BREAKING THE MONOPOLY OF MEDIOCRITY

JUST THE FACTS
Phoenix, Arizona
The Institute for a Competitive Workforce (ICW) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. ICW promotes the rigorous educational standards and effective job training systems needed to preserve the strength of America’s greatest economic resource, its workforce.

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Are ALL children receiving a high-quality education in Phoenix?

Not yet.

Metropolitan Phoenix school districts range from small elementary districts with less than 5,000 students to large unified districts with more than 100,000 students. School choice is abundant, with open enrollment and 270 charter schools.

However, too many students in the Phoenix area are not graduating prepared for college or the workforce. Only 46% of Maricopa County high school graduates are college ready in math. Additionally, there are significant achievement gaps between whites and Latinos, with only one in four students with limited English proficiency graduating from high school on time. Thus far, there has been little to no measurable improvement statewide despite ongoing and focused efforts to increase college readiness rates in Arizona high schools.

Arizona has taken promising steps to address achievement gaps, high school graduation rates, and college readiness. The state is implementing the reforms proposed in its application, despite not winning a Race to the Top grant, and the governor has passed an ambitious reform agenda. However, in order to realize success from these reforms in Phoenix, the city’s school districts need to work together to implement Arizona’s new college- and career-ready standards, assessments, and accountability systems.

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How are schools in the Greater Phoenix area failing their students and the state of Arizona?

Arizona needs more educated workers to fill high-skill jobs.

- More than 60% of jobs in Arizona will require a postsecondary certificate or degree by 2020, but only 31% of adults in the state currently have these qualifications.  
- Only 30% of students from Arizona who enroll in a four-year public postsecondary institution will graduate in four years.  
- Nearly 60% of students in Arizona entering two-year institutions enroll in remediation. Of those students, only 13% complete remediation and their two-year degree course work in two years.  
- More than 825,000 Arizonans age 16+ lack a high school diploma or GED and are not currently enrolled in school.  
- More than 246,000 Arizona adults cannot communicate effectively in English.  
- Statewide, only 20% of Latinos are enrolled in some form of postsecondary education.  
- Public perceptions of public schools in Arizona are low. Nearly 50% of Arizona heads of households rate schools as “poor” or “very poor” in preparing students to directly enter the workforce.  

Not enough Phoenix area students are graduating from high school prepared for college or the workforce.

- Eighty percent of the Maricopa class of 2011 students graduated on time, compared to 85% of all students in the state. There is a significant gap between white, Latino, and English-language learners (ELL).  
- College readiness rates have not improved over the past five years. Rates in English remain at or near 75%, and approximately 46% of Maricopa County high school graduates are graduating college ready in Mathematics.
Phoenix, Arizona

Not enough Phoenix area students attend high-quality schools and meet state standards for proficiency in reading and math.

• As Arizona prepares to complete the implementation of college- and career-ready standards and aligned assessments, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that most students in the state are not proficient in reading and math, despite high passing scores on the state’s test. Nearly 75% of Arizona 4th graders are NOT proficient in reading, and 69% of 8th graders are NOT proficient in math.16

• In Maricopa County schools, only 26% of 10th graders met state standards on the Arizona Instrument for Measuring Standards (AIMS) in math and only 46% in reading.

• Statewide, only 25% of students attend an “A” rated school. Within the boundaries of the Phoenix Union High School District, the largest Local Education Agency (LEA) in the state, the majority attend charter or district schools, where at least 70% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Only 6% of the District’s high-poverty schools received an “A” label.17

• A little more than half of the LEAs in Maricopa county (including charter school LEAs) are rated as “A” or “B” school districts.18

Percentage of students at or above “Proficient,” National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2000 and 2011

![Percentage of students at or above “Proficient,” National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2000 and 2011](http://www.arizonaready.com/content/hs-AIMS.html)
What is Arizona doing to improve schools and prepare students to meet college- and career-ready standards?

Implementing state standards and assessments aligned to college- and career-ready standards

In 2010, the State Board of Education adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and became a governing state in the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). The Arizona Department of Education (ADE), in conjunction with Arizona’s five Regional Education Centers, has developed a system of support aligned to Arizona’s Race to the Top plan, to assist schools in implementing the new standards to ensure that all students have access to learning content aligned to the new standards.

Arizona has adopted Common Core Standards in reading and math. Arizona is committed to implementing standards in reading and math aligned to the Common Core by 2013–2014.

Arizona and metro Phoenix school districts are supporting the implementation of new standards.

Arizona is implementing assessments aligned to CCSS. Arizona plans to administer the new (PARCC) assessment aligned to the CCSS starting in the 2014–2015 school year. New online assessments will be administered four times a year in grades 3–8 in reading and math.

Focus on mastery of college- and career-ready standards. Arizona’s Move on When Ready initiative offers students the opportunity to advance based on their mastery of the curriculum, not time spent in school. This initiative moves the state away from a “one-size-fits-all” system to one that is adaptive to individual student interests and needs. A key feature of the model provided is the Grand Canyon Diploma, a performance-based diploma available to students on a voluntary basis beginning in the 2012–2013 school year. Qualification for a Grand Canyon Diploma signifies to students that they are ready to do college-level work without remediation and opens up a variety of education and career pathways within, and beyond, high school. Students have the option to remain in high school and take “upper division” courses, such as AP or IB classes; take dual enrollment or specialized STEM courses; enroll in a full-time career and technical education program; or graduate and go to community college.

What to Watch:

• **Implementation of a curriculum aligned to new standards.** Will students in Phoenix schools learn content that is aligned with the new standards?

• **New college and career diploma.** How will a Grand Canyon Diploma improve college readiness and career success?

Holding all schools accountable for meeting state standards

Through Arizona’s new A–F letter grade system, the state makes annual accountability determinations for all schools and districts based on a student’s academic status and growth. The system was designed to place equal value on current-year achievement and the academic growth of all students while placing a “laser-like” focus on the lowest-achieving students. The formula is based on a point system that weighs academic outcomes and academic growth equally. There are different grading systems for traditional, alternative, and small schools.
Arizona has consequences for low-performing schools. Under its waiver application, Arizona will require interventions in its lowest-performing schools.23

Arizona has set high-achievement goals. Arizona developed and adopted rigorous annual performance targets that will increase in annual equal increments and result in 100% of students achieving proficiency no later than the end of the 2019–2020 school year.

Arizona has ambitious graduation rate goals. Arizona’s Education Reform Plan has set a goal of 93% of students graduating on time by 2020.24

What to Watch:

- **Accountability for all students.** Instead of focusing on student subgroups in their A–F accountability system, Arizona is making accountability decisions based on the achievement of the bottom 25% of students under its No Child Left Behind waiver. All students who struggle will receive assistance.

- **Transparent information about school performance.** Arizona must revise its report card to reflect its new accountability system, and Phoenix school districts will need to ensure that they provide transparent data to parents.

- **The lowest-achieving schools need to get better!** Too many students are in poorly performing schools. Are interventions for struggling schools helping? Will the proportion of students attending “A” and “B” rated schools increase even as standards increase?
Improving teacher effectiveness

Recognizing that great teachers make a difference, Arizona’s 2011 Framework for Measuring Educator Effectiveness requires annual teacher evaluations that include student achievement as a significant factor. Arizona also requires its districts to use evaluations for professional development, teacher compensation, and personnel decisions. The Framework, however, only sets the stage for individual districts to design such policies. In Phoenix, it remains to be seen whether the city’s school districts will implement rigorous policies to ensure teacher quality.

✓ Arizona requires all teachers to be evaluated based on student results. The Arizona Framework for Measuring Educator Effectiveness requires all school districts to implement teacher evaluations that include quantitative data on student academic progress. These measures must count for 33%–50% of a teacher’s evaluation.25

✓ Pay for performance. Arizona requires districts to develop incentives for “highly-effective” teachers, including multiyear contracts, by the 2013–2014 school year. Through its Rewarding Excellence in Instruction and Leadership program, Maricopa County and four other Phoenix districts are implementing a program to provide up to $5,000 per teacher for demonstrations of excellence.26

✓ Compensation for teachers who teach in high-needs schools or shortage area subjects. Arizona requires all districts to develop policies by the 2013–2014 school year to provide incentives for “highly effective” and “effective” teachers to work at “D” or “F” schools.27

✓ Teachers can be dismissed for ineffectiveness in the classroom. By the 2015–2016 school year, Arizona requires districts to initiate notices of “inadequacy of classroom performance” for teachers regarded as “ineffective” after intervention has been provided.

✓ Last in, NOT first out. Arizona prohibits seniority and tenure status from being the sole factors used by districts to determine which teachers are laid off during reductions in force.28

What to Watch:

✓ Quality of new teacher evaluations in Phoenix. By the 2013–2014 school year, Arizona districts must adopt evaluations conforming to the Framework for Measuring Educator Effectiveness. It remains to be seen how new performance-based teacher evaluation requirements are implemented in Phoenix.

✓ Sustaining performance-based compensation. The Rewarding Excellence in Instruction and Leadership program is funded through a $51.5 million federal Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant through 2014–2015. Maricopa County received a new TIF grant in 2012 to continue the effort. How will Maricopa County sustain the effort beyond the grant?

✓ Improved student achievement. When it comes to policy on the books, Arizona has potential on the teacher effectiveness front, but Phoenix has a long way to go to raise student, teacher, and school performance districtwide.
What options are available for parents who want something better for their child?

Public school choice, charter schools, and online learning

Arizona is known for its strong school-choice policies. It is one of 17 states that allow students to apply for admission to any public school based on available classroom space. Arizona leads the nation with the highest percentage of charter students and schools in the country—second only to Washington, D.C.

- **Open enrollment.** Parents have meaningful school choice and are not restricted in choosing a school for their child by where they live.
- **Strong charter school law.** Arizona law encourages the creation of new charter schools, which now serve some 145,000 students attending 540 schools, many of whom are minorities. There are 270 charter schools in Maricopa County that educate 70,000 students.
- **Virtual classroom options.** Arizona permits students to take courses online in virtual classrooms—there are more than 40 approved online schools and programs throughout the state.
- **Choice for students with special needs.** Empowerment Scholarship Accounts were created in 2011 for eligible students to attend private schools or to access other educational services and programs.

How are governing boards selected for school districts in the Phoenix area?

**School Governance**

The Maricopa County Education Service Agency (ESA) administers governing board elections and special elections for district bonds, overrides, and governing board recall elections. It also provides election services for the 57 school districts in Maricopa County.

The Maricopa County ESA also provides information on these elections to school districts, parents, and the community so that they can make informed decisions regarding the education of their children.

For more information, go to: http://www.maricopa.gov/Schools/service-home.aspx?sid=17

What Needs Work:

- Ensuring that parents have access to transparent information about schools, which will enable them to select the best schools for their children.
- Ensuring that there are enough A-rated schools to meet the demands of all students, especially students in high poverty areas of Phoenix.
Endnotes


7. Ibid.


27. Ibid.


33. Ibid.