

EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ROUNDTABLE MINUTES

December 3, 2025

The Education and Workforce Development Roundtable of the City of Mesa met in The Studios at Mesa City Center, 59 E. 1st St., on December 3, 2025, at 1:30 p.m.

BOARDMEMBERS PRESENT

Councilmember Heredia, Chair
Dr. Erica Copeland (Designee for Dr. Perry Berry)
Candice Copple
Dr. Richard Daniel
Dr. Joseph Foy*
Sally Harrison
Marcie Hutchinson
David Loutzenheiser
Dr. Shane McCord
Rich Nickel
Renee Parker (Designee for Dr. Matthew Strom)
Jenny Jackson Robinson
Matt Sexton (Designee for David Williams)
Vince Yanez

BOARDMEMBERS ABSENT

Kristen Sorensen
Dr. Chad Wilson

COUNCIL PRESENT

None

STAFF PRESENT

Andrea Alicoate
Lisa Cartwright-Harris
Holly Moseley
Rafaella Safarian
Sarah Tolar

(*Participated in the meeting through the use of video conference equipment.)

Chairperson Heredia conducted a roll call.

Chairperson Heredia excused Boardmembers Sorensen and Wilson from the entire meeting.

Chairperson Heredia excused Boardmember Daniel from the beginning of the meeting; he arrived at 1:40 p.m.

1. Call meeting to order, welcome announcements and reminders from the Chair.

Chairperson Heredia called the meeting to order and pointed out the 2026 meeting schedule. He welcomed Designee Dr. Erica Copeland, Associate Superintendent at Higley Unified School District; Designee Renee Parker, Director of Community Partnerships at Mesa Public Schools; and Designee Matt Sexton, Community Development Manager at Meta.

2. Take action on selecting Education and Workforce Development Roundtable Vice Chair for new term.

Education and Workforce Administrator Sarah Tolar displayed a PowerPoint presentation. **(See Attachment 1)**

Chairperson Heredia noted the need to select a new vice chairperson to fill the vacancy created by Councilmember Spilsbury's departure and nominated Boardmember Copple for the position. It was moved by Chairperson Heredia, seconded by Boardmember Harrison, that Boardmember Copple be appointed as Vice Chairperson of the Education and Workforce Development Roundtable for the remaining term ending June 30, 2026.

Upon tabulation of votes, it showed:

AYES– Heredia–Copeland–Copple–Daniel–Foy–Harrison–Hutchinson–Loutzenheizer–McCord–Nickel–Parker–Jackson Robinson–Sexton–Yanez
NAYS – None
ABSENT – Sorensen–Wilson

Chairperson Heredia declared the motion carried unanimously by those present.

Ms. Tolar confirmed that the Education and Workforce Development Roundtable (EWDR) is to be comprised of seventeen (17) members; nine (9) standing and eight (8) appointed members. She stated that the Mayor and Council will appoint a replacement standing member and reviewed the eligibility criteria for the position. (See Page 3 of Attachment 1)

3. Take action to approve the Roundtable Meeting Minutes from September 3, 2025.

It was moved by Boardmember Jackson Robinson, seconded by Boardmember Daniel, that the September 3, 2025, Education and Workforce Development Roundtable meeting minutes be approved.

Upon tabulation of votes, it showed:

AYES– Heredia–Copeland–Copple–Daniel–Foy–Harrison–Hutchinson–Loutzenheizer–McCord–Nickel–Parker–Jackson Robinson–Sexton–Yanez
NAYS – None
ABSENT – Sorensen–Wilson

Chairperson Heredia declared the motion carried unanimously by those present.

4. City staff to provide overview and debrief on Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy's progress and next steps.

Ms. Tolar discussed the progress being made by the Arizona Institute for Education and The Economy (AIEE) and provided a brief overview of the presentation from the September 3, 2025, EWDR meeting. She reviewed AIEE's theory of change in action and reported the positive

feedback received from local industry partners who are engaged in the initiative. She explained that AIEE is developing a playbook to guide innovation in education across Arizona that will highlight best practices, identify what policy changes may be needed, and offer tools that districts can use to scale innovation. She added that advocacy organizations are involved in supporting this work and that the guidance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) will be included to help educators and students effectively use these resources. (See Pages 4 through 6 of Attachment 1)

Ms. Tolar highlighted the AIEE State 48 Graduate Profile, which is based on the principle that students may pursue different pathways, while still being prepared for any of the four future options identified in the profile, including the ability to return for additional education as needed. She noted that the profile identifies eight essential skills developed collaboratively by schools, businesses, and industry partners to reflect what graduates need for success. (See Pages 7 and 8 of Attachment 1)

Ms. Tolar commented that at the recent statewide Redesign Day, participants from across Arizona gathered to help bridge gaps in the education system. She stated that the attendees worked in regional groups to select a priority challenge, assess the current conditions, identify a desired future state, discuss the steps needed to achieve that outcome, and reviewed models from other states to help inform their discussion. She added that the session emphasized possibilities rather than limitations to encourage forward-focused problem-solving and noted that AIEE will continue to convene the groups to support ongoing collaboration. She highlighted that AIEE has published statewide AI guidance, created by a cross-sector team, to help schools implement AI in ways that strengthen programming and promote innovative, future-oriented practices. (See Pages 9 and 10 of Attachment 1)

Ms. Tolar pointed out that the full document and resources can be viewed using the QR Code located on page 7 of the presentation.

5. Hear report from Rich Nickel, Education Forward President and CEO, on statewide education attainment report.

Boardmember Nickel encouraged members to review the materials provided independently to ensure full understanding of the information. He reported that Education Forward Arizona has been in existence for four years and is supported by three non-profit partners working collectively to strengthen the educational voice in Arizona. He noted that their efforts include examining historic and future trends in education, engaging statewide leadership, and gathering input from rural and remote regions to inform a statewide vision. He stated that an updated strategic framework was released in November 2025, which includes revisions to Education Forward Arizona's vision and mission to better reflect current priorities in policy, programming, and workforce alignment. (See Pages 11 through 13 of Attachment 1)

Mr. Nickel outlined the Achieve60AZ initiative with the goal of increasing post-secondary education attainment across Arizona from the current rate of 49% to 60% by 2030. He reported that Arizona has achieved approximately 280,000 additional degrees and credentials toward this objective, with each percentage point representing approximately 35,000 to 40,000 individuals. He verified that progress is being measured using the Education Progress Meter, with early learning indicators remaining a priority focus. He noted the continued support for several services and programs that impact students and educators, including 870 scholarships awarded totaling \$2.4 million and Ask Benji, a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) support chatbot that serves approximately 450,000 high school students and parents. He referenced the

Everything to Gain public awareness group that advocates for expanding scholarship programs, augmenting pay for teachers, and increasing dual enrollment plans. He remarked that an increase in higher education enrollment by 20% could lead to more than \$5 billion in economic gain for Arizona annually. (See Pages 14 through 19 of Attachment 1)

Mr. Nickel reviewed recent statewide polling, and noted that voters' top concerns include homelessness, housing, healthcare, and quality-of-life issues. He stated that while education remains a high priority across demographic groups, voters identified affordability, student debt, childcare challenges, and underfunding of K–12 public schools as significant concerns. He reported ratings for community colleges and universities remain generally positive, and local perceptions of school districts show modest improvement. (See Pages 20 through 24 of Attachment 1)

Mr. Nickel presented polling data regarding the Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) Program and stated that the results indicated 22% favorable, 22% unfavorable, 32% unfamiliar, and 25% with no opinion. He noted that respondents expressed concerns related to transparency and accountability, but results confirm that after receiving additional information, approximately 80% of respondents supported policy measures to require stronger financial controls, audits, reporting requirements, and outcome tracking. (See Pages 25 through 27 of Attachment 1)

Mr. Nickel reported that voters overwhelmingly believe elected leaders should take additional action to strengthen the workforce pipeline and reduce reliance on importing talent from other states. He added that broad support exists for policies that expand access to post-secondary opportunities, reduce barriers to enrollment, and increase options for career and technical education, online learning, and adult training programs. (See Pages 28 through 35 of Attachment 1)

In response to a question from Boardmember Copple, Mr. Nickel stated that uncertainty remains about whether the state will achieve the 60% attainment goal but affirmed that significant progress has been made. He emphasized the importance of expanding high-value credentials, improving data collection for adults aged 25 to 64, and strengthening the pipeline of younger learners.

In response to a comment from Chairperson Heredia, Mr. Nickel acknowledged significant disparities across socioeconomic and demographic indicators and emphasized the need to support populations that represent a growing share of Arizona's student body.

Responding to an inquiry by Boardmember Foy regarding data related to dual credit participation and its impact on enrollment in Arizona colleges and universities, Mr. Nickel stated that data is available for various regions and at the state level. He noted that Helios and the Phoenix Chamber are leading dual enrollment data efforts and that additional analysis will help make the information more accessible and actionable.

6. Hear presentation from Melinda Gulick, First Things First CEO, on early childhood issues and impact on economic and workforce development in Mesa.

- a. Discuss priorities, work and opportunities for engagement with City of Mesa.

Ms. Gulick presented information on early childhood education and its direct connection to long-term post-secondary attainment and emphasized that post-secondary success starts at birth. She noted that the First Things First program is funded through a voter-approved tobacco tax initiative

directing 40% of tobacco revenues to early childhood services. She highlighted research showing that 90% of brain development occurs before kindergarten and that early literacy, social-emotional development, and high-quality early learning are critical components of Arizona's graduate profile. She reported that the statewide goal is for 45% of children in Arizona, aged birth to five, to have access to high-quality early learning and confirmed that the current rate is 32%. (See Pages 36 and 37 of Attachment 1)

Ms. Gulick referenced a Harvard study demonstrating the long-term impact of early learning on academic outcomes and life trajectory. She cited findings from the School Readiness Task Force indicating that children who participate in high-quality early environments enter kindergarten better prepared, require fewer interventions throughout their academic career, and show improved social and emotional development. She explained that the statewide childcare crisis stems from multiple, compounding challenges, and stressed that demand for care far exceeds available supply. She stated childcare employees face low wages, minimal benefits, and limited opportunities for paid professional development, making it difficult for providers to retain staff. She said the cost of care often consumes 12–32% of household income, far above the 7% benchmark considered affordable. She pointed out that infant care can reach roughly \$25,000 per year, and overall childcare averages \$14,000–\$15,000 annually, frequently exceeding the cost of college tuition, resulting in many families being forced into debt just to secure needed care. (Pages 38 through 41 of Attachment 1)

Ms. Gulick remarked that childcare challenges have significant impacts on Arizona's working families and employers. She reported that these shortages result in substantial economic losses due to reduced workforce participation, employee turnover, and employer costs associated with vacancies. She emphasized that investing in childcare and early learning could generate an estimated \$2.5 billion in economic benefit, support increased workforce participation, and boost high school graduation rates by approximately 4,800 students per year. (See Pages 42 through 46 of Attachment 1)

Ms. Gulick highlighted several community-based initiatives currently underway across Arizona to address childcare shortages. She encouraged the EWDR to examine whether similar collaborative approaches could address Mesa's childcare gaps, especially as school closures affect community access to care. She reviewed additional community solutions such as employer-supported infant-at-work programs and public-private partnerships. (See Pages 47 through 49 of Attachment 1)

Ms. Gulick explained that the First Things First early childhood programs are primarily funded through tobacco tax revenues and state general funds; however, tobacco has become a declining revenue source, with collections down 47% since 2006, worsening the childcare funding crisis. She noted that Arizona's tax structure is outdated, as newer tobacco and nicotine products such as synthetic nicotine and nicotine pouches are not taxed and consumers have increasingly shifted to these products. She reported that current efforts to add vape and synthetic nicotine products to the taxable list face substantial political challenges and emphasized that resolving the funding shortfall is essential to investing in the future workforce. She identified that additional information is available via the QR code provided. (See Pages 50 through 57 of Attachment 1)

Responding to a comment from Mr. Nickel, Ms. Gulick said that the influx of federal investments made during the 2020 pandemic provided clear evidence of its positive impact. She pointed out that during that period the state's childcare progress measure was the only statewide education metric that improved.

In response to a question from Chairperson Heredia, Ms. Gulick commented that approximately 1,800 licensed providers contract with the Department of Economic Security (DES) to accept childcare subsidy funding and many statewide providers also receive support through First Things First scholarships. She pointed out that federally funded programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start serve approximately 17,000 children across Arizona.

Ms. Gulick discussed the emergence of new partners in early childhood education, including the Bezos Academy, which offers free, high-quality preschool programs and expands parental choice. She stated that recent preschool grant awards present an opportunity to better integrate the various players in the early learning system to ensure programs make sense for all families. She reported that the Bezos Academy currently operates sites in Mesa, Glendale, and Peoria, and discussions are taking place regarding how these programs can complement district offerings, alleviate pressure on Mesa Public Schools, and support families' needs. She stated that Head Start, the Bezos Academy, and local business leaders are engaged in ongoing conversations to align services and build on existing strengths within the community.

Chairperson Heredia thanked Ms. Gulick for the presentation.

Ms. Tolar asked the EWDR to consider engaging the business community and emphasized that childcare is fundamentally an economic development issue with significant impacts on employers. She noted the challenges facing Mesa, including the lack of affordable childcare and after-school care, and said that bringing business leaders together through a task force could help build shared understanding and support. She recommended partnering with the consultant currently working with First Things First, acknowledging that Mesa's size and diversity require tailored strategies. She stated that this approach could be a productive next step, drawing on successful models used in other communities to develop an effective, locally informed childcare strategy.

7. Roundtable members share out information regarding their involvement in recent and upcoming education or workforce-related events or programs.

Chairperson Heredia extended an invitation to the grand opening of the new Southeast Mesa Library at Gateway on Saturday, December 6, 2025, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Boardmember Hutchinson highlighted the Mesa Public Schools Career and Technical Education programs and encouraged EWDR members to sign up for the monthly newsletter by emailing degiles@mpsaz.org. She mentioned new micro-internship opportunities launching in January, which enable students to take ownership of tasks, offer fresh perspectives on workflow, and gain hands-on experience. She reminded the boardmembers of the spring hiring fair scheduled for April 28, 2026.

Boardmember Daniel announced that Mesa Community College recently celebrated its 60-year anniversary and expressed appreciation for the ongoing partnerships with the City of Mesa, the Mesa Chamber of Commerce, and Mesa Public Schools.

8. Call to the public.

There were no public comments.

9. Call for future agenda items.

There were no future agenda items discussed.

10. Adjourn.

Without objection, the Education and Workforce Development Roundtable meeting adjourned at 3:03 p.m.

I hereby certify that the foregoing minutes are a true and correct copy of the minutes of the Education and Workforce Development Roundtable meeting of the City of Mesa, Arizona, held on the 3rd day of December 2025. I further certify that the meeting was duly called and held and that a quorum was present.



HOLLY MOSELEY, CITY CLERK

sr
(Attachments – 1)

MESA

EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE

DEVELOPMENT ROUNDTABLE

December 3, 2025

2026 Meeting Dates

- February 11, 2026
- May 6, 2026
- August 19, 2026
- November 4, 2026

Mesa Education and Workforce Development Roundtable Resolution Appointed Member Criteria

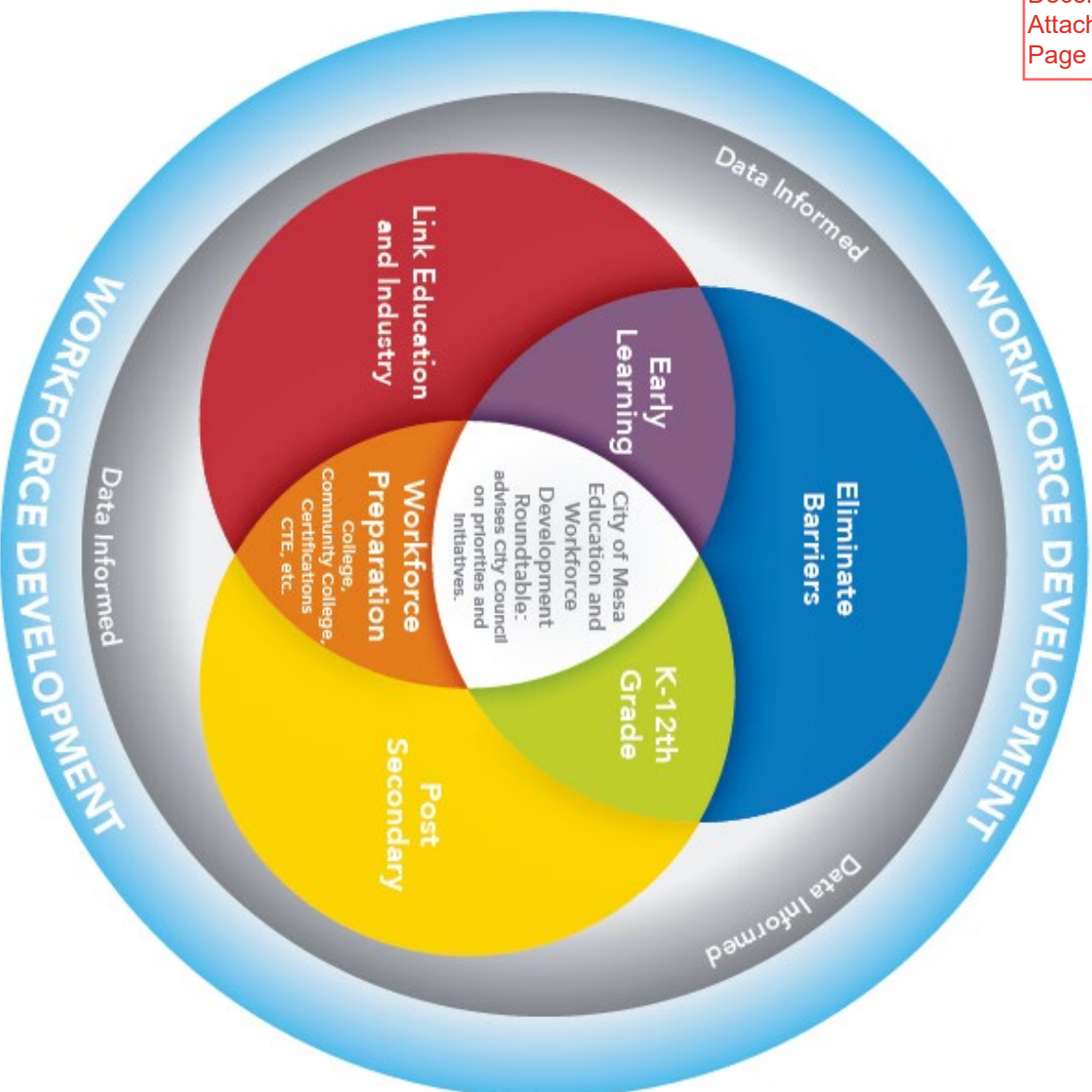
C. Appointed members.

1. Nine (9) people selected from the following categories will be appointed to the Roundtable by the Mayor and approved by the Council.
 - a. One (1) or two (2) members of the Council.
 - b. One (1) member of the Mesa Public Schools Governing Board.
 - c. One (1) to three (3) people who are each either: an executive director of an education focused nonprofit organization located in Arizona or designee; an early learning expert; or a professional in the field of diversity and inclusion.
 - d. One (1) or two (2) executives of businesses with Mesa offices or locations or designees.
 - e. One (1) educator currently employed at a school district or postsecondary education institute serving Mesa residents. This member must be a resident of Mesa.
 - f. One (1) parent or legal guardian of a student enrolled at a school district serving Mesa residents. This member must be a resident of Mesa.

**of Mesa
 Education and
 Workforce
 Development
 Roundtable**

Share expertise to coordinate goals, amplify resources, track data, and advise the City Council on the highest priorities that will strengthen, streamline, and align Mesa's education and workforce needs.

Strategic Focus Areas 2025



Eliminate Barriers:

Identify and address common barriers, including awareness, financial, and other challenges that impact access to resources, opportunities and experiences for students, educators, businesses, families, and community.



Link Education and Industry:

Deliberate communication between industry and education partners. Facilitate a common understanding of skills, opportunities and experiences.



Post-Secondary:

Communicate the importance of post-secondary training, education, certification, opportunities and benefits.



Data Informed:

Measure outcomes, identify patterns and guide discussion by tracking community and city-wide data.



Workforce Development:

- Continue to bring industry to connect directly with education partners.
- Identify CTE pathways that align with high growth and in-demand industries.
- Prioritize promotion and awareness of opportunities.



**ARIZONA INSTITUTE
FOR EDUCATION &
THE ECONOMY**

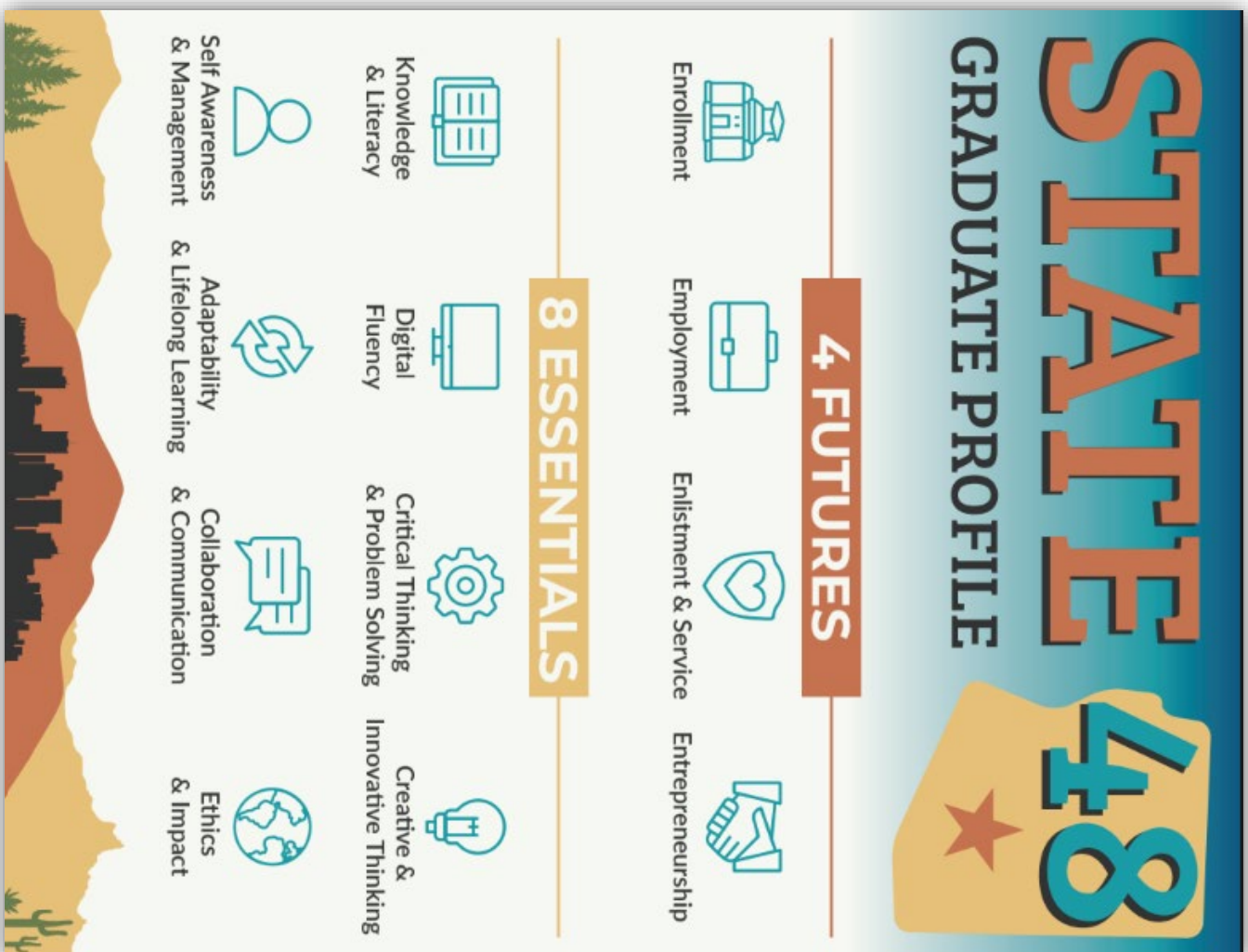
NAU NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

Future of School. Future of Work. Future of Arizona.

Our Theory of Change in Action

Initial Big Bets

With the State 48 Graduate Profile as Arizona's new north star, the Innovation Playbook and Education and Workforce Innovation Sandbox will provide statewide and local ecosystems the tools, policy flexibilities, and inspiration to help schools modernize, experiment responsibly, and accelerate real change, ensuring every graduate is future proof - fully equipped to live, work, and thrive in Arizona and beyond.







AIEE documents and resources:



[Bit.ly/42PDtwh](https://bit.ly/42PDtwh)





4 FUTURES





ST SECONDARY PATHS TO PURPOSE

 <p>Enrollment</p>	<p>High school graduates enroll in an accredited postsecondary institution (community college, university, or technical school) prepared to succeed in credit-bearing coursework without remediation. This includes readiness for a range of academic pursuits, from performing and visual arts to liberal arts to STEM, healthcare, education, etc., with a clear plan for completion and career alignment.</p>
 <p>Employment</p>	<p>Graduates enter the workforce in high-demand, high-skill, high-wage fields equipped with industry-recognized certifications, technical skills, or stackable credentials that align with employer needs. This path emphasizes dual and concurrent enrollment, work-based learning, internships, apprenticeships, and/or arts and CTE programs completed in high school that translate to immediate and sustainable employment.</p>
 <p>Enlistment and Service</p>	<p>Graduates commit to serving their community, their country, or the world by enlisting in the U.S. Armed Forces or engaging in a structured local, national, or international service experience such as AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, faith-based missions, or community service corps. This path includes students who are physically, mentally, and emotionally prepared for structured service and leadership development, often with future education or career benefits.</p>
 <p>Entrepreneurship</p>	<p>Graduates launch or actively participate in entrepreneurial ventures, small businesses, or start-ups—leveraging creativity, business acumen, digital tools, and real-world problem solving. This path includes students who have completed entrepreneurial coursework, developed business plans, or engaged in incubator or pitch competitions, and who demonstrate the mindset to build and sustain value-driven enterprises.</p>

8 ESSENTIALS

STUDENTS GRADUATE WITH SKILLS, COMPETENCIES, AND MINDSETS FOR THE FUTURE

<p>Foundational Knowledge and Literacies</p> 	<p>Demonstrates essential academic and practical skills to understand, communicate, and confidently navigate the world.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reads, writes, and speaks effectively across content areas • Applies mathematical and scientific reasoning to everyday and academic situations • Interprets and uses visual, numerical, and financial information • Recognizes the influence of history and culture on shaping knowledge and understanding • Connects ideas across subjects and applies learning in new and meaningful ways
<p>Digital Fluency</p> 	<p>Uses digital tools and technologies ethically, creatively to learn, communicate, and solve problems; and uses technology to evolve.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigates digital environments to access information • Critically evaluates and discerns media messages • Uses digital tools and platforms to create and share content • Understands and adapts to essential and emerging digital technologies • Recognizes the impact of technology on individuals, communities, and the world
<p>Critical Thinking and Problem Solving</p> 	<p>Applies logic, reasoning, and thoughtful analysis to solve problems in academic and real-world settings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyzes information and breaks down complex problems • Connects information and ideas to build new knowledge • Applies learning in new and unfamiliar situations • Considers evidence, logic, and ethics to make decisions
<p>Creative and Innovative Thinking</p> 	<p>Uses imagination, curiosity, and originality to generate new ideas, explore possibilities, and create new or improved solutions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explores ideas with curiosity and an open mind • Generates original ideas and builds on the ideas of others • Designs solutions that are creative, purposeful, and address real-world needs • Takes risks, learns from failure, and adapts

<p>CONNECTION AND CONTRIBUTION</p> <p>Ethics and Impact</p> 	<p>Demonstrates empathy, integrity, and responsibility to build stronger, safer communities and promote societal well-being.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes decisions that consider their effect on others and contribute to the greater good • Participates in civic life through service, leadership, and community involvement • Honors history and traditions as foundations of community and society • Builds knowledge of social and governmental structures in local, national, and global contexts • Acts with honesty, fairness, and accountability
<p>PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT</p> <p>Adaptability and Lifelong Learning</p> 	<p>Demonstrates resilience, adapts to new circumstances, and continually develops the knowledge, skills, and mindset needed to thrive in a changing world.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embraces new ideas, perspectives, and approaches • Adjusts plans and strategies based on feedback, experience, or new information • Persists through challenges and overcomes setbacks with determination and an open mind • Pursues opportunities to develop new skills and deepen understanding
<p>Self-Awareness and Management</p> 	<p>Uses personal insight and reflection to guide decision-making that supports well-being and success in school, work, and life.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes and reflects on personal and cultural identity to understand oneself • Identifies individual strengths, challenges, motivations, values, and goals • Balances priorities by managing time and energy to support both achievement and wellness • Understands and regulates emotions to sustain focus and encourage positive outcomes • Makes decisions that consider both personal success and the impact on others
<p>Communication and Collaboration</p> 	<p>Demonstrates high emotional intelligence by applying interpersonal skills to build understanding, strengthen relationships, and accomplish shared goals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expresses ideas clearly using verbal and non-verbal communication • Actively listens and engages in respectful dialogue • Values diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and lived experiences of others • Demonstrates reliability and accountability in collaborative work • Navigates and manages conflict constructively

10/21 (Re)Design Day

- Challenge 1: Learning with Purpose and Relevance
- Challenge 2: Schools Design for Belonging and Well-being
- Challenge 3: Rethinking Knowledge & Learning in a
Changing World

AI Guidance

- **K-12 Guidance Document**
 - Understanding Gen AI
 - Teaching, Learning and Admin Uses
 - Responsible and Ethical Uses
 - Implementation Recommendations

Link to download: azk12.ai

Generative Artificial Intelligence in K-12 Education

Guidance for Arizona Schools and School Systems

A Balanced Perspective

Original Publication: May 2024
Version 25.01: May 2025

Please use and share
this link to access the
published version of
this document.

azk12.ai



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THE ECONOMY**
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Direct questions about this document to LeeAnn Lindsey at the Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy.



Mesa Education & Workforce Development Roundtable

Understanding Voters' Perceptions of Education in a Dynamic Environment

Our Vision (11/14/2025 Strategic Direction)

All Arizonans, regardless of background, have access to flexible, high-quality, and integrated education and training pathways that prepare them with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in a rapidly changing environment and to help strengthen Arizona's economy.

Our Mission (11/14/2025 Strategic Direction)

To advocate for high-quality education and training that aligns with career and workforce opportunities to advance the quality of life for all Arizonans.

We Work in Three Main Areas



Voice

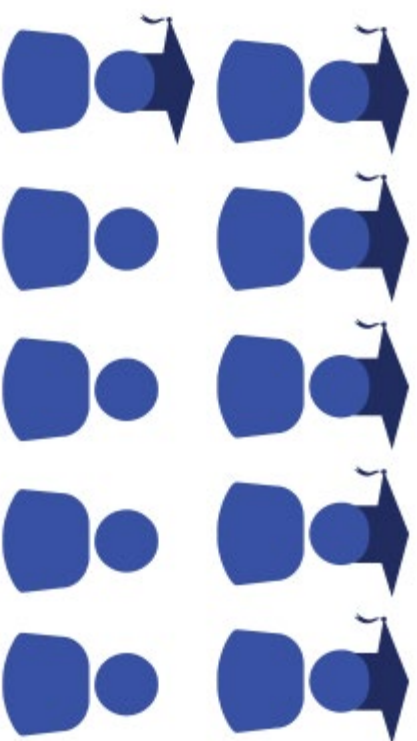


Policy



Programs

Achieve60AZ Attainment Goal



Goal: 60% working-age adults holding credentials by 2030.

Today, the **state's rate is 49%.**

Education Progress Meter – AZ Data



QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

Percent of Arizona 3- and 4-year old children that are in quality early learning settings.



THIRD GRADE READING

Percent of Arizona 3rd grade students who scored Proficient or Highly Proficient on the Arizona Academic Standards Assessment (AASA) 3rd grade English language arts assessment.



EIGHTH GRADE MATH

Percent of Arizona 8th grade students who are prepared to be successful in high school math.



HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

Percent of Arizona high school students graduating in 4 years.



OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

Percent of 16-24 year olds in Arizona that are NOT going to school or working.



POST-HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

Percent of high school graduates enrolled in postsecondary education the year after graduating high school.



ATTAINMENT

Percent of Arizona residents 25-64 years of age who have completed a 2- or 4-year degree or who have an active professional certificate or license.

Impactful Services to Support Arizona Students & Educators (...and Policy Makers)



Network for College
Access & Attainment
Professionals

Encourages postsecondary

attainment in Arizona
College Knowing & Going

(CKG)

Supports a College Going

Culture in 30 High Schools



COLLEGE

KNOWING & GOING

A Helios Education Foundation Initiative



AI-powered Chat
Bot

Provides FAFSA
support



Success
Services

College Success Services

Awards over \$2.4M per year
and provides a Success
Advisor to every scholar

**Community Impact
Managers**

Working with communities Northern,
Central, & Southern Arizona in on

education advocacy

GUARANTEE
YOUR FUTURE
WITH FREEPORT

College Success Services

Full scholarship in six high
demand areas, paid summer
internship, and job
placement.



Guide to Your Future



Our bilingual website guides students and families through every step of the journey in 4 practical steps:

- Step 1: Plan for What's Next**
- Step 2: Explore Your Options**
- Step 3: Put Your Plan Into Motion**
- Step 4: Fund Your Future**

Get started at

[GuideToYourFuture.org](https://www.GuideToYourFuture.org)



Research Shows . . .



BILLIONS TO GAIN

The Economic Benefits of a More Educated Arizona



EVERYTHING TO **WIN**

Arizona has **everything to gain**
— in our economy, workforce,
communities and as individuals —
when students continue their education
and training after high school.

Polling Data is Critical Information

Through public opinion research, the Everything to Gain campaign builds a clear understanding of what Arizonans believe about the value of postsecondary attainment and what keeps them from pursuing it.

- 1. Beliefs About Value of Postsecondary Education**
- 2. Barriers to Participation**
- 3. Solutions to Drive Education Policy (2024)**
- 4. Voters' Perceptions of Postsecondary Attainment (2025)**

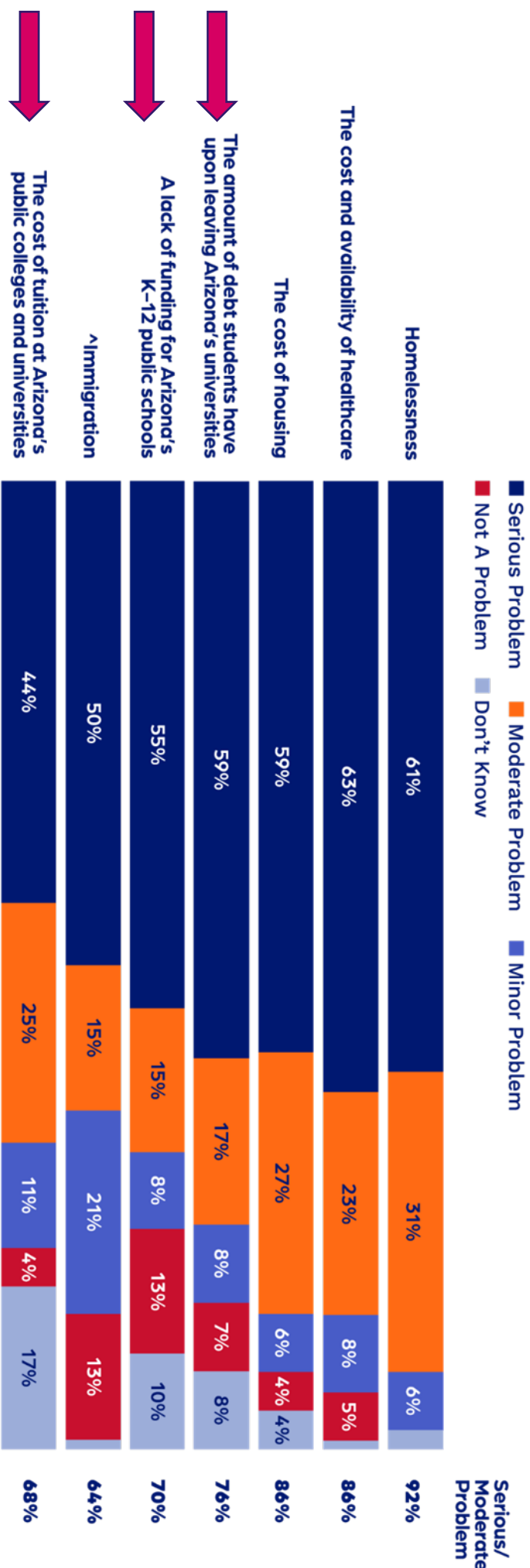
Poll Findings: Arizona Voters' Perception of Postsecondary Attainment

Public Opinion Research by Education
Forward Arizona



Top Concerns for Arizonans

Healthcare, housing affordability, and homelessness are top of mind for voters with student debt and funding for K-12 public schools right behind.



^Not Part of Split Sample

Outlook on Universities and Community Colleges

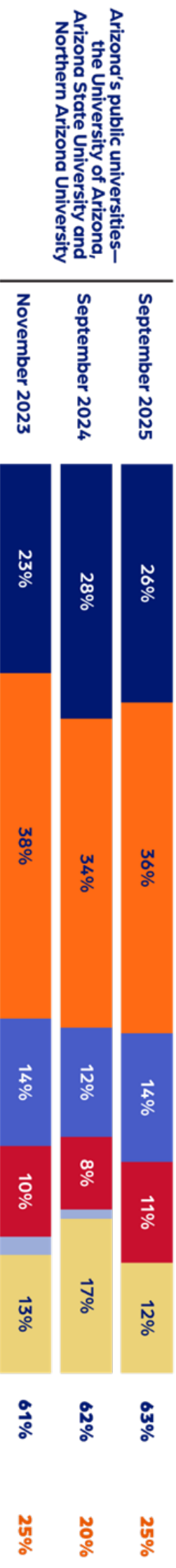


Views of Arizona's public **universities** and **community colleges** are consistent with past statewide surveys

Here are the names of people and organizations that are active in public life. Please indicate whether you have an overall favorable or unfavorable opinion of that person or organization.

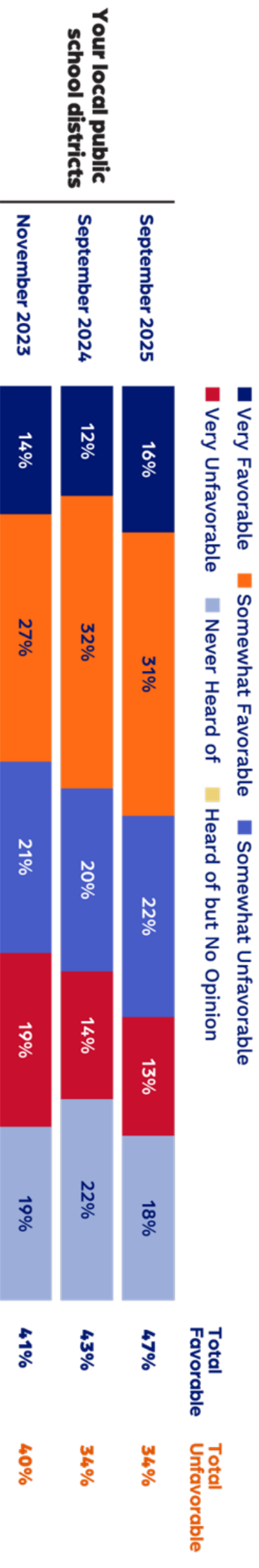
■ Very Favorable
 ■ Somewhat Favorable
 ■ Somewhat Unfavorable
■ Very Unfavorable
 ■ Never Heard of
 ■ Heard of but No Opinion

Total Favorable **Total Unfavorable**



Outlook on Local Schools

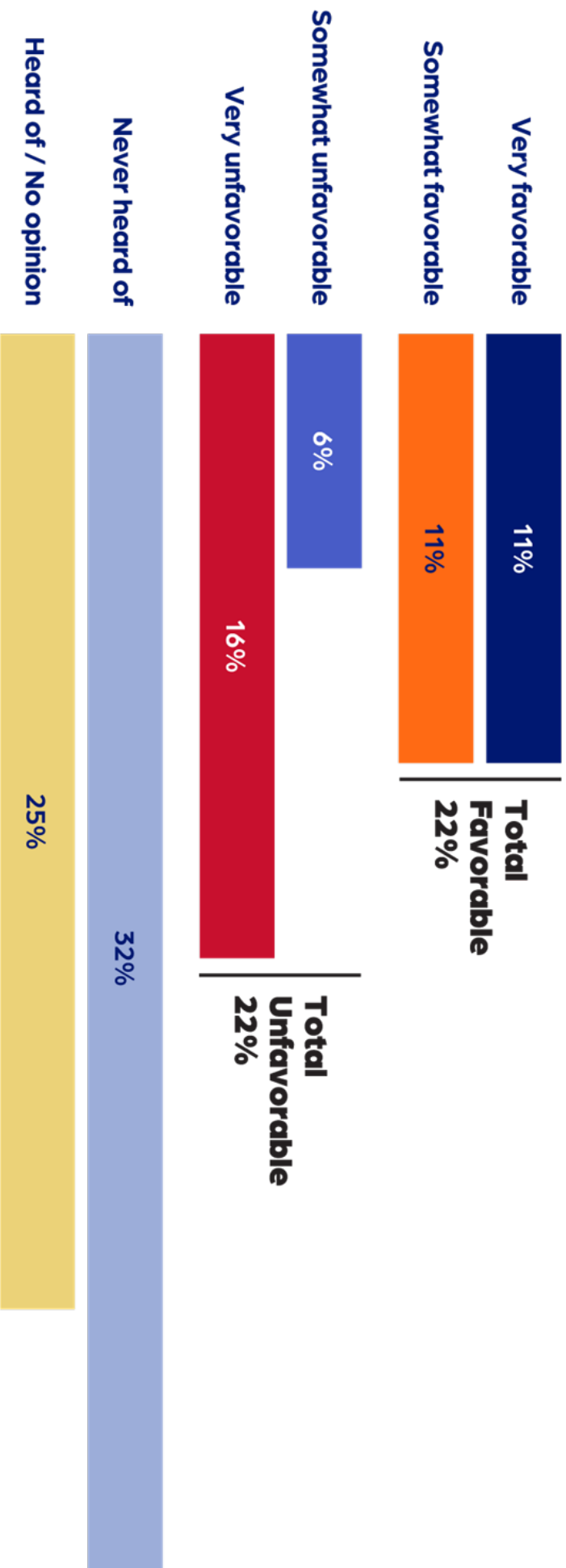
Voters' ratings of their **local school districts** continue to show modest improvement.



Your local public school districts

Outlook on ESAs

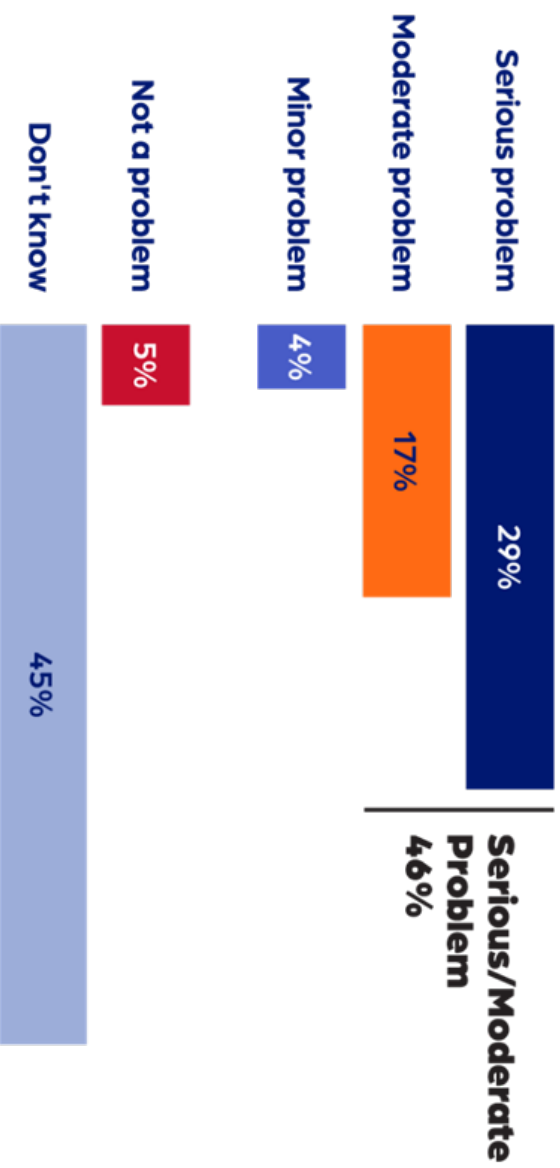
As part of the initial check of favorable vs. unfavorable a majority of voters did not express an opinion about Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) program, but views of ESA's are divided among those who do express an opinion.



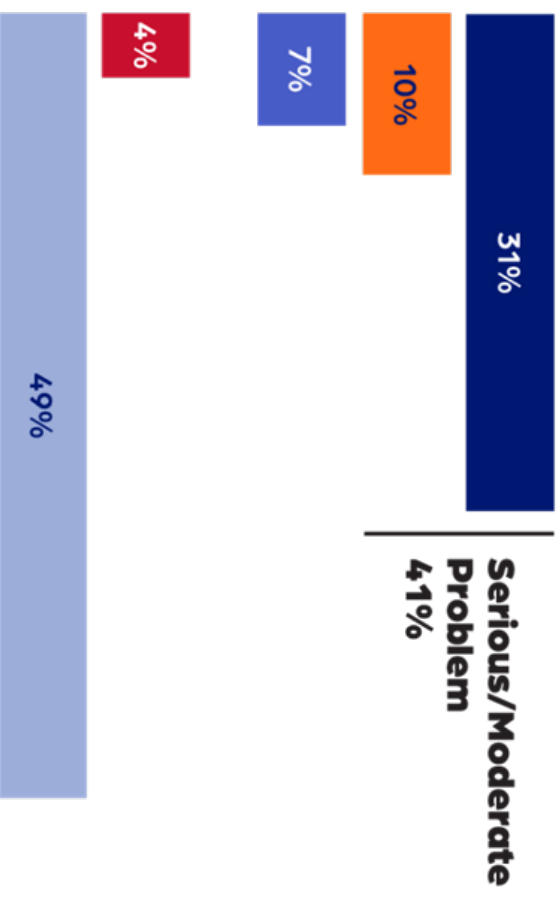
Accountability and Fraud

Of those with an opinion about Arizona's ESA program (in the fav / unfav), an overwhelming majority are highly concerned about the recently reported issues of both fraud and abuse or the lack of transparency and accountability (voters were asked one of the two questions).

*A lack of accountability
and transparency in Arizona's
Empowerment Scholarship
Account program*



*Fraud and abuse in Arizona's
Empowerment Scholarship
Account program*



Key Voter Takeaways on ESAs

Notably, more than 80 percent of voters support:

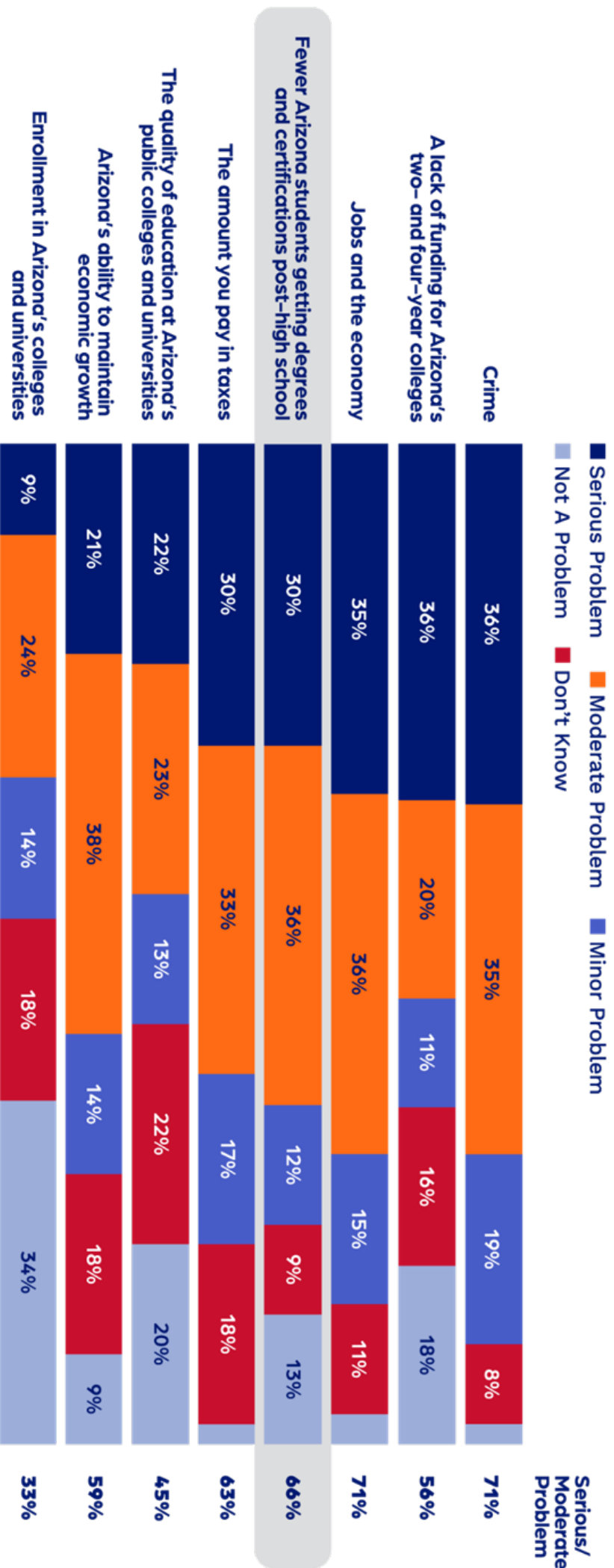
- ★ Annual independent **financial audits** to track ESA fund usage
- ★ **Strict usage controls** for ESA families to ensure responsible spending of taxpayer dollars
- ★ **Regular reporting requirements** on ESA student outcomes, including:
 - Achievement in reading and math
 - High school graduation rates
 - Postsecondary enrollment



Outlook on Post-High School Education and Training



Two-thirds of Arizonans see it as a significant problem that not enough Arizona students get an education beyond high school.



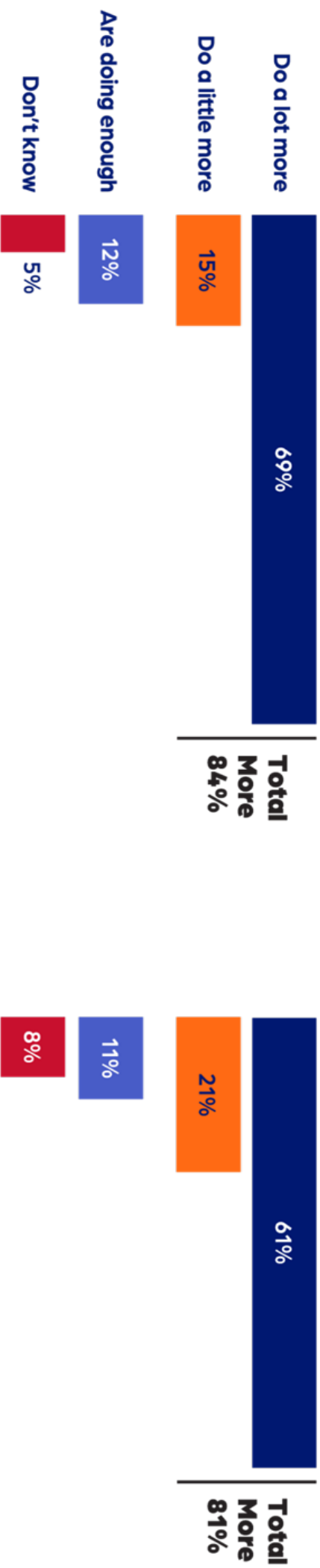
Federal vs State Leadership

Most think that leaders in Washington and Arizona should be doing “a lot more” to ensure the nation and state have skilled and trained workers.

Do you think elected leaders in _____, should do more or are they doing enough to make sure America/Arizona has a skilled and well-trained workforce

Washington

Arizona



Overwhelming Majority Says More Must Be Done And the Number is Growing

Two-thirds are supportive of Arizona taking steps to meet the objective that 60% of its workforce obtain post-high school education, job training or certification for a career.

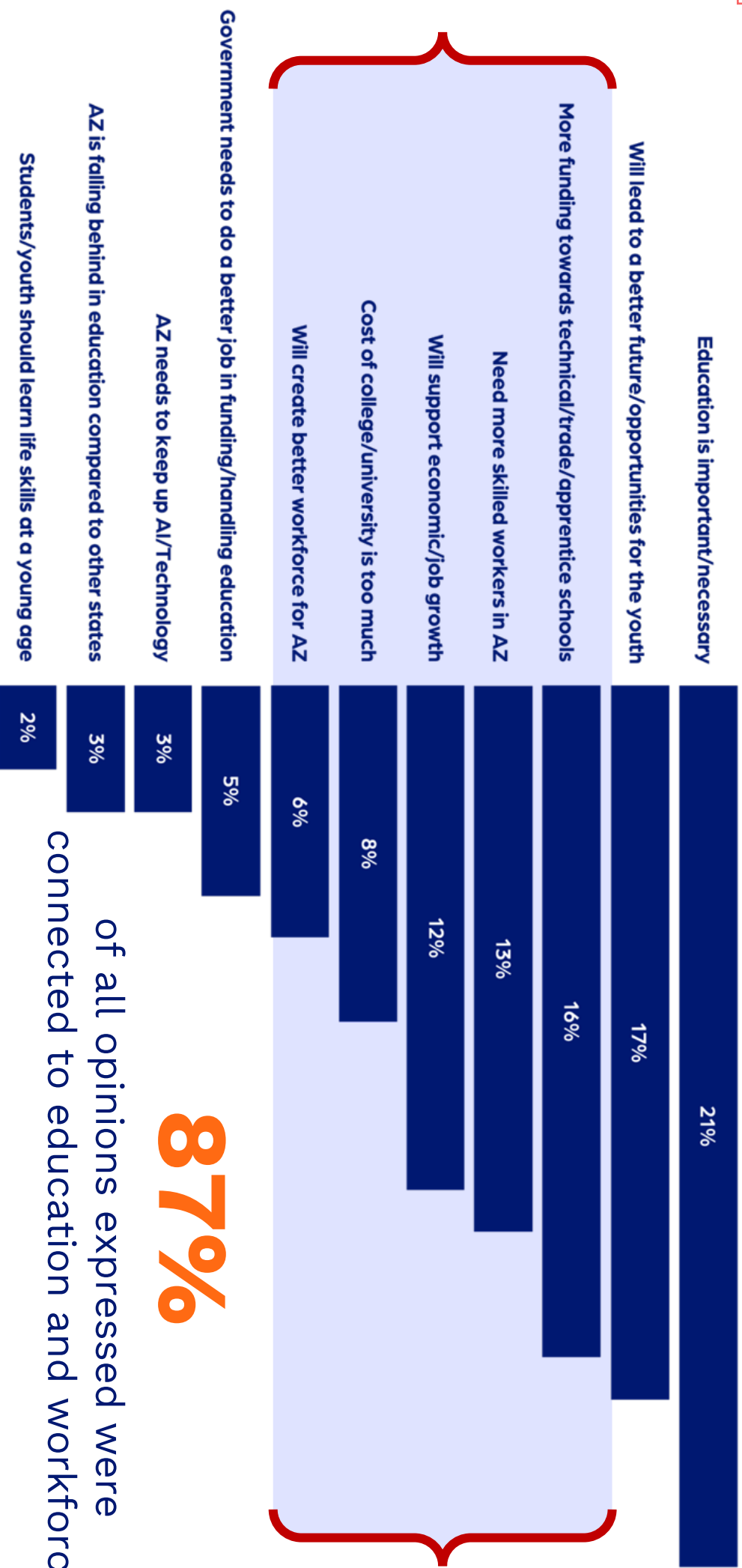
This number has grown 5 percent since last year.

Arizona is working toward a goal that by 2030, at least **60% of Arizonans** ages 25-64 will complete some education beyond high school, including at a four-year college, community college, apprenticeship, or a workforce certification program to ensure the state has a skilled and educated workforce. **Currently, only 49% of Arizonans ages 25-64 are estimated to have earned some type of workforce certification or degree after high school.**



In your own words, please explain why you think more should be done to increase the share of Arizona students with education or training beyond high school.

(Open-ended; Asked of Those Who Responded More Should Be Done, n=425)



87%

of all opinions expressed were connected to education and workforce.

The following messages resonated with 80 percent or more of voters:

Arizona
Economy

Technical
Education

Skills Gap

Career
Connection

Lifetime
Income

Future
Beyond
High
School

Intel/TSM
Jobs

Summary: Key Poll Takeaways

More Must be Done to Develop a Skilled and Educated Workforce

- ★ Voters believe elected leaders at the federal and state levels should be doing more to ensure the nation and Arizona have a skilled and well-trained workforce.
- ★ Therefore, it follows that the vast majority of Arizonans think “more should be done” to meet the goal that 60% of Arizonans have post-high school education, job training, or career education
- ★ Consistent with previous statewide surveys, voters across all major demographic groups favor doing more to meet the attainment objective.

Summary: Key Poll Takeaways

Voters Support a Variety of Policies to Accomplish Achieve60AZ

- Voters continue to support policies that will increase access to post-high school education and career education programs.
- This includes:
 - College-level **dual enrollment** for high school students
 - Expanding **online education**
 - Funding **Adult** Technical Education
 - Making education and career programs more **affordable**.



Thank You!

Rich Nickel

President and CEO

rich.nickel@educationforwardarizona.org

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-  [EdForwardAZ](https://twitter.com/EdForwardAZ)
-  [Education Forward Arizona](https://www.linkedin.com/company/education-forward-arizona)
-  [EdForwardAZ](https://www.instagram.com/EdForwardAZ)





Arizona's Early Childhood Agency

Committed to healthy development and learning from birth to age 5.



**of brain growth
happens in the
first 5 years!**

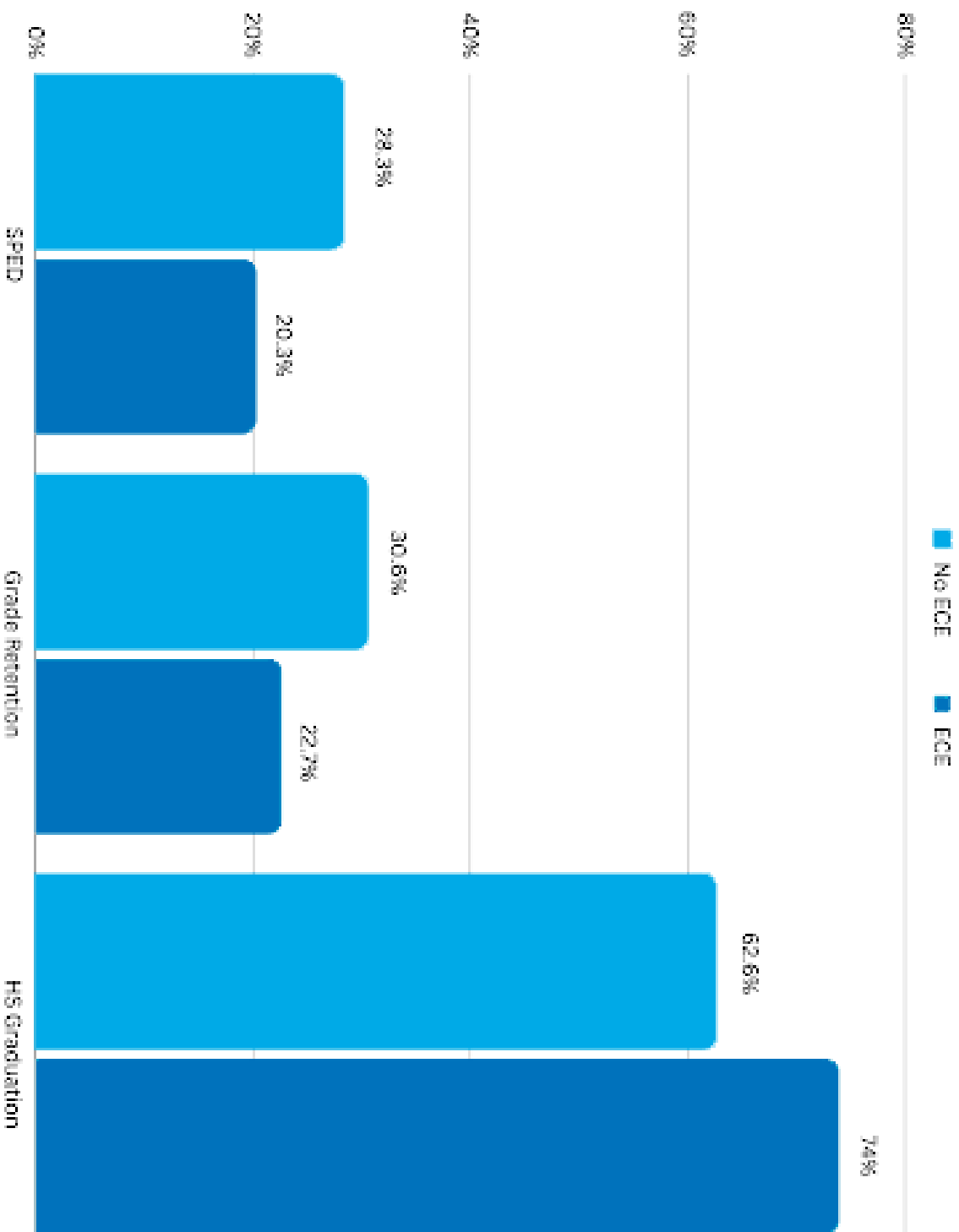


**Created by voters in 2006
and funded by tobacco tax.**

Our three focus areas are:

- Quality child care
- Strengthening families
- Preventive health

Early learning impact: student outcomes





Early learning impact: educator retention

— Governors ERR task force
recommendations

— Providing quality, affordable childcare
to educators

— Improving working conditions for
educators

— Students who participate in quality
ECE programs are better prepared to
teach

A woman with dark hair, wearing a red t-shirt with a logo that says "NINJA'S Ready Child Co.", is kneeling on a wooden floor in a classroom. She is holding an open children's book and reading to two young children. One child, a girl with dark curly hair wearing a blue shirt and a colorful patterned skirt, is sitting on the floor and looking at the book. The other child, a boy in a grey hoodie, is standing and also looking at the book. The background shows a classroom setting with a bulletin board and a door.

We have a child care crisis.



Demand exceeds supply.

304,000 children in Arizona may need child care, but only **230,000 slots** exist.

Child care wages are low.

\$14.60/hour is the national median, making recruitment and retention difficult.

Families can't afford more.

12-32% of income is spent on child care; **infant care** costs more than state college tuition.



The child care crisis: impact on working families.



90%
Say costs
have increased



73%
Report child care
options decreased



35%
Left a job



82%
Missed work



17% child care gap in Mesa

- 33,887 children aged 5 and under.
- 23,746 children live in home where both parents work.
- 14,482 available child care slots with licensed providers.

A photograph of a man in a blue and white plaid shirt holding a baby in a grey stroller. The baby is laughing and looking towards the camera. They are at a playground with wood chip mulch and colorful equipment in the background. The text "Here's Arizona's economic case for child care." is overlaid on the image, with "economic case" in yellow and the rest in white.

Here's Arizona's **economic case** for child care.



Arizona's economy loses \$4.7 billion annually.

Families lose

\$3 billion annually

in earnings and job
search expenses.

Employers lose

\$958 million

annually due to
absences & turnover.

The state loses

\$725 million

annually in
tax revenue.



Arizona's economy could generate **\$12 billion** annually

Families gain

\$2.4 billion

in discretionary spending

Employers sustain

115,000+ jobs

through increased
workforce participation

Graduation rates

4,800+ students

graduate from high school



Arizona community based solutions

PEEPS

funds 1,600

Scholarships in Pima

County through library

property tax

Sky Harbor

Airport

Scholarship

program for airport

workers

Greater Yuma

Child Care

Taskforce

convened by economic

development group



Arizona community based solutions

Gilbert Infant to

Work:

Babies 0-6 months

can join parent at work

Pinal County:

Taskforce brings

together city,
economic
development, and
businesses around
child care issues

Unused space:

Districts

Using unused
classroom space to
create early childhood
centers




Community Solutions Fund

Public-Private Partnership - A public-private partnership would allow the state, businesses, and families to share in the cost of child care for working families.

Through this partnership, the state would partner with interested businesses who will contribute a set amount per child each month that the state will match, up to \$400.

The family pays the remaining amount. This model could reduce the cost of child care by two-thirds for participating families.

Modeled in Iowa, Arizona leaders are exploring how this could work throughout the state.

A photograph of a man in a blue and white plaid shirt holding a baby in a black plastic swing. The baby is laughing joyfully. The background shows a playground with colorful equipment and a wooden play structure. The text is overlaid on the image.

The early childhood system is facing a **funding** challenge.

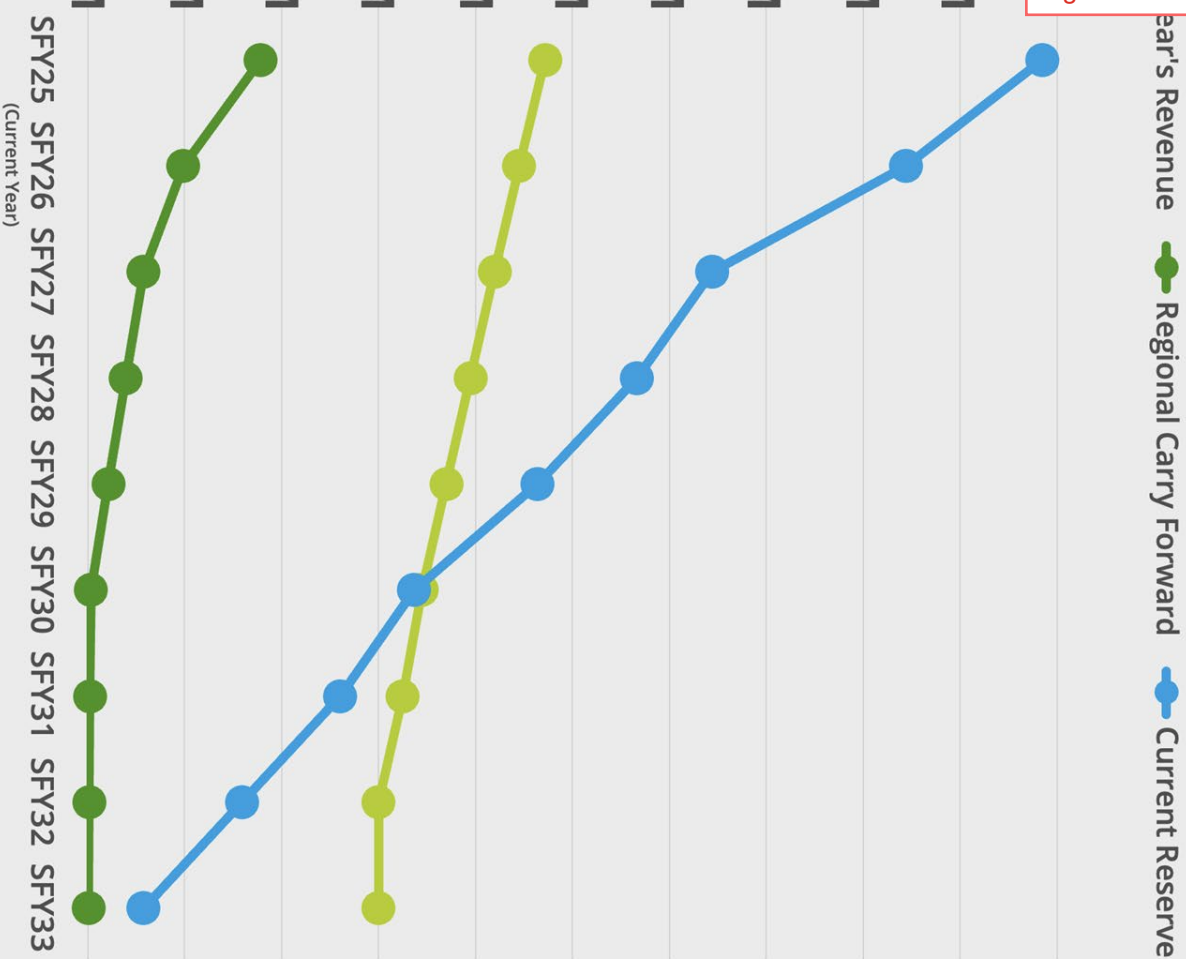
How FTF is funded

- **94%** from tobacco taxes & investment earning
- **6%** from grants
- **0%** from State General Fund

We rely *almost* entirely on a single, shrinking revenue source.



FTF Projected Funds



The challenge we face



- Tobacco revenues are down nearly **47%** since 2008
 - \$76 million less in SFY25
 - Per-child investment down to \$196
- Core programs in jeopardy:
 - Quality child care & scholarships
 - Parenting education & home visitation
 - Professional development
 - Early literacy support



Why revenue is declining

Outdated tax structure

Tobacco tax was approved before vapes and nicotine alternatives existed.

Market shift

Consumers are smoking less or prefer vape and nicotine products over tobacco.

Policy gap

These newer products aren't taxed to support early childhood.



Economic impact of First Things First



\$324 million
Economic output



2,800
Jobs supported



\$8.5 million
State revenue



\$9.7 million
Local tax revenue



Read more:

FTF investments contribute over \$300 million annually to economy

Solution: Close the loophole

- Taxing vape/nicotine products could generate up to **\$80M annually**
- Stabilizes early childhood funding
- Protects nearly:
 - **80 grant partners**
 - **160,000 children, families and early childhood professionals**
 - **1,400+ Quality First child care providers**



Advocate for Arizona's kids

1. Contact your elected officials
2. Ask them to support sustainable early childhood funding
3. Share our advocacy tools and video
4. **Sign our Letter of Support**





Business & Community Resources



**1. Connect through our
Child Care Solutions for
Businesses page.**

Find resources to support employees

Connect with FTF to learn about
community-based solutions

**1. Advocate for more
public support.**

Thank you.



    [FirstThingsFirst.org](https://www.FirstThingsFirst.org)

Roundtable Share outs