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**Summit summons**

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Yes, another one, to structure a system for useful data on education

You might say: Not another summit.

It seems like every time you turn around, there's a statewide task force, a blue ribbon committee or a high-level meeting devoted to sorting out some major issue du jour.

But Arizona needs a summit of business leaders, educators and researchers to come up with a way to gather information about education in the state.

You might say: Not more information.

It seems like every time you turn around, there's a new study to digest, a new finding to consider or a new ranking that puts Arizona at the bottom of some educational heap.

Information may be plentiful. But researchers from the state's three universities contributed to a report compiled by Arizona Education Policy Initiative that found a troubling shortage of meaningful information.

"Arizona often lacks adequate data to make important education policy decisions," says Alex Molnar, director of the Education Policy Studies Lab at Arizona State University.

The "common thread" researchers found in subjects as varied as dropout rates and early childhood education was a "lack of data, conflicting data, or data that cannot be cross-referenced," he says.

That means Arizona schools might be a lot better than people think. Or a lot worse.

It means the structured data necessary to evaluate funding and policy is missing. Consider just a

few of the questions that cannot be answered:

- How well do teacher-training programs prepare teachers?
- What is the practical impact of Proposition 203, a six-tenths of a cent sales tax for education that was approved by voters in 2000 and included accountability measures?
- What is the real teacher/student ratio? (A clue: It's not the same as the number of students divided by the number of teachers, because some teachers are not assigned to jobs in the classroom, says David Garcia, senior researcher at ThinkAZ, a Phoenix think tank.)

With schools facing the loss of federal funding and possible state sanctions for failing to meet tough, new standards, reliable information is essential. Without it, schools cannot accurately assess the changes they are making.

For example, Arizona's system for labeling schools was changed from 2002, when only three schools statewide were rated as "excelling," to 2003, when 132 schools got that designation.

Did all those schools really improve? Or did they benefit from lower standards?

Arizona must answer those and many other questions with concrete data, not ideological or philosophical babble.

Doing that, says Garcia, means gathering an array of state leaders to begin developing a statewide information tracking system for Arizona education.

It means organizing a summit.

Molnar says the Arizona Education Policy Initiative aims to prod that process.

The state's business leaders, the Department of Education and elected officials ought to join in.

This summit has the potential to make a real difference.