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My view: Education is an economic imperative

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Economic developers, elected officials and business leaders agree the most important element of improving Arizona's economy is education. The need for quality education "from cradle to career" is the most consistent and loudest refrain heard in communities across the state, no matter the main topic at hand.

The diverse group of Arizonans who participated in the 105th Arizona Town Hall, "Arizona's Economy," spent three days considering how best to support and expand the state's economy.

Participants reached consensus on specific recommendations aimed at supporting local business, expanding trade and ensuring that necessary infrastructure needs for business are in place. They also concluded that actions such as tax increment financing and the creation of an "entrepreneurial ecosystem" were important. But nothing trumped the persistent idea that the most important issue to address is how to ensure our educational systems meet the needs of a 21st century economy.

Participants parroted experts in this respect: We need to create a workforce that fills the needs of aerospace and biotech companies. We need to support economies that are not reliant on construction or the five C's. We need to create centers of innovation and focus on the export of high-end products. To accomplish these goals, it is imperative to have quality education.

Despite expert opinions and widespread support of the need for accessible quality education, there seems to be no other political issue more mired in partisan debate and the challenges of the state's current budget. How to create and maintain the education systems needed to thrive in the 21st century is perhaps the biggest problem that needs to be solved for Arizona's economic success.

The problem can be solved if stakeholders follow the lead of Town Hall participants, who first experienced and then championed the results of respectful civic engagement. It can be solved if we collectively focus on what affected each of us the most in our own educational journey, then ask if the incentives and systems in place are supporting those qualities. It can be solved if we take a fresh look at the complicated school financing systems with these goals in mind and consider what matters most to teachers.

It will not be solved if the issue is framed in terms of charter vs. district; local vs. regional; teacher vs. administration; Republican vs. Democrat; or some other counterproductive framework that doesn't produce solutions.

[For more information.](#)

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