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Creating a gold standard for Arizona education

By Tara Jackson

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Against the backdrop of the 2008 Summer Olympics, most of Arizona's children returned to school this week. For Olympic athletes, the difference between merely being in the game and performing at the top of their game is the difference between a gold medal and returning home empty-handed.

When it comes to educating Arizona's children, the difference between being at the top of our game and merely in the game is even more striking: it will mean the difference between a shrinking quality of life for all Arizonans or maintaining and improving our competitive edge in the global economy.

Through a series of initiatives, the Arizona Town Hall is leading the charge to find and retain the highest quality teachers for Arizona's children. Study after study concludes that quality teachers are the single most important factor in student achievement. These same studies also show that fewer of our best and brightest are entering the teaching profession. Nearly half of those who choose teaching as a career leave within five years – many citing a lack of support from parents and administrators, low salaries, and overcrowded classrooms.

To maintain our competitive edge and our lifestyle, we need to find new ways to recruit and retain great teachers.

This past April, Arizonans from around the state gathered at the 92nd Arizona Town Hall to tackle this issue. The group included government, business, education and civic leaders as well as various political perspectives. Importantly, it also included classroom teachers.

Using the Arizona Town Hall process, and an extensive background report prepared by the University of Arizona, this diverse group spent three days in intense discussion. At the conclusion, the group produced a written consensus report that called for a fundamental redesign of Arizona's Pre-K-12 education system.

Nine specific goals were identified as key to necessary reform. The goals, and the strategies and deadlines for accomplishing them, are outlined in the report. Topping the list is the need to define and promote teaching as a distinguished profession, followed closely by the need to provide teachers with professional pay linked with systematic education reform. This extensive report is an invaluable resource for a discussion of solutions that incorporates a statewide perspective.

It's also just the beginning.

A statewide task force formed by participants at the recent Town Hall will convene its second meeting on Sept. 11. The meeting will be held in Phoenix at facilities that encourage participation by phone for those who cannot attend in person.

Meanwhile, community outreach programs sponsored by Arizona Town Hall that incorporate interactive discussion in communities around the state will be taking place well into the fall.

Participants of the 92nd Arizona Town Hall are also working in partnership with organizations engaged in similar efforts. On Oct. 1, business and community leaders in southern Arizona will hold a community conversation on education that will focus on teachers.

This fall, groups such as the Arizona Business and Education Coalition will sponsor programs around the state that complement and build on the Arizona Town Hall community-outreach programs. All of the efforts will be working toward accomplishing objectives and deadlines outlined in the recommendations report.

This week, as you watch America's finest compete in Beijing, we hope that you'll join us in helping Arizona's children "go for the gold."

To participate in any of these efforts, download reports or obtain more information, visit the Arizona Town Hall Web site at www.aztownhall.org or call (602) 252-9600.

– Tara Jackson is president of Arizona Town Hall, a private, nonprofit civic organization.