



Congratulations on your candidacy for the Arizona Legislature. Stand for Children is a non-partisan, non-profit education advocacy organization. Our mission is to ensure all Arizona students graduate from high school prepared for, and with access to, college and career opportunities. We do this by educating and empowering community members, advocating for effective policies, ensuring strong policy implementation, and supporting courageous leaders at the ballot box.

In the 2018 election cycle, Stand for Children will consider endorsing candidates aligned with our mission and current policy priorities. In the questionnaire below please provide responses indicating your position on our key focus areas. Please limit your overall responses to 6 pages.

Thank you for your willingness to share your perspectives and preferences regarding public education.

CANDIDATE INFORMATION

Candidate's Name: Denise "Mitzi" Epstein

Office Sought: Arizona House of Representatives Legislative District (LD): 18

Party Affiliation: Democrat

E-Mail Address(es): Mitzi@azeps.net Phone: 480-704-4624

Alternate Campaign Contact: Campaign Website: <https://www.mitziepstein.com>

Education (Please note highest degree achieved): Bachelors Computer Science, Cum Laude, and courses toward MBA

Previous Elected Office(s) Held: LD18 State Representative (2016 - Present), Kyrene Elementary School District Governing Board

Current Profession: LD 18 State Representative

Please describe why you are qualified for the office sought:

I have experience as a small business owner, state PTA leader, AYSO Soccer leader, and lifelong community problem solver. For over 25 years, I have been working at the community and state levels to strengthen the economy. As a former Kyrene school board member, I recognize that local businesses and neighborhood schools are vital for our community's economy and quality of life. As a computer systems analyst for multinational companies I worked to make efficiencies and improve the process of doing business.

As a legislator, I have accomplished my goals by building coalitions and reaching across the aisle to find solutions. By bringing together all stakeholders and Republicans and Democrats, we have solved issues effectively. As one of the authors of a letter on school safety that was signed and delivered by Democrats and Republicans, I stand by my record of finding common ground for sensible solutions.

One of my best accomplishments in these first two years has been in preventing youth suicide. Rates of suicide in Arizona are alarming. I convened a statewide stakeholder group of experts, parents, survivors, and advocates. We developed sets of solutions. When I first proposed them to my colleagues across the aisle in January, it was a no-go. But with persistence, respectful relationships, and caring, we achieved a major swing in Arizona. Previously, AHCCCS and DHS and ADE did not communicate on the topic and it was not high on any department's priority list. I championed adding a full time Suicide Prevention Coordinator in the Budget, and we have achieved that. Further, because of our grassroots advocacy and efforts to improve awareness, AHCCCS has elevated the job to report to the CMO, Chief Medical Officer, and is developing a full array of programs to prevent suicide in Arizona. Most importantly to the parents in my stakeholder committee, AHCCCS is now working with the Department of Education on specific prevention plans. I applaud the professionals in AHCCCS and ADE for their work and help in this cause.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What are your top three priorities for public education in Arizona?

A. Restore Education Funding:

Our schools are hurting. That impacts our economy now and in the future. Teachers need a pay raise. We must take actions to keep our best teachers here, because we are losing them to states that financially support education better than Arizona does. For many teachers, raising a family is very difficult on current salaries. Many must rely on multiple jobs, or public supports to create sufficient income. Or they leave the state. The profession of teaching must be elevated and that shift in respect must be heard from our elected legislators.

Increasing teachers' pay is only one aspect of schools that requires more funding. Buildings, support staff, class sizes, electives, behavior issues, and academic achievement – all are in need of more money. I am not calling for sky-high funding. Today's students deserve what my children had in Arizona schools ten years ago.

- B. Counseling, the arts, PE, world languages, music, CTE, and other elective courses are vital.

Elective skills prepare our students for global competition. Parents want the school down the street to offer a comprehensive education; they do not want to have to drive to a special school. Arizona needs to educate the whole child in every public school, so that every child can live up to his or her full potential.

To keep electives strong in schools, they need to be incorporated into our school labels better. Schools and teachers should get credit for teaching children to perform music, not only for teaching children to take a reading test. If our school labels are not comprehensive, very soon our schools will not be comprehensive.

Both activist movements, #RedForEd and #MarchForOurLives, clamored for more school counselors. They are needed to teach students skills in SEL- Social Emotional Learning, to be successful in assertiveness, empathy, communication, and so on.

- C. Accountability and Transparency improve schools.

Parents, teachers, retirees, businesses, and the whole community have the Right to be heard in schools that use public dollars. The voice of the community helps to keep quality high and costs down. Taxpayers have the right to demand your tax dollars are used efficiently. I will fight for your rights to BOTH: school choice AND a Voice to be heard.

2. What state policy change(s) do you believe could allow more Arizona children attend a quality school, be taught by an effective teacher and be provided with opportunities to succeed?

The number one way to secure a high-quality education for our students is simply through adequate funding of our schools. Yes, there are many other issues with education that must be confronted and many other opportunities to improve our schools. New technologies and teaching styles ought to be brought into the classrooms in order to foster an innovative learning environment. However, when compared to the raw calculation of dollars and cents, these issues and aspirations cannot be our top priority. Our schools have been systematically starved of funds by the state government, which jeopardizes our students' well-being both physically and educationally.

Until our schools have the funding to make infrastructure repairs, students will live with an element of insecurity about the soundness of the roof over head. Until our schools have the funding to pay teachers a decent salary we will fail to attract the best educators. Until our schools have the funding to hire more guidance counselors and special education teachers, students struggling with issues outside of the classroom will continue to be left behind. The number one policy to improve education in this state is not a radical change to the structure or focus of education, but simply for the legislature to put its money where its mouth is, and fully restore education funding.

3. What role should the state play in holding schools accountable for student academic growth and achievement?

Any organization that accepts public funding must also be accountable to parents, families and taxpayers. Accountability measures should be in place for financial and academic activities.

Financial Transparency: Parents and taxpayers should have access to reports of income and expenses at the school level, and at the appropriate aggregated level; school district or charter owner. Audits should be required of charter schools as well as district schools. Audits should be tools used to improve school functions and budget priorities, not cudgels to lay blame. With appropriate audits and public reporting, the school community can be an asset to the school officials in continuous improvement. -- for schools that accept public funding.

Accountability for Achievement: School staff and board members must be held accountable for the outcomes and the processes of the school. If something is wrong for even one student, that student's family must be able to exercise their right to do either: leave the school or work with the school to make it better.

Providing only the choice to leave the school is not really a choice. Laws and policies should protect the rights of parents, teachers, and taxpayers to be heard in developing school plans. – for schools that accept public funding. **Testing:** Except under dire personal situations, every child should take a standards-based test most years after 2nd grade. However, policy makers should not read too much into that one snapshot of one day. Portfolio evaluations that include test scores, homework, projects, performances, and other evidence of learning should be part of evaluations for schools and teachers. – for schools that accept public funding.

Currently, Stand for Children Arizona is focused on several policy areas: Early Literacy and Grade-Level Reading, English Language Instruction and School Finance. The following questions address those priorities.

Early Literacy & Grade-Level Reading

Based on the Spring 2017 statewide assessment, 56% of Arizona students cannot read on grade-level by the end of third grade, meaning only 44% of students are reading on grade-level. Scores have improved overall, but with the statewide goal of 72% of 3rd graders reading on grade-level by 2030, we have a long way to go. When looking at the data by school and region, it shows the improvement is concentrated in a small percentage of schools while many Arizona schools struggle to increase students' reading ability (see attached data sheet). Reading proficiency at this point in a student's academic career is vitally important. Research shows failure to read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade is linked to ongoing academic struggles, failure to graduate high school on time, and it dramatically reduces and creates barriers to entry into a postsecondary institution or career opportunities.

4. Would you support providing targeted funding and evidence-based programs, such as reading coaches and summer school, to improve the reading proficiency of Arizona students?

Depending on the details, probably yes.

5. Would you support state funding for early learning opportunities such as full-day kindergarten or quality pre-school for 3 and 4-year olds?

Depending on the details, probably yes. Full Day Kindergarten has been proven to help reading scores immensely. Arizona should invest in a plan that targets funding for full day kindergarten to the places where it will create the best results. Eventually, full day kindergarten should be funded for every child whose family chooses it. For the time being, we need to develop practical plans to use limited funds optimally.

Most importantly, since I am not an expert on reading and childhood development, I turn to professional educators for their recommendations. I would work with them to make balanced, practical plans.

English Language Learners (ELL)

Current state policies regarding ELL students were adopted in response to a lawsuit and limited by voter-protected requirements. They have been in place for 12 years. These policies use a one-size fits all approach, unlike any other education policy. During the 2018 legislative session, Stand moved H.B. 2435 through the process. The bill allowed for flexibility at the local level while preserving voter mandates and it provided for needed transparency and accountability. HB 2435 passed unanimously out of the House and Senate Education committees. Unfortunately, the bill failed to get a final vote in the last days of the session as time ran out.

6. Would you support legislation similar to HB 2435 to change current ELL instructional requirements in order to provide local flexibility, increased accountability and transparency and more efficient use of funds?

Providing reports and analyses of the ELL models are good steps in the right direction. The bipartisan process worked well to develop a good solution.

I was glad to support it in the House COW and Third Read.

7. Would you sign a pledge to support similar legislation, if elected?

I will sign a pledge to always stand up for children's education, safety, rights, and well-being.

8. If not, what policies would you support to improve ELL instruction?

School Finance

Arizona's current school finance system is over 30 years old. It was designed to support local school districts funded by their taxpayers with the state providing what could not be raised locally. Since that time, Arizona's public-school system has expanded to include a myriad of choices: open enrollment, charter schools and Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs); many students don't attend their local community school. The current system is outdated and continues to increase reliance on state funding. State policies which continue to limit the ability to raise revenue have resulted in the chronic underfunding of public schools. Short-term solutions and targeted investments fail to address the underlying problem. Stand for Children advocates for sufficient funding for all Arizona students, regardless of where they live or what type of school they attend.

9. What would you do or support to increase public school funding to at least the national average?

Public education funding is a state responsibility. As such, our current system of over-reliance on local property owners is inappropriate, as well as not working for the reasons you stated. We must stop balancing our budgets annually with accounting gimmicks and unwarranted hopes for future years' bounty.

Arizonans need a reliable, dedicated source of funding for public schools. We need to develop a balanced revenue system, and we need to do that work transparently in open meetings. Our current tax system is badly regressive. As we work on revenue for schools, we must not overtax those that are already paying more than their fair share. I oppose increased TPT taxes because middle-income and low-income earners pay more than their fair share of it. We need to stop more carve-outs; and close the loopholes that cause unfairly high tax rates on everyday Arizonans.

Also, as we increase funding for public education, we must not create a leaky bucket. Funding to private schools drains dollars away from public schools but the costs remain. Taxpayers deserve accountability for their tax dollars, and organizations that accept such funding must be held accountable to taxpayers with transparent reporting and comprehensive measures of learning and children's safety.

10. How do you plan to grow state revenue, establish new revenue sources and provide additional resources for education?

Like all taxpayers, I want every tax dollar to be used wisely, to pinch as much value from it as possible. We need to review the many tax loopholes that have been enacted in the past 28 years to determine which are helping all Arizonans in a fair way, and which are draining our state and causing our schools to suffer.

To grow, Arizona must make public education the top priority. From birth through college or career training, the more we make high quality education available to everybody, the more success we will all have.

Teachers are job-makers! Arizonans love our independence! We want to not just learn how to get a job, but how to make a job for ourselves and for others. By supporting local Arizona entrepreneurs with quality education, capital, and with practical business and technical advice, our economy will thrive, and our quality of life will be great!

Below, please include any additional information you believe Stand for Children should know about your priorities: