

Giles bullish on better educated citizenry

BY CHRISTOPHER BOAN
Tribune Staff Writer

There's a burgeoning issue that's at the top of Mesa Mayor John Giles' mind, centering around the lack of college-educated citizens and residents who completed some kind of post-high school education.

Giles believes this issue should be at the forefront of all Mesa residents' minds as well, given the need for a highly skilled workforce in the years to come.

Statistics seem to back up the mayor's concern, with 35 percent of residents achieving post-secondary certification – whether that be an associate's or bachelor's degree or some form of job or vocational training.

Mesa's so-called post-secondary attainment rate trails the statewide average by 10 percentage points.

Giles believes a quintessential way for Mesa to catch up would be to provide free community college education to qualified residents.

The mayor is teaming up with Mesa Community College and the local business community to raise \$500,000 to fund the program, which costs \$200,000 a year or \$1 million over a five-year period.

"We're kind of the poster child for a situation that needs to be addressed," Giles said. "This is something that we need to get better at. So, to that end, we need to use the tools that we have, and one of the best tools we have in Mesa is Mesa Community College."

Giles envisions a day when Mesa Public Schools alumni can breeze through a two-year program at MCC without taking on excess debt.

Such a future would allow more students to finish their four-year studies, which would boost the local economy in return.

Giles called it a "selfish problem," for both parties, as businesses would have a well-trained workforce while the city would have more high-earners living here.

"This is the right thing to do," Giles said. "Having a well-trained workforce, having people progress from inactive, low-performing economic levels to higher ones that saves society literally billions of dollars. So, it's about poverty prevention and helping people be more productive."

Giles' positive outlook about the Mesa Promise program is shared by Dr. Lori Berquam, recently named MCC interim president.

Berquam believes the tripartite relationship between the college, the city and the business community could redefine college education in the state.

"We're really excited to partner with the city of Mesa on this," Berquam said. "What we're excited about in all of this partnership is, number one, that it's an exciting time to be part of the city of Mesa and it's a very exciting time to be part of the Mesa Community College."

"And, we know more than ever, it's so important to make sure that our students have the support financially, specifically, that they need to be able to achieve an education and go out into the community and thrive."

The Mesa operation is an offshoot of the statewide Achieve60AZ program, which aims to push the state's population with a college degree, a certificate or a license to 60 percent by 2030.

The opportunity to build a coalition with Berquam and Giles is what excites MPS Deputy Superintendent Dr. Andi Fourlis the most.

Fourlis believes the district is making progress towards greater college attainment levels of late, but that such a partnership would provide a shot in the arm in that pursuit.

She cited the district's strategic planning about what the collective can do to advance college attainment, finding key traits that fuel higher college graduation rates.

"We need to provide an opportunity for our children to tackle postsecondary education by removing the barriers," Fourlis

said, adding:

"And the barriers are often funding. And with the city's initiative in partnership with a community college, it looks as though students will be able to engage in two years of college coursework at no charge or maybe limited fees."

Fourlis said the district believes graduates should be able to communicate as well as be creative and have the ability to critically think and solve problems.

Its strategic plan found that the district needed to do more to provide opportunities for students so they could be ready to tackle college and other post-secondary educational outlets.

"I think on a wider scale, we found that, to meet the needs of our ever-changing economy, we're going to have to work differently towards those goals," Fourlis said.

"School districts could no longer work independently of their city," she explained. "They cannot work independently of their community colleges and our four-year universities. They cannot work independently of nonprofit initiatives."

"So, to me, the takeaway is how are these organizations all focused on education coming together to create, to make educational attainment specifically post-secondary attainment, understandable and doable because we all have an interest in it," Fourlis added.

It's that shared interest that motivates Giles, who has defined himself as an advocate for education on multiple occasions.

Giles knows that heavy-hitting corporations such as Google and Boeing wouldn't have moved employees to Mesa if not for the highly-educated and skilled population in the region.

He knows too that those companies won't stick around forever should that population stall out in the future – which is why he wants everyone to get on-board.

"If we fall behind in having a skilled and educated employee workforce to offer to these businesses, they're going to stop coming," Giles said. "So, it's good for everyone."

The Class of 2017

Some of the data studied by people involved in the the statewide AchieveAZ60 initiative involved a look at the percentage of 2017 high school seniors who graduated and then enrolled in some kind of two- or four-year college.

Here is what the data showed for some Mesa high schools. The third column only reflects high school grads who were enrolled for at least one year in college after graduation and does not reflect how many actually completed a college program.

School	% graduated	% enrolled in college
Mesa High	79	39.4
Westwood	72.8	46
Mt. View	84.7	55.6
Dobson	76.4	50.7
Red Mt.	84.6	58.8
Heritage Academy		
	96.4	57
Skyline	74.6	47.1
Desert Ridge	92.6	62.2

The class of 2019

Mesa Public Schools supplied this data for the percentage of students who graduated last year from its six comprehensive high schools. A spokeswoman said the district-wide graduation rate from these schools was 82 percent, compared to the statewide average of 78 percent.

Dobson:	86
Mesa:	80
Mountain View:	89
Red Mountain:	92
Skyline:	83
Westwood:	77

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Contact Paul Maryniak at 480-898-5647 or pmaryniak@timespublications.com