On the grade 8 AIMS reading tests, 65 percent of all students meet state standards. As in elementary school, gaps among student groups often exceed 20 percentage points. Half or more of Hispanic, Native American and low-income students score “below basic” on the NAEP. More than 8 in 10 ELL students score “below basic.”	
Middle School — Math	Although 26 percent of our students are “proficient” on the NAEP math test in grade 8 (38th nationally), our students are closer to the national average (31 percent proficient) than in any other grade and subject. On the AIMS grade 8 math test, 62 percent of students meet state standards. As in other grades and subjects, gaps are large.	
High School	Only about 7 in 10 of Arizona's students graduate from high school in four years, and disproportionately fewer minority students do so, which is about average among U.S. states. Only 60–70 percent initially pass the AIMS tests required to graduate. Fewer than half of graduates are eligible for college admission, only about one-third go on to college, and high percentages of college freshmen must enroll in low-level courses — all similar to national averages. Although scores on college entrance and Advanced Placement tests are comparatively high, participation is much lower than national averages.	

System Conditions

Standards and Accountability	<p>High expectations are at the heart of a quality state education system. Generally, we receive high grades for our academic content standards, but graduation requirements are low and not aligned to college or work standards. Passing scores on the state tests were lowered in 2005, so our accountability system is based on student expectations that are not particularly high compared to other states' tests. Working toward a P=20 system has potential.</p>	
Teaching Quality	<p>To help students achieve high standards, carefully constructed curricula must be taught by highly effective teachers. The National Center on Teaching Quality gives Arizona an "unsatisfactory" grade overall, with a mix of Cs and Ds and an F for preparing special education teachers. Arizona has comparatively high percentages of teachers on waivers and teachers teaching out of their field. Shortages are particularly acute in urban and rural areas and on or near reservations. Teacher preparation programs could be more rigorous and better reflect our changing population's learning needs. Professional development is inadequately supported, and we have low salaries and many novice teachers.</p>	
Leadership and Governance	<p>Research also shows that teachers cannot do a highly effective job unless they work with strong leadership, which requires outstanding principals and administrators. We need a better understanding of Arizona's conditions for school leadership. Currently there are projects under way but no strategic statewide plan. Our governing structures are complex and could affect leaders' ability to create excellent schooling conditions.</p>	<p><i>Inadequate state and national data</i></p>
School Choice	<p>While the standards are constant, a one-size-fits-all approach won't work for all students or families, so multiple choices are necessary to spur innovation within the system. Our choices are plentiful; we are a national leader in the percentage of students attending charter schools. However, there are persistent concerns about program quality and the adequacy of program oversight.</p>	
Public School Finance	<p>Funding — as long as it is spent efficiently — is critical to attracting and retaining great teachers and leaders, offering sufficient choices and providing the multiple instructional supports students need to reach the standards. Only two states spend less annually per pupil on school operations than Arizona — about \$2,500 less than the national average.</p>	

The color of the circle describes Arizona's current performance, compared to other states.

-  Arizona is among the top 10 states.
-  Arizona is among the middle 30 states.
-  Arizona is among the bottom 10 states.

Recommendations

Although too many of Arizona's current performance indicators reflect significant room for improvement, a critical mass of forces are aligning to strengthen the state's schools. The work of the Governor's P-20 Council to promote lifelong learning and align all elements of our educational systems, and the Superintendent of Public Instruction's recent announcement to increase instructional time and create individual graduation plans, could pay significant dividends.

Building on this momentum, we recommend additional actions in seven primary areas. New public investments likely will be required, but when spent well, the returns will make the quality of life and the strength of Arizona's economy the envy of the world. Going forward, Arizona should:

1. Implement internationally competitive academic standards and comparably aligned curricula. Move from a system that advances students based on age and time spent to one in which demonstrated mastery of subject matter is the determining factor for promotion.
2. Refine and improve teacher preparation, and elevate the status and compensation of teachers. Link pay to performance, and provide relevant and effective professional development. Create pay differentials to attract teachers into high-needs districts and high-needs subjects.
3. Enhance the quality of training, and increase compensation for administrative leaders, from building principals to district superintendents.
4. Improve the quality of our state's charter schools through greater accountability and transparency.
5. Strengthen the school financing system by addressing demonstrated needs and insisting on measurable results. Creative approaches for allocating resources are needed, in particular, to ensure that students from low-income families receive greater support.
6. Create a needs-based tuition assistance program to dramatically increase the number of college students. Providing increased postsecondary opportunities is essential for the state to meet the increasing demands for a more highly educated workforce critical to the 21st century economy.
7. Develop common performance metrics from early childhood through postsecondary education to ensure that everyone is clear about expectations and held accountable for agreed-upon results. Such agreements are all the more important given the state's diffuse system of education governance.

Beginning with changes such as these, we can help our young people get the education that they deserve and that our state's well-being requires. We encourage Arizona's civic leaders, philanthropic community and general public to learn more about what is working well in education and also to ask questions about where we fall short and how we'll know when we're making progress.

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