

# Educators confront some of the coming year's challenges, insist that Common Core will work if its tenets are followed

By Michelle Hirsch

Is Common Core really in jeopardy or is it here to stay? This seemed to be the No. 1 question posed to eight of the East Valley's top educators at Tempe's annual State of the Schools address.

The answer seemed clear: Common Core, despite any political threats that may have emerged, won't be going away anytime soon.

That, at least, was the interpretation that came from the top-tier educators who answered the question and others during a nearly two-hour panel discussion, hosted by the Tempe Chamber of Commerce.

While the participating educators won't be the ones to make the decision, consensus appeared to lean toward Common Core being such an effective approach so far that those at the state level who actually can decide its future will be hard pressed to void it.

When asked about Common Core, accurately known as the Arizona College and Career Ready Standards, MCC President Dr. Shouan Pan reminded attendees that these were approved in 2010.

The good news, he said, is that students will be better prepared than they are now as a result of the standards' adoption.

Pan, of MCC, reported that currently close to 60 percent of college-entry students test into one or more college level remedial classes.

Jay Heiler, founder and chairman of Great Hearts Academies and vice chairman of the Arizona Board of Regents, added that much of the controversy regarding Common Core focuses on the testing requirements and evaluating teacher performance and pay based on test

results.

Kyrene schools superintendent Dr. David Schauer advocated taking politics out of the standards discussion. He also noted that the new standards require a different way of teaching and learning, where students are engaged in working on problems, providing answers and presenting their thinking process, which is different from the way most adults learned in school.

Therefore, he said, the new approach can be confusing and unclear, although more can still be done to inform and garner support for the benefits of the new standards.

William Symonds, director of Global Pathways Institute, said he feels that student engagement is negatively affected by too much emphasis on testing in the new system, an opinion supported by Christine Busch.

Busch, superintendent of the Tempe Elementary district, praised students for their ability to adapt to the new system and be resilient to the changes required.

She also praised teachers for the 10- to 12-hour workdays, often 6-7 days a week, they have been required to perform to create new lesson plans in alignment with the new standards.

Busch added that it would be discouraging to teachers if the state scraps the standards after they and district staff have worked for several years to align their lessons and teaching methods, and are starting to see the benefits.

On other topics, TUHSD Superintendent Dr. Kenneth Baca offered an explanation of how his district is helping ensure Arizona students are the best in the nation, noting that all six Tempe Union high schools have A ratings and more National Merit finalists than any other district.

Beyond academic successes, the district is also preparing students to value community service, Baca said,

adding that teachers deserve credit for what they do every day for students.

Dr. Chris Bustamante, president of Rio Salado College, highlighted what he termed the hundreds of thousands of students trained at his institution each year while providing affordable education options and programs.

Dr. Christine Wilkinson, senior vice president and secretary of ASU, praised her boss, ASU President Michael Crow, for his vision and implementation of restructuring at ASU, thus increasing retention, graduation and student engagement.

Again, Tempe Elementary's Busch shared examples of ways her district is maximizing resources to educate children to love learning and experience physical fitness, music and arts, and to be prepared for furthering their education at places like community colleges and ASU.

Symonds, of Global Pathways, said only 35 percent of students who graduate high school are prepared for college coursework, therefore emphasizing the need to offer students multiple pathways to success to help ensure that students understand how the content they're learning relates to careers.

He also reported that, with ratios like 800 students to one high school advisement counselor, too few of the students receive adequate advising to prepare them for success beyond high school.

Schauer highlighted that the Kyrene district offers several program options so that students will have many pathways to their future academic success, noting however that teaching and learning needs to be transformed to better prepare students for their future.

Asked later about the greatest challenges facing students, Baca responded that they need to see there is

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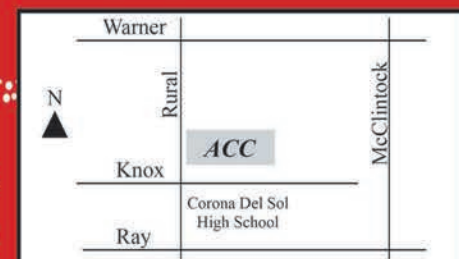
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a clear roadmap to college and career opportunities. Schauer emphasized that it is important to do whatever it takes to address the needs of students to reduce the achievement gap.

When the panel was asked how business leaders can best assist educators, they agreed that business people need to be advocates for education, with Pan reminding attendees that students are the future of Arizona.

He suggested mentoring students, offering internships and employment opportunities, or being among guest lecturers as ways to get involved.

Heiler cautioned that education is not utilitarian but rather an act of love from one generation to the next, to make a person fully human and able to succeed and achieve his or her dreams.

Schauer highlighted the importance of each person taking responsibility and not being apathetic, noting that an education community working with the business community can make a difference in improving education.

Symonds suggested business people talk to students, share how they started their business or how they became successful in their careers.

He shared results of a Gallup study showing that having a mentor and direct work experience can make a significant difference over grade-point average for student success beyond graduation.

Busch and Wilkinson suggested business people visit schools to observe the learning that is happening in classrooms today, and to share the information they

gained with others, spreading the word about the good things taking place in education and encouraging others to be advocates.

Bustamante emphasized the need for elected representatives who support education, and Baca agreed, stating the importance of electing Governing Board members and state legislators based on merit, not politics.

Busch spoke of her concerns that teachers are leaving the profession and fewer college students are pursuing teaching as a career because of what she feels is a punitive environment. Many teachers believe they can earn more money and respect in other professions.

Historically, said Busch, teachers haven't been paid a lot, but in recent years, in addition to pay freezes and reductions, they have also experienced increases health insurance and retirement contributions, and that considerably more time is required on professional development and planning without additional compensation.

Schauer emphasized the need to transform the public education system from the industrialized model — designed to teach students basic literacy and prepare them for labor jobs in factories, in a one-size-fits-all, often dull, repetitive process — to a 21st Century model that better educates students with the skills they need for future success in college and careers.

These include such areas as problem-solving, critical-thinking, digital literacy and collaboration, along with core competencies in math, reading, writing, science, PE, music and other fine arts.

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