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Policy Memo

I. Introduction

It is a commonly accepted notion on both sides of the aisle that Arizona's public school system fails a lot of its students. However, the research has shown that the Arizona public school system is failing mostly students that happen to be of low-income and racial minorities. These disparities have not been directly addressed as it is often overshadowed by conversations regarding the overall state of the public school system. Therefore, state sponsored solutions have been aimed towards offering an alternative education to students attending public schools rather than improving the overall public school system which only negatively affects students of low-income and racial minority that are left behind in public schools. Additionally, white students of middle to upper income establish themselves in communities which contribute to better funded and resourced public schools than their counterparts enabling the educational discrepancy within public schools and not just private vs public.

This issue is a problem because there is an entire community of a particular demographic being systematically put at a disadvantage. This memo will evaluate the different solutions put forth and its consequences as well as recommended solutions that would directly address these discrepancies.

II. Background

Arizona's public school system has been historically placed in the lowest rankings nationwide for various factors including academic underperformance, low graduation rates, and success on Advanced Placement tests. It ranked on the 90th percentile on "Education Week" just a couple of years ago and has been heavily criticized specifically on its education formula which is used to determine the amount of money allocated to schools—a formula that has been deemed ineffective, not just by the "Education Week" review, but also by Arizona public schools and scholars in the education field. Some of the criticisms derive from the fact that the formula determines funding based on the school's students' attendance which then allows schools to overestimate or underestimate the overall attendance for the following year resulting in funding discrepancies. Moreover, public schools require consistent funding to regardless of the number of students attending each year. Students that opt out of public schools and onto state-funded vouchers and education savings account drain public money from these public schools.

Arizona's public school system displays disparities in the quality of education students of low-income and racial minorities receive in comparison to non low-income white students. For example, a report compiled by UnidosUs from the Arizona Department of Education demonstrates educational disparities among Latinx students in the state of Arizona, portrayed in a 2017 - 2018 standardized test scores of 3rd, 8th, and 11th graders demonstrating a 22% - 26% score gap between Latinx students and White students (UnidosUs). Moreover, the academic discrepancies are noticeable in the academic achievement gap among Title 1 schools and non Title 1 public schools. Recent data compiled from School Digger demonstrates a negative linear relationship between the percentage of qualifying free/reduced lunch students and their

respective school's ranking by national education institutions (SchoolDigger), proving an economic inequality gap. Additionally, a racial and ethnic inequality is contributed to the rise of the phenomena known as the "white flight" in which white students are attending majority white schools and minority students are attending majority minority schools (Powers). Unsurprisingly, the schools with majority white students are better funded and have higher achievement results.

III. Executive Summary

The academic disparity among minority and low income students in public schools continue to rise as Arizona's funding formula does not satisfy the needs for public schools with high percentages of minority and low income students. State sponsored solutions to this problem have been alternatives to public schools like vouchers and education saving accounts which have only exacerbated this disparity.

The neglect of this issue irreversibly affects the opportunities available for students attending underfunded and underperforming schools. Furthermore, those being systematically affected are low income and minority students as they are the ones attending underfunded schools that result in academic underperformance. Arizona's lack of direct approach to the problem is widening the gap and even contributing to the segregation of low-income and racial minority students into bad public schools while their counterparts opt out of the system with public money taken from public schools and used for programs like the voucher system.

Arizona lawmakers must adopt a funding approach that supports all public schools, especially those whose underperformance can be correlated with economic disparity. This can be done by revising the school funding formula to accommodate proper resources to the public

schools whose needs are higher than others and by repealing programs that harm public schools and benefit private institutions.

IV. Appraisal of Past Solutions

Proposition 123 passed by Arizona voters in 2016 increased overall funding for public schools in Arizona which were utilized for a variety of purposes including the increase of teacher salaries and then a gradual 20% salary increase to Arizona teachers in 2018. Increases in teachers' salaries like these draw an appeal for teachers to move and stay in Arizona, naturally increasing the profession's competitiveness and thus quality in the state. While this money was beneficial to all public schools in Arizona, its impact could have been greater by allocating that money on an as-needed basis.

However, the expansion of vouchers in the last three years has only increased the disparity that exists within public and private schools and failed to address the disparities among public schools themselves which inevitably contributes to the disparities within the public school system, as well. On the other hand, the impact standardized testing has on school funding has been revised to accommodate the underperformance that naturally comes from Title 1 schools which has been beneficial.

While some of these programs have been successful, others, like the expansion of vouchers, have actually undermined the efforts to strengthen public education and its quality, especially for minority and low income students living in locations where public school is their only option

V. Key Stakeholders and Project Plan

The main stakeholders are students, as well as their families, attending underfunded and underperforming public schools as its the quality of their education that is being neglected by the state of Arizona. This project will consist of raising money to subsidize the cost of Advanced Placement classes for students in Title 1 schools because fees are often a deterrent for students. Although, specifically Title 1 schools, often underperform in Advanced Placements tests, students would nonetheless be experiencing a college level course and be taught by teachers that have, typically, the more experience and training than the rest of the teachers at Title 1 schools. Additionally, the project also consists of organizing communities affected by this issue in Arizona to petition Arizona lawmakers and bring the issue to the forefront of discussion.

VI. Conclusion

The project would help directly subsidize the cost of Advanced Placement classes, which arguably offers a better quality education than common core classes do as they are more rigorous and taught by more experienced teachers. Furthermore, it would also place pressure on lawmakers to act on the solutions needed to bridge the gap and involve previously excluded actors into the political conversation.

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