



ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

2025 STATE OF EDUCATION SPEECH

Supt. Tom Horne
January 21-22, 2025

Since I took office in January 2023 I have been evangelizing for more school resource officers in the schools. I have repeatedly talked about the nightmare of a maniac invading a school and killing 20 kids, as has happened in other states and could happen here. If that were to happen, the parents would never recover. If they found out that the school could have had a school resource officer to protect their children, funded by your appropriation through the department of education, and the school decided not to do it, you can imagine how they would feel about that decision-making.

Last Thursday we avoided by the skin of our teeth that happening. A maniac invaded a school in Tucson. A school safety officer, paid for with newly available funds, was told about a man behaving strangely with 20 students and a number of staff in that room. Luckily, this officer was experienced enough and brave enough to know he had to act quickly and not wait for back up. He arrested the invader and found that he had a firearm and a knife. The invader stated: "I'm going to hurt the children and make them immortal and the school famous."

This brave police officer prevented the nightmare I have often talked about. 20 students and additional adults would have lost their lives, and the student's parents would have had their lives ruined by uncontrollable grief. I know about this because I have lost a child. Those who have been opposing police in the schools need to rethink this issue. Think of the unimaginable tragedy that would have occurred if that school resource officer had not been there, or if he had been hired a little later.

Some opponents said they want gun-free schools. That is like advertising to the world "we're easy victims come get us". There are no massacres at police stations.

Most of what I will talk about today are the efforts of the Department of Education to help public schools achieve better academics. First, I want to mention a couple of philosophical issues.

I believe the most interesting philosophical divide in our country today is between people like myself who believe in the traditional American value of individual merit and those who want to substitute racial preferences. Focus on racial preferences does nothing to encourage hard work, conscientiousness or creativity.

If our country adopts that philosophy, we will become a mediocre third world nation, and China will call the shots in the world. Imagine a world like that. If you look up school report cards on the Department of Education website, you will see that I have required the districts and charter schools to answer questions about these kinds of philosophical issues and published their answers on the report cards. Parents will be informed if the schools are serious about teaching academics or promoting woke ideology. This is important now that parents have choices.

I started fighting critical race theory when I fought against ethnic studies in the Tucson district in 2007. For a long time, I felt like a voice in the wilderness. But when television stations started referring to critical race theory as CRT I knew that the world had caught up to me. I will always be committed to this philosophical fight.

The second issue is this: biological males have no business in girls' sports, showers, or locker rooms. News sources are filled with stories about girls who worked hard to qualify for a team, perhaps get a scholarship for college, or even qualify for the Olympics, and then had their dreams shattered when they had to compete against a biological male with the advantages of male musculature. I am fighting this battle in court as we speak and pledge to never stop fighting for the right of girls under title IX to compete, excel, and take their rightful place on the winner's podium. The news media like to write about controversies, which is understandable. But I am hoping they will also write about that which absorbs 90% of my time and energy, and that of the Department of Education, which is helping our public schools improve their academics.

First, I'm going to tell you a story: In 1959 Singapore received its independence. The Prime Minister of Singapore visited a Caribbean country that had also just gotten its independence and was at about the same economic level of development as Singapore. They exchanged views on how they would shape the future. The Prime Minister of the Caribbean country said he would focus on agricultural development. The Prime Minister of Singapore said he would focus on education. Eventually, Singapore would have about 100 times the per capital income of the Caribbean country.

The future belongs to the educated. Parents want their children to have a good academic education so they can have a successful future. People without children want the country to be successful, which is not possible without a good education system.

James Carville became famous for making a sign saying that it's the economy stupid. If I were to make a sign, it would say it's the academic level of education.

I have 15 initiatives designed to help the schools improve their academics and have passed out a list of those initiatives. They are in random order, not order of importance; all are important. I am personally involved in every one, so I can answer any questions you have about any of them. I can also answer any questions that you want to ask me about controversies. But for the rest of my presentation today, I'm going to focus on quick summaries of each of the 15 initiatives.

Just before taking office in 2023 I had received an email from a consultant who specialized in helping failing schools. He said that the schools had not had any help from the Department of Education in many years. The department had simply sat in judgment of them. My philosophy is the opposite of that. We cannot avoid monitoring. That is part of our job. But our main duty is to do everything we can to help the schools improve.

So, before I took office we developed the following mission statement: the Department of Education is a service organization dedicated to raising academic results and empowering parents.

I recently had a conversation with a secretary who had served in the department for many years, through different administrations. She told me she would frequently go with program specialists in their visits to schools. The people in the schools would be nervous that the Department of Education was coming to judge them. But now, under my administration, they welcomed us, knowing we were there to help. Yes, I said. That's exactly what I wanted.

The first initiative on the list is a good example of that. Improvement teams of highly qualified teachers and administrators visit the schools to help them improve. One of their projects focuses on the bottom 5% of schools in test scores. After two years of our project, 70% of these schools were no longer in the bottom 5%.

I will take two initiatives out of order:

Eighth is teacher retention and recruitment. Last year when I spoke to you, I described a crisis that we have, that more teachers are leaving the profession than are coming into the classroom. There were efforts to increase teacher salaries and to pass a bill to give administrators incentives to support teachers on issues of discipline, but they did not succeed last year. I hope they will succeed this year. We must renew Prop 123 and increase the income from the land trust, which is overflowing with money, to increase teacher salaries. We should also deal with the aggregate control limit promptly so schools are not in a panic in the last minute that they could lose 60% of their budget and have to lay off 60% of their teachers. Eleventh is safety which I spoke about earlier. We have increased the number of schools with police officers to protect

students and staff from 190 to 565. Pursuant to your legislation, money left over after all schools that ask for a police officer have received one is to be allocated to counselors and social workers. Those paid for by the state increased from 565 to 630.

The second initiative is leadership training. Leadership is crucial. There is no such thing as a great school or a great district without a great leader. To date this section of the department has trained 2900 principals and other leaders. At the end of the course the attendees asked whether they would recommend the course to others. 100% of principals and other leaders have said yes, which is why the number of trainings have expanded so dramatically.

Third is data that informs instruction. This is a chart from our website that shows test scores on the Y axis and degree of poverty on the X axis. The school that is not doing well can go up the vertical line and find schools with the same degree of poverty that are doing better on their test scores. They can then learn from those schools how they can improve.

One of the things we learned from the data we collected is shown on the screen. It is a list of schools with 80 or 90% graduation rates and under 10% proficiency rates and in some cases 2 or 3%. These schools are issuing fraudulent diplomas. Companies are noticing. CEOs are telling me that they have applicants come with high school diplomas without the skills they expect from a high school graduate.

Even back when I was in the legislature, I was known as someone who crusades for excellence against mediocrity. We cannot have excellence if we graduate students who have not learned anything. Between 2003 and 2011 we had an AIMS test that students had to pass to graduate. The cut score was set at a reasonable level, and the students had five chances to pass a sophomore level test, so I never heard of anyone who was willing to study who could not graduate. But I did hear a lot about students who failed the first or second time and studied really hard to pass so that they could graduate. Unfortunately, when I left this office to become Attorney General that requirement was repealed. We need to bring a modified version of it back. Senator Kavanagh has been kind enough to introduce a bill in the Senate to require that, to graduate, a student either must pass the high school test with a reasonable cut off level, and multiple chances to pass, or alternatively be certified for a trade in a career technical education program. I hope when that bill comes to the house it will have your careful consideration. Students need to be competent in either ACT or a career ready program in order to achieve excellence.

Fourth is Move on When Reading. Our state has long had the policy that students in the third grade who cannot yet read should not go to the fourth grade. But there was a loophole where the district superintendent could say that a student who had not tested proficient in reading but had made sufficient progress could move on to the fourth grade. This loophole was abused and too many students that did not read went onto the fourth grade. Working with the state board, we have closed that loophole. Again, our most important role is to help. We have 34 coaches who visit first grades and teach the teachers the science of reading.

Fifth is teaching English to English language learners. In 2000 the voters overwhelmingly

passed an initiative requiring that students be taught English through structured English immersion and not through bilingual education. When I first took office in 2003, bilingual education was common. The percentage of students who became proficient in English in one year was a pathetic 4%. At that rate almost no one would eventually become Proficient in English, and they would fail in the economy. We instituted structured English immersion and got the rate up to 31% in one year. At that rate almost everyone becomes proficient in English. This success was due in large part to intensive training of teachers. In 2010 I was elected Arizona Attorney General and no longer Superintendent of Schools, and my successors did not continue the training. Proficiency rates plummeted. Now the teachers are again getting the training they need. Structured English immersion districts are outperforming the ten districts that held on to dual language 3 to 1.

Sixth is helping our colleges of education do a better job of Preparing teachers for the classroom. I serve on the Board of Regents and work hard to encourage Colleges of Education to substitute courses that give teachers the skills needed to teach effectively, for courses that do not.

Seventh is a radical expansion of what used to be called vocational education and is now called career technical education. Our goal is that every student graduates college or career ready. If a student does not plan to go forward with education, that student should have a skill that will enable the student to get a well-paying job. For this purpose, we formed the Arizona Education Economic Commission. Many of Arizona's largest corporations participate and let us know the skills that our CTE teachers must teach for students to qualify for good jobs with that company.

Ninth is a County consortium. We are working with County superintendents to bring more effective professional development into the classrooms in rural areas. As an example, our work with Yuma County has brought 1200 educators to our joint professional development classes.

Tenth is tutoring. We allocated \$40 million of federal money to free tutoring to anyone whose parents applied. 22% of the students who got tutoring made six months progress in six weeks – half a year's progress in a six-week tutoring session.

Twelfth is Character Education. Someone with character but no academic achievement is powerless, but someone with academic achievement but no character is dangerous. Our favored character education program is character counts, and this past year we established a student parent character counts advisory cadre. We have also approved nine other character programs that schools can choose if they prefer and receive state funding.

Thirteenth is red tape reduction, so teachers and staff can focus more on educating students. We reduced the needs assessment from 168 questions to 20 and reduced testing time for kindergarten teachers by 80%.

Fourteenth is the Arizona Digital Education Library, a library of 14,000 videos on our website where teachers can watch a master teach a given subject, or even use the video with the class. 75 are internally produced videos, 12,500 are through our partnership with Khan Academy, and 2,200 are from Prager.

Fifteenth and last is perhaps the most revolutionary change in today's world to improve academic outcomes. This is the best program we have found for education application of artificial intelligence. It is from Khan academy and is called Khanmigo. It does not substitute for teachers; it helps them. It gives them the equivalent of two assistants to do the grunt work so they can concentrate on creative teaching. Studies show the most effective means of teaching is one on one tutoring. We cannot afford to hire a million tutors for our million students, but Khanmigo gives every student a tutor. It does not answer their questions; it asks them questions to lead them to the answers – the Socratic method. Today, when a teacher gives a test, some students get 90%, others get 70%. Those with 70% are moved to the next grade, missing 30% of the knowledge they need for continuing their studies. They are lost. With Khanmigo, the teacher can say “here is what you did not learn, use Khanmigo to tutor you on that subject. “Then all students move on with 90% or more of the knowledge. We have paid \$1.5 million to Khanmigo to cover the first 100,000 students. The rest can be covered for \$25 per student. We will work hard to convince public schools that it is worth it. This is the future, and we are making the tools available today.

At the outset I described our mission statement that the Department of Education is a service organization committed to raising academic outcomes and empower parents. It only remains to refer to empowering parents. We established a hotline, so parents not satisfied With responses from the districts could contact us directly. And of course there are Empowerment Scholarship Accounts. We have families with, say, three children. Two are doing fine in the neighborhood school. But even a good school cannot necessarily meet the needs of all students. The third child's needs are not being met. So, with ESA's, the parents can find a school that meets the needs of the third child. It is hard to understand how anyone could think the family should not have the ability for the third child's needs to be met.

Thank you for inviting me and being so attentive. I'm now happy to take your questions.