

## Voters want candidates to focus on education

BY RICH NICKEL

In a state where significant challenges plague the education system — and legitimate solutions exist — strong leaders thinking and working together across both sides of the aisle can ignite meaningful change. What is most important, however, is prioritizing voters' priorities for education — their priorities need to be at the forefront of all decision-making.

If you were to solely rely upon the hot-button issues that generate heated banter on social media and in news headlines, you would be highly misguided about the true education concerns that Arizonans believe warrant the greatest attention. Unfortunately, issues like critical race theory, gender identity, and closing failing schools take the spotlight.

It's a confounding challenge. Voters continue to prioritize education and want to see their candidates discussing and taking action on the issues that matter most to improving student outcomes. Yet the disconnect perseveres.

Education Forward Arizona recently conducted a poll of 500 Arizona voters to better understand their priorities for education. The survey, conducted in coordination with the Center for the Future of Arizona, complements and dives deeper on findings reported in the Arizona Voters' Agenda.

In the survey, likely Arizona voters were asked an open-ended question about what they believe the biggest issues are facing education. Their most common responses were that teachers are underpaid and schools are underfunded. When asked specifically about school funding and teacher pay, 78% said that they believed teachers were underpaid and 66% said that they believed that schools were underfunded.

Notably, the survey also showed a majority of likely Arizona voters do not support banning critical race theory; restricting discussions of gender identity and sexual orientation during sex education; or closing failing schools.

Instead, they prioritized ensuring every classroom has a qualified teacher, raising teacher pay, increasing school funding and fostering more opportunities for Career and Technical Education for Arizona students. Voters also prioritized actions that would close achievement gaps, including providing additional

funding and resources to schools to support their low-income students along with scholarships for low-income students to go to college.

Voters want to see candidates prioritizing and offering solutions to address Arizona's teacher shortage, to help students learn key subjects, and to ensure they have opportunities that lead to education attainment and good careers. These are meaningful changes that will move the needle on the goals in the [Arizona Education Progress Meter](#) and meet our state's [Achieve60AZ](#) attainment goal.

It's time for our candidates to concern themselves less with what sparks passionate debate and more with what changes in our education system will have meaningful impact for Arizona families, and ultimately the state's economy.

*Rich Nickel is president and CEO of Education Forward Arizona.*

