Flagstaff Commission

On

Excellence in Education

Report and Recommendations

October 22, 2014

**INTRODUCTION**

Flagstaff, as a community, believes in the potential of every child. We accept that it is our responsibility as adult citizens to provide the resources and devote the effort necessary for that potential to be realized. Historically, our citizens have strongly supported our school systems through passage of bond issues and overrides, personal and corporate donations, volunteer efforts, and other means.

Recently, Flagstaff declared itself America’s first STEM city and committed to the goal of all Flagstaff students graduating from high school with knowledge and skills required for success in today’s highly competitive, highly technological world. We want every Flagstaff graduate to be career or college ready. The newly formed Flagstaff STEM Consortium is working diligently to support the schools in achieving this goal.

In addition to these efforts, last year (2013) saw completion of the first Coconino County Education Report. The report resulted from a year-long study sponsored by the Coconino County Education Service Agency and United Way of Northern Arizona. The intention was to establish a benchmark against which future progress of our schools could be measured. In addition to describing various demographic characteristics of schools across the County, the report quantified student performance in various academic areas at specific milestones in their educational journey. The report highlights a number of positive attributes of our schools, but it also identifies areas of significant need and deficiency. First among these is the need for a comprehensive, high-quality early childhood education system. Second, the report documents a deterioration in grade-appropriate math performance between 3rd and 8th grade.

In the wake of the Coconino County Education Report, the same two sponsors formed the Flagstaff Commission on Excellence in Education. The attention of the new commission was focused solely on Flagstaff, but the charge to the Commission was much broader than in the earlier study. In particular, this group was asked to study many aspects of early learning and K-12 education in Flagstaff and to make specific recommendations for improvement.

Approximately 36 community entities are represented among the members of the Commission. In order to approach its work efficiently, task forces were formed from among the Commission members and various forms of research were undertaken to inform recommendations, and for defining community consensus around a plan of collective action. We ask all constituent groups and individuals to join the Commission in working together to improve the educational outcomes for all Flagstaff children.

**NARRATIVE**

Aspirations in the Flagstaff community reside in the highest realms. Likewise, the Flagstaff Commission on Excellence in Education pledged to identify concrete approaches for superior opportunities across the educational spectrum, and to build community consensus around goals leading to stellar student achievement. What does it mean to provide a world-class education? How can an entire community elevate the education of all its children and leverage cooperation to improve academic and life outcomes? How does the Flagstaff community define high-quality early childhood education and increase access to these institutions? How can we best support our teachers in holding them and the profession in better regard? Which is the most impactful arena to begin work? In what ways do the unique cultural characteristics of Coconino County and Flagstaff provide untapped opportunities?

In the spirit of Flagstaff’s commitment to maximizing our role as a research and science-based community, and through the work of four task forces – World Class Education, Early Childhood and Family Engagement, Teacher Quality and Professional Development, and Community Engagement – the Commission reviewed the academic literature; consulted with local, state and national experts; and held public meetings for community input and insight. Experts who participated in public meetings and conversations included Dr. Mitchell Chester, the Massachusetts Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education; Todd Sanders, CEO of the Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce and a member of BUILD AZ; Dr. Karen Ortiz, Vice President and Program Director for Early Childhood Education Initiatives at the Helios Education Foundation; Dr. Daniel Kain, former Dean of the College of Education and current Vice Provost at Northern Arizona University; Merl Waschler, President and CEO of Valley of the Sun United Way; Brian Spicker, Sr. Vice President of Community Impact at Valley of the Sun United Way; Deborah Bayle, President and CEO of United Way of Salt Lake; Bill Crim, Sr. Vice President of Collective Impact and Public Policy at United Way of Salt Lake, Jeff Edmondson, Managing Director of StriveTogether -- a subsidiary of KnowledgeWorks; and Dr. Robert Kelty, former Coconino County Superintendent of Schools.

The findings of the Commission from its research were at times as expected. At other times they were surprising, often challenging and encompassing the full spectrum of despair and hope. For example, in Flagstaff the average starting salary for teachers is $33,700. While teachers are sometimes afforded opportunities to augment their income through school-related activities like coaching sports, sponsoring extracurricular activities, or participating in professional development programs, one must question how many other professional occupations so frequently require second jobs and additional part-time work to make ends meet.

Schools exist throughout the US that at one point faced many of the same problems of disappointing student performance, inadequate school funding, and unacceptable graduation rates that confront Flagstaff and Arizona, but are now centers of excellence. Flagstaff has the same attributes and deeply held beliefs that made systemic change in other states possible, including a willing business sector, and a community prepared to embrace a different, albeit challenging, approach with the understanding that excellence requires long term fidelity to a shared education vision.

Children born in Flagstaff, as elsewhere, begin their education at the moment of birth. Research definitively shows the environments and experiences of a child in his or her early years profoundly affect the degree to which they are successful in school and beyond. High-quality early childhood education requires responsive, engaged and consistent caregivers; indoor and outdoor environments that are safe, stimulating and well-stocked with age-appropriate materials; predictable and balanced routines; and healthy lifestyles that include physical activity, regular health and dental checks, and nutritious foods. Providing critical components early in life pays great dividends as children enter kindergarten, move through high school, and transition into college and career.

Knowing the power of consensus-based, informed action, communities representing 26 states and the District of Columbia are implementing a collective impact framework that has achieved positive trends in promoting high school graduation rates, fourth-grade reading and math scores, and preschool readiness. Integral to their successes are critical elements such as a shared community vision, evidence-based decision making, collaborative action, and a plan for resource development and sustainability.

**CALL TO ACTION**

Our education system, including all aspects of early childhood through 12th grade education, creates the launch pad of opportunity upon which our nation, our state, and our community stand. This initial report by the Flagstaff Commission on Excellence in Education is intended not to be a conclusion, but to be a beginning. We suggest several actions which we believe will move Flagstaff toward becoming a community that offers a world-class education to all its children. However, the Commission cannot, nor can any other single entity in Flagstaff achieve this outcome in isolation. It is of critical importance that all sectors of our unique, multi-faceted, and multi-cultural community participate in providing for the world class education of Flagstaff children. Only a cooperative, concerted effort by schools, the business community, the university and community college, government, nonprofits, faith organizations, cultural groups, parents, and citizens in general can bring this to pass. With this report, we hope to encourage a community-wide commitment to best prepare our kids for success in today’s world, and then, in cooperation with all Flagstaff stakeholders, including those already working diligently with passion and commitment in this arena, to move forward with bold, imaginative and informed action.

**WHERE WE WANT TO BE IN 2020**

To achieve a World Class Education, the Flagstaff Commission on Excellence in Education recommends that the Flagstaff community work collaboratively to attain the following outcomes:

* **Increase the number of children entering kindergarten ready**

**for school from 47% to 90%**

* **Increase the number of students reading on grade level at the end of third grade from 73% to 90%**
* **Increase the number of 8th grade students performing at grade level in math from 56% to 90%**
* **Increase the number of students graduating from high school within four years from 77% to 90%**

**RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

The following list is not meant to be comprehensive, but to serve as a starting point for our work.

**Community:**

* **The business community must be a deeply committed partner and motivator in the pursuit of a world-class K-12 education system for Flagstaff.**
* **Flagstaff should join the growing number of municipalities and counties across the nation implementing a collective impact framework to support appropriate Cradle to Career initiatives.**
* **Engage local community leaders, coalitions, government officials and business leaders to advocate for and promote the importance of high-quality early childhood experiences.**
* **Incentives should be offered to encourage collaboration between district and charter schools.**
* **The community should support the profession of teaching in order to ensure a strong pool of candidates for rigorous teacher education programs.**
* **The community should celebrate and respect teachers for the important role they play and pay them at a level commensurate with their education and demonstrated effectiveness.**

**Advocacy:**

* **Expand early care and education advocacy efforts.**
* **Create a culturally appropriate public awareness campaign on the importance of quality early childhood experiences.**
* **Improve the public view of early childhood professional educators.**

**Family:**

* **Expand opportunities for family support services.**
* **Expand and sustain home visitation programs.**
* **Increase parent education classes.**
* **Provide early childhood health and development literature to parents when their child is born.**
* **Increase coordination of existing services for families with risk factors.**

**Student Enrichment:**

* **Focused attention should be given to out-of-school time as an opportunity to implement strategies that have measurable impact on in-school success.**
* **Expand access to before and after school programming.**

Early Learning:

* **A comprehensive, citywide, high-quality early childhood education system should be established as a key component of school success.**
* **Expand access to enriching early learning experiences.**
* **Partner with hospitals, libraries, schools, and other community groups to expand early learning opportunities.**
* **Meet the demand for accessible, affordable and high-quality child care.**

**Teaching and Learning (P-20):**

* **The Arizona College and Career Ready Standards must be successfully implemented. All community members should support our teachers and encourage our children as they navigate this transition to a significantly more challenging set of academic expectations.**
* **Instruction should be built around practices whose effectiveness is supported by solid research. Teachers should demonstrate a disposition to learn and put into place such practices, and schools should provide opportunities for teachers to learn these techniques.**
* **Both district and charter schools should be rewarded for enrolling and creating success for students whose families struggle with poverty, students with disabilities, and second language learners. No school or district should be punished for enrolling any child in America.**

**Professional Learning:**

* **Expand early care and education professional development.**
* **Mentor early childhood professionals throughout their education and career.**
* **Create a community early childhood lab school that develops teaching methods and facilitates learning opportunities for early childhood students, and offers dual credit opportunities for high school students.**
* **Provide degree programs and scholarships for early childhood professionals.**
* **New and seasoned teachers should be provided with the rigorous course work, professional development, and financial compensation that result in excellent teaching skills, content expertise, and attitudes of innovation and creativity that catalyze students to perform at World Class levels.**
* **As the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education proclaimed in 2010 (“Conditions for School Effectiveness”), professional development for teachers should:**
* Include both individual and collaborative development opportunities
* Be job-embedded (e.g., instructional coaching)
* Be connected to school priorities and regularly evaluated
* Be supported by structures and opportunities for collaboration that enhance professional development

**Funding:**

* **Arizona public school funding for both district and charter schools must be increased. Responsibility for finding the additional funds rests primarily with the state legislature, but local revenue sources should also be secured.**
* **Partner with statewide and local advocacy groups to impact funding and legislative agendas.**
* **Establish tax credits for qualifying early care and education programs.**
* **Advocate for full-day kindergarten and preschool block grant funding.**
* **Increase the pay and benefits pool for early childhood professionals.**
* **Provide stipends (insurance, licensing fees, etc.) for licensed and regulated child care providers.**
* **Research clearly shows a relationship between students in a given teacher’s class and the academic achievement of those students. Increased funding should be used to reduce class size within professional reason.**

**Thank You**

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I/We support the Recommendations contained in this report and commit to participate in implementing one or more of the Recommendations through contributions of time, talent and/or treasure.

Organization

Signature Title

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