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Education - the best investment for our future

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For more than 50 years, Arizona Town Hall has asked Arizonans to identify the most pressing and important policy topics for discussion. In recent years, Town Hall members and participants have repeatedly identified education as a topic that requires immediate attention. Perhaps this has been due to widespread opinions that Arizona's education systems are not prepared to support the most prosperous future for our state.

As a result of the increasingly urgent call for Arizona Town Hall to address Arizona's education systems, education was the topic for both 2013 statewide Town Halls. Higher education was addressed at the spring Town Hall and early education was the focus for the fall session. In addition to the statewide Town Halls on education, Town Hall sponsored programs in local communities around the state that continued the conversation and provided additional insight into the concerns and suggestions of diverse business, community and civic leaders. More programs are scheduled in the months to come.

As always, Arizona Town Hall approached the topic of education from the perspective of determining the consensus of the diverse participants in each Town Hall event. Votes were not taken; instead, a common voice emerged from the participants' discussion. The consensus statements, therefore, are a particularly powerful representation of how a diverse cross-section of Arizonans identifies both issues and solutions related to education:

There is a strong correlation between education level, individual productivity and the economic and social strength of a community.

A well-educated populace translates into less spending on social programs and prisons. It also creates a workforce that is more resilient during economic downturns and that has a higher taxable income base.

Arizona can build from its strengths, which include one of the largest and best community college systems in the country, world-class universities and a culture of innovation.

Efforts to align and coordinate resources across the educational continuum are having a positive impact — including initiatives such as First Things First, Expect More, BUILD Arizona, Read On Arizona and the transfer pathways programs between community colleges and universities. However, better coordination is still needed between pre-K12 education, higher education institutions and state and local economic development agencies.

Investments in education pay big dividends. For example, studies of the cost-benefit analysis for investing in early education show returns of \$3 to \$17 for every dollar spent.

Sustainable and diverse funding sources should be explored, including tax credits, social impact bonds, public-private partnerships, and changes to the Arizona Constitution that allow higher education institutions to better reap the financial benefits of the intellectual property they develop.

Teachers matter. Programs that incentivize and support quality pre-K12 teachers should be supported. A simple expression of gratitude can go a long way. Competitive salary and benefits packages go even further.

Parents matter. Resources that support parents and caregivers have a big impact, especially with early education.

A highly educated workforce allows Arizona to be more competitive in the ever-evolving global economy, attracting capital, global talent and economic activity. The best way to ensure a bright economic future is to make education our top priority.

Every person can make a difference — whether it’s mentoring a child, funding a scholarship program or supporting a local library.

Whether it’s an investment of time, money or the creation of new partnerships and collaborations, one message is clear: we can’t wait to take action. Now is the time to invest in education.

Arizona Town Hall reports and related materials can be downloaded at www.aztownhall.org.

— *Tara Jackson is president of the Arizona Town Hall.*

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