Virtually all Arizonans agree on the need for high educational achievement among the state’s residents. Progress has been made recently, but too slowly in the eyes of many.

Public opinion polls in Arizona and across the nation repeatedly cite education as one of residents’ leading concerns. Academic studies identify educational achievement as indispensable to a state’s economic and social well-being. Political and business leaders regularly name it as their top priority. In fact, no issue is more in the limelight than K-12 and postsecondary education, or has as great an impact on the state’s treasury. Together, K-12 and higher education account for nearly 60% of state General Fund spending.

In the past decade or so, Arizona has launched many policy initiatives in response to continuing calls for greater achievement at all levels. The initiatives include, among others:

> K-12 Academic Content Standards
> A high-stakes test for high school graduation
> Strong support for charter schools
> Pay increases for teachers
> Training for all teachers in working with students with limited English skills

State-funded all-day kindergarten, beginning with 130 low-income schools, is one of the latest policies aimed at improving education in Arizona. In addition, arts education is back in the spotlight with new investments available to school districts.
Yet many measures show how far the state still has to go. For example, its elementary class sizes remain among the nation’s highest; its 4th-grade students are ranked 40th among the states on the national NAEP reading test; its high school students are almost last among the states for going on to college; and – regardless of how one calculates it – an alarming number of students drop out of school each year. To further complicate matters, a recent report by the Arizona Education Policy Initiative, a collaborative effort among Arizona’s three public universities, found that the state has inadequate data and tracking systems even to judge whether reform policies are working.

**Tough Assignments from a Changing Population**

The tasks facing Arizona’s public schools are substantial. Arizona’s State Superintendent of Public Instruction reported that, in 2003, 51% of the state’s K-12 public school students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches – a standard indicator of disadvantage. Approximately half of the state’s K-12 students (49%) come from minority groups, which suffer disproportionately from low incomes and poor preparation. Sixteen percent of elementary and secondary students were “English language learners” in 2003. Spanish is the most prevalent native language other than English, but as many as 43 languages are spoken by Arizona students. According to a 2002 U.S. Department of Education survey, Arizona ranks second only to California in the percentage of teachers who reported working with students who had little or no proficiency in English. To meet students’ many needs, Arizona has emphasized before- and after-school programs and is ranked 8th in the nation for the number of elementary schools providing such support, according to NCES data for 1999-2000.

Despite some tough assignments, Arizona’s test scores on the standardized “Stanford 9” tests have been improving. Third grade students, for example, climbed from below average nationally in math, reading, and language in 1999 to above average.
average for all three in 2003. Eighth grade students did even better, achieving 60th percentile scores in math and language. The Stanford 9 test is due to be replaced in 2005, according to the Arizona Department of Education.

A Taste for Innovation

Arizona has made charter schools a centerpiece of its efforts to improve education and provide parents with school options. The state’s nearly 500 charter schools put Arizona first in the nation. In the nation’s first major effort to examine the entities that authorize charter schools, Arizona also fares well. Among 24 states reporting in a study by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and Morrison Institute for Public Policy, Arizona ranked 3rd on measures of the “policy environment” or the support for and accountability of charter schools and “authorizer practices,” including such activities as application processes and performance contracts.

Arizona and School Drop Outs

The high number of Arizona students who quit school has made the drop out problem one of the state’s most visible, and critical, education issues. However, there is no nationally uniform way of counting drop outs. Some states, including Arizona, consider children drop outs even if they earn a GED; other states do not. States also differ in how they count departing students whose whereabouts are unknown, and those who drop out in the summer. Three calculation methods are used most often: the annual method, the pool or status method, and the cohort method.
The annual dropout method counts enrolled students who fail to complete the school year (and students enrolled last year who failed to enroll this year) but did not transfer, graduate, or die. This figure, prepared by the U.S. Department of Education, assigns Arizona the nation’s highest dropout rate.

The pool or status method counts the proportion of teenagers in a state’s population who are neither enrolled in school nor high school graduates. Census 2000 ranked Arizona as 2nd highest in the nation using this method.

The cohort method – used in No Child Left Behind – measures the proportion of a class of students who enrolled in 9th grade in a given year but who were not enrolled and had not graduated four years later. The Arizona Department of Education reports that Arizona’s 4-year graduation rate has hovered around 71% in recent years, and reported it at 72.7% for the class of 2002 – although this number did not include 10.9% of students classified as “status unknown.” The National Center for Education Statistics reported that Arizona had a completion rate of 68.3% for the school year 2000-2001, second lowest after Louisiana, although not all states were included in that count.

All of these measures have flaws, and their shortcomings make comparisons among states difficult. As noted in The Condition of Education in Arizona, 2004 published by the Arizona Education Policy Initiative, the drop out question is just one of many that must ultimately be answered by “we don’t have the data.” Arizona may be doing better than it appears, or not. The firmest conclusion to be drawn is that Arizona’s drop out rate, whatever its true ranking among states, is too high.

Numerous organizations, such as the Center for the Future of Arizona, have taken that reality to heart and begun to work aggressively on increasing graduation rates.

**College Experiences**

Arizona’s tuition levels for public universities and community colleges remain relatively low, ranking 36th for public 4-year institutions and 47th for public 2-year entities, according to the 2004 edition of Measuring Up from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

Once Arizona’s students get to college, what happens? Graduation rates are similar for Arizona’s public universities and community colleges – slightly under 50% for each. This rate places Arizona’s universities below average for graduation at 32nd (6-year rate), but it ranks Arizona’s community colleges 3rd overall in the nation (3-year rate). It’s important to note that many students attend community colleges for...
important reasons other than obtaining an associate degree. This accounts in part for the difference in ranking between universities and community colleges.

In recent years, the vital roles Arizona’s colleges and universities play in the development of a competitive knowledge economy have become evident. As a result, Arizona’s government and public universities have made significant investments in science and technology research as well as commitments to increase the number of Arizonans with knowledge economy skills. In 2002, the 417 science and engineering doctorates granted by Arizona universities put the state 19th, based on number awarded. That same year, academic research and development dollars at Arizona’s universities on a per capita basis yielded a ranking of 36th.

Policy Choices Here and Now

Arizona’s educational system must respond and react to policy decisions made at all levels, from campuses and school boards to state and federal agencies to the White House. It also must respond to the market, because education is synonymous with economic development, both in preparing resident workforce and attracting and retaining the talented, creative people vital to a competitive knowledge economy. Leaders in many sectors have questioned why the state’s schools have not more widely and systematically applied “what works” to vexing problems. With so much riding on education from preschool through university to lifelong learning, Arizonans

DATA NOTES

The Stanford 9 is a standardized, norm-referenced test. It compares each student’s achievement to that of a representative national sample of public school students of the same age and grade at a particular point in time. The Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (Stanford 9) was tested in 1995 and reports results in comparison to nationwide student achievement in 1995. Thus, a score of “40” means that the typical Maricopa County student scored better than 40 percent (and worse than 60 percent) of students nationwide for that grade level in that subject in 1995. A score near the 50th percentile indicates that the typical student performance on that test is about average when compared with other students in the same grade level across the country.

The National Assessment of Academic Progress (NAEP) has been a monitor of student achievement in the United States since Congress authorized it in 1969. It provides educators and policy makers with information on student learning and the factors associated with achievement. NAEP achievement levels are Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. NAEP tells how Arizona’s students are doing compared to other states and the nation.
are taking note of a wide range of policy options. Here and now the policy talk is about:

> Expanding state-funded voluntary all-day kindergarten to all schools throughout the state.

> Ensuring that community- and school-based programs and services support the rapid acquisition of English skills.

> Providing appropriate resources to all schools to apply “best practices” at such milestones as 3rd grade, 8th grade, and the first year of college to increase achievement and completion rates.

> Matching skills needed in the workforce with academic learning for young people and adults.

> Developing more options for financial aid for higher education among low- and middle-income students of any age.

> Creating data systems that document the performance of Arizona’s education system from preschool through postsecondary education (known as P-20 performance).

Education presents innumerable challenges, but, with more than 40% of Arizonans saying that our state’s public schools are not as good as those in other states, efforts to improve make sense. Public sentiments underscore the fact that education remains an issue of great importance to all Arizonans.

**METRO FOCUS**

**Those Without a Diploma and Those With Several**

> The amount of education among residents is one of the most important indicators of economic and social well-being. Based on Census 2000 data for 318 metro areas analyzed by the Social Science Data Analysis Network, Phoenix and Tucson place 97th and 118th respectively on the percent of the population (age 25 and over) with a college or professional degree, where 1 is the most desired ranking. When the metro areas are ranked according to the percent of those 25 and over without a high school diploma, the figures put Phoenix at 145th and Tucson at 189th.