Lack of education data has state largely in dark

Op-ed
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by

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What do we know about public education in Arizona? Not as much as we should, according to a report released last week by the Arizona Education Policy Initiative.

The report assesses the state of key areas such as early education, English Language Learning, teacher quality, school choice, student academic performance and school funding. The authors, experts from Arizona's three public universities, contributed recommendations for improving public education in Arizona.

Unfortunately, in many instances, the authors could not answer important education policy questions because the state lacks the necessary data.

"The Condition of Pre-K-12 Education in Arizona: 2004" paints a sobering picture of Arizona's education information infrastructure. In one key area after another, the report's authors note that the state either has no data or the data are incomplete, conflicting, inadequate or inaccessible.

As a result, vital questions cannot be answered. The unanswered policy questions are important to everyone with a stake in Arizona public education:

• What is Arizona's dropout rate?

• How many graduates of Arizona's teacher education programs are actually teaching?

• Of those, how many are teaching in Arizona?

• Does Arizona's tuition tax credit program help poor children attending public schools transfer to private schools, or primarily subsidize students already in private schools?

• What is the effect of eliminating bilingual education on the academic achievement of English Language Learners?

• Do teachers and administrators who graduate from approved certification programs perform better than other teachers and administrators?
We don't have good answers to any of these essential questions and many more that are equally important.

Without adequate information, Arizona's policymakers have, in effect, been gambling with the quality of education Arizona's children receive and the state's economic prospects. Since adequate information is rarely available, ideology has tended to trump all other considerations.

The exact reasons Arizona education policymaking is starved for data are not entirely clear. Politically, it is reasonably certain that people who benefit from the status quo are quite content to let sleeping dogs lie. The systematic collection and expert analysis of relevant data threatens to shake things up.

Another major factor is the lack of research-based expertise in key agencies and leadership without a long-term perspective on the importance of data in public policy. Too often, state agencies such as the Arizona Department of Education are forced to focus scant resources on crisis management or the reform de jour.

As a result, the collection and analysis of information is often done poorly or overlooked entirely. This makes it difficult if not impossible to track changes in the performance of Arizona's public education system.

The education department is revising its Student Accountability Information System database. Launched in the mid-'90s, SAIS was designed to track education funding. Implementation has been hampered by the lack of resources and because SAIS is not compatible with the reporting systems in most school districts.

The education department is attempting to revamp SAIS, and the business community has invested time and expertise to help. These are positive steps. It is unlikely, however, that even a modified SAIS system can be used to answer the questions raised by the Condition of Education report.

What, then, is to be done?

I believe it is time to have an "education information summit" attended by representatives of the governor's office, the Legislature, key state agencies such as the education department and the State Readiness Board, Arizona's universities and community colleges, education interest groups, the business community and civic leaders.

The purpose of the summit will be to formulate a state education information strategy, describe the characteristics of an information system capable of addressing the kind of policy questions raised in the AEPI report and to mobilize the state to create and support the information infrastructure it needs to ensure that a high-quality, equitable public education is available for every Arizona student.

This autumn, the Arizona Education Policy Initiative will organize the summit and get the ball rolling.