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SPEAKERS

Christopher Conover, NPR promo, Tom Horne, Nicole Cox, Michael Dauphinais



Michael Dauphinais 00:00

Following is an azpm original production.



Christopher Conover 00:09

Welcome to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover. This week the state of schools in Arizona, the topic of K 12, education has been a major issue for Arizonans for years. Despite recent gains, Arizona has long been near the bottom for per pupil funding. Teachers routinely talk about having to have a second job or side hustle to get by, and parents around the state often hear calls from their children's schools asking for basic supplies ranging from pencils and paper to tissues and hand sanitizer for classrooms. The state has increased spending on schools since the Red For Ed movement began nearly a decade ago, but test scores have been flat or going down since the COVID 19 pandemic. Add to that concerns about how schools handle a variety of social issues, from pronouns and bathrooms to potential school shooters or immigration officers entering a campus. So what is the state of Arizona schools? This week, we ask that question of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Horne. Horne is midway through his current term in the position, after defeating incumbent Democrat Kathy Hoffman. He previously held the position from 2003 to 2011 when he opted to instead run for Arizona Attorney General, a position he held for one term. Horne was in Tucson last week honoring Tucson Police Officer William Bonanno, who arrested an armed man who was on the campus of a local charter school. Horne starts by telling us about that event.



Tom Horne 01:52

I've been evangelizing for more police officers in the school since I started my third term in January of 2023, little over a year ago. And what I've been saying is, my nightmare is, I've said this in a lot of speeches. My nightmare is that a maniac will invade a school, as has happened

other states. Could happen here, kill 20 kids, the parents will never recover from that, I know because I've lost a child, and imagine if they find out that the school could have had a police officer to protect the students paid for by us the department, and decided not to imagine how the parents would feel about that decision making. So I've been trying to get more schools to ask for police officers. Everyone who asked for one has gotten one, and so we've been in the last year and whatever, we've increased the number from 190 to 565 and but we really need to have them in all of our schools. And this is what happened at this charter school is an illustration of that. Somebody was acting strange. A parent said to the police officer, there's somebody acting strange. And he went over and because he was experienced and brave, he realized he had to act quickly. He couldn't ask for back up, so he immediately arrested the person. He had a firearm and a knife, and said he was going to make the students famous by hurting them, and he's going to make the school famous, and he would have killed all the people in that room, which is 20 students and a whole bunch of adults. That was that tragedy was avoided by the skin of our teeth. They were not in the in the latest scheduled round, we happened to find some extra money and invited other schools to apply. This charter school applied, a number of other schools applied, and the charter school is the only one who acted quickly, the others, took much longer to get in their paperwork. They got a police officer right away. He was only there for two weeks when this happened. So there are a lot of points along that chain of events where we could have missed and the kids could have been killed and the adults could have been killed. And I think it illustrates the importance of having police officers in the schools. Some people say, well, we want to have gun free schools. Saying you are a gun free schools i like saying, I'm an easy victim, come get me. There are no massacres and police stations, and we should students deserve the protection.

C Christopher Conover 04:34

If I remember when the legislature put the money forward for this program for the state through the Department of Education to pay for school resource officers. Part of those dollars could go not for school resource officers, but for counselors and things like that, if that's what a school needed. Are people participating in that?

T Tom Horne 04:53

Well, in the in the the last scheduled round that we had, or. Actually the last round where the charter school applied, all the money available was not taken up by the police officers, so the balance went to fund for social workers and counselors, which is also part of school safety. You know, if kid comes to school upset about something at home, they can't learn. They they need they need somebody to talk to. And we've actually funded more counselors and social workers than police officers, but, but the legislation required us to give preference to the police officers to protect their lives, which is really top priority. And so every school that applied for police officer got one, and then, with the leftover money, we funded counselors and and social workers.

C Christopher Conover 05:47

Talking about money, it looks like about 12% of the money that goes to Arizona schools comes from the federal government. There have been issues the last few weeks with funding freezes and unfreezes and frozen freezes and all kinds of things. How's the federal money? Are we still

able to get what we need? Are there any problems at this point?

T Tom Horne 06:08

yes, it's not within, if the president closes the Federal Department of Education, which I think would be a great idea, actually, if it happens, I'll throw a party, but the funding will still be there because that's passed by Congress. So Title One, special education. Other federal programs, there's actually some of our money is a federal safety program. Those have been funded by Congress. So so if they close the federal Department of Education, the money will still be available, but we in the state will need to administer it, and we'll do a much better job, and there'll be extra money to pay our teachers more.

C Christopher Conover 06:45

I know somebody hearing you say that about the Federal Department of Education, will say, wait a minute, closing the federal department is a good idea. So is closing the State Department there for a good idea?

T Tom Horne 06:57

No, somebody's somebody has got to administer the funds, and somebody's got to help the schools do better academically, which, which we do in a big way, which the federal government does not do. No, you can't close the State Department, but you could certainly close the federal department.

C Christopher Conover 07:12


Also talking about funding. We're in the legislative session. We've been having this fight the last few years over the aggregate spending limit which the legislature can allow schools to spend more than than local budgets allow for. Is it time this has been in law for decades? Is time for the legislature to get rid of that or is there something that needs to be done so we don't have this financial cliff fight every year?

T Tom Horne 07:41

Yes, I've been advocating doing that consistently. You know, when it's March, and if they if they don't make an exception for the aggregate control limit, the schools lose 40% of their money, which means they'd have to lay off 40% of their their teachers. And you can imagine the burden on the remaining teachers. It would be an unbelievable catastrophe. And now this year, we don't have that, that kind of fear of a cliff, because the legislature provided backup funding in case they don't act in time to provide the funding. But I really, I think the aggregate control limit is would be better to be repealed. We wouldn't have to worry about this every year.



00:00

 Christopher Conover 08:25

You were in the legislature a long time ago. You've been Superintendent of Public Instruction, Attorney General. Everybody I've talked to in education says, yes, the aggregate limit needs to go away. What's the hold up at the Capitol.

 Tom Horne 08:40


I think that the Republicans, some Republicans there, feel that if the Democrats get a majority, the aggregate control limit will give the Republicans negotiating power. I think that's the reason.

 Christopher Conover 08:57

Okay, well, I guess we'll we have another year of wait and see what they do. We haven't started serious budget talks yet at this point.

 Tom Horne 09:05


Now, it's not just the agri control limit, though. We desperately need to increase the pay of our teachers. We're at this and I in both of my last two state of education speeches at the legislature, I've told them we're facing an incredible emergency with teachers. We're losing more teachers than are coming into the classroom. If we don't take strong action to turn that around, and the trend were to continue, we could end up with zero teachers. You can imagine how the public would react to that. So we've got to increase the funding for teacher salaries. I favor sending the money directly to the teachers. It'll come out of the out of the land trust, so it doesn't mean you have to increase taxes. The land trust has lots of money. And I hope the I hope the legislature does that.

 Christopher Conover 09:56

And that's that prop 123, extension plays into that. Also, because that's Land Trust.

 Tom Horne 10:01

Yes, you'd read the same thing. You renew the Prop 123, but you increase the percentage that comes out of the land trust.

 Christopher Conover 10:09

I know some states, and this is for listeners. We have lots of listeners who have just moved to Arizona. Some states, when it comes to teacher pay, it's up to the districts. Some places it's up to the state. So just so people understand, who pays the majority of teacher pay in Arizona, is it the districts? Is it the state? Is it a combination?

T Tom Horne 10:29

Well, it's state money, but the districts do it. And some of it comes from the local taxes. And if there's a minimum qualifying tax rate, if a district doesn't have a lot of assessed valuation, and they can't, they don't make it up to the average with about \$13,000 a student, if you include the local taxes and so on, then the state makes up the difference so that we have equalization. There's no such thing as a rich school district having more money than a poor school district, other than with respect to overrides. So it's state money and local taxes that pay the teachers. The problem is this, under the Ducey administration, he promised to raise teacher salaries 20%. But instead of sending the money to the teachers, they sent them to the districts, and a number of the districts siphoned the money off, not all of it, but part of it. So the teachers didn't get the 20% they were promised. So the feeling now is, let's get the money from Prop 123, increased, and send the money directly to the teachers so the districts can't siphon it off for something else.

C Christopher Conover 11:36

Let's stay with teacher pay and big example, the Isaac Elementary District in the Phoenix metro area, district ran out of money. Teachers were working without a guarantee that they'd get a paycheck. Is more oversight needed for school boards and districts?

T Tom Horne 11:54

Well, I would say that first of all, the teachers were heroic. They worked for about two or three days without without being paid. I when we discovered this at the state board, I made a motion to appoint a receiver. It passed unanimously. We had receiver in place. We had to work things out with this. We had to get money available. There were \$6 million that the district had forfeited to the federal government by not getting their paperwork in time. So we as a department asked them to send it back because the emergency and they did. So we had 6 million for them. There was a deal that they made with another school district to essentially borrow money with a school as collateral. So the money became available. There's a problem as to whether the county treasurer was willing to use the money without using it to pay back the debt that was owed to him. He ultimately decided that he was and that problem was solved. I think that most districts have competent superintendents and business managers. I don't think it's correct to blame school boards because they're volunteers. They should be focused on improving the academics in the district, and you don't want them to be immersed in the details of the finances. That would for one thing, it'd be hard to get people to run for school boards under that circumstance. So I don't think it's a good idea to blame the school board. I think in this case, according to the county treasurer, and I don't know this myself, but what he said at that meeting of the state board was that he was getting deceptive numbers, and he thinks there was wrongdoing involved. That's being investigated now. If there's wrongdoing involved, somebody needs to be punished for it. That's not a typical situation. There's never been a problem since I've been involved in education, which goes a long way back, because I served 24 years on the school board, never been a problem this serious. This is a really unusual situation.



C Christopher Conover 13:50

Staying with money. You and I cannot have a conversation without talking about empowerment scholarships, ESAs, there has been a great deal of criticism. You and I have talked about it. Everybody has talked about it with the way some of those monies were being spent by families and oversight. Now your office is doing audits, but audits in the past, if you will, looking back after things

T Tom Horne 14:18

For under \$2,000

C Christopher Conover 14:20

Right for under \$2,000 we talked to the Attorney General couple of weeks ago, and she said, problem is, your office doesn't have enough people to do the audits, and she was calling on the legislature to get you more money, to get more people. Is that the answer?

T Tom Horne 14:37

Yes, that's, that's, that's an answer for, let me say this, when I took office and we we had and the universal empowerment scholarship accounts were new. They were just passed in the summer of 2022 I think, and I took office January 2023 I got a lot of advice from advocates for empowerment scholarship accounts, telling me, Don't try to check every request. You get bogged down, just spot check. I said, No, I want to be sure this is done honestly and correctly, and we're going to check everyone. And we did and and a year ago we were able. The big problem that we have, by the way, is, is is reimbursements. There are number of ways that people get money. The two main ones are Class Wallet, which is our vendor, and reimbursements. People spend the money and look seek it. Back a year ago, we were able to take care of that within 30 days. But certain things happened that greatly increased the burden of reimbursements, including the legislature passing a law that said that parents with kids in private schools were before that years ago, through Class Wallet, they could go through reimbursements. And so a lot of parents did that because it saved a fee. That was a big mistake. They didn't check with us. You know, I've asked them in the future, please, let us tell you the consequence of what you're doing before you do it. And that greatly increased our burden to where we were getting 500 requests a day. And every all the staff that we have, if they work very hard, they can do 200 requests a day. So so we felt behind 100 days instead of 30 days. So we had to do something. There's a provision in the statute passed by the legislature that said we could do risk-based auditing, and that's what we did, which is we said, All right, everything above 2000 we'll still check the way we did before. If it's under 2000 we'll pay it so that we can do it in a reasonable time check it later, if we find that somebody abused it, we'll call the money back. So that's the situation we're in. If I've asked the legislature to repeal that provision, if they go back to Class Wallet, we won't have that problem anymore. Or if they fund more people for us, we just don't have enough people to handle 500 a day.

C Christopher Conover 16:54

My last question to Tom Horne. After the last conversation, you mentioned with Attorney

You're listening to The Buzz. After the break, we continue our conversation with Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Horne. Stay with us.

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NPR promo 17:10

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C

Christopher Conover 17:25

Welcome back to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover. We're talking with Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Horne this week. Our conversation continues. As your auditors are going through and checking these we hear the stories, of course, about the family that paid for a ski trip or bought very expensive LEGO sets, which I wish my mom had bought me. But realistically, how much misspending? We won't call it fraud. We'll just call it misspending. Are you finding as you do these audits?

T

Tom Horne 18:00

Well, we're not allowing it. Now, I must tell you, I get attacked from both sides, so that means I'm doing something right. I get attacked by by a lot of advocates saying parents should just get whatever they request. And I'm saying no, if we're going to spend taxpayer money, it has to be a valid educational purpose. It has to be reasonable cost, according to the market. So I've denied a lot of these stories. You hear stories where I denied them, you know, we just denied we just won an appeal where we denied dune buggies. They wanted dune buggies. Some of the things they've asked for just unbelievable. And I get attacked for that, but I say no, we have to be very careful. We have to maintain the integrity of the system. We will not send out any money unless it's a valid educational purpose and unless it's a reasonable cost.

C

Christopher Conover 18:54

Let's talk about education, classroom education. The National Report Card recently came out, it showed that reading scores continue to drop in the state. It's following a trend now a few years since COVID, math scores are flat. How do we get back on track?

T

Tom Horne 19:11

Well, this is, this is 90% of my time and effort, and the 90% of the department's time and effort. The media understandably like to talk about controversies, but our efforts are going to help the schools do better academically. Before I took office, I got but after I was elected, I got a letter from a consultant who said that he specialized in, say, in failing schools, and he said that the schools have not any help. Had help from the Department of Education in many years, all they do is sit in judgment of them and monitor them. And my philosophy is the opposite. That is we,

we are there to help the schools primarily. We have to do monitoring. That's part of our job, but, but primarily, we're there to help the schools. And so I started 15 initiatives, and. To help the schools do better academically. And just give you an example or two, we sent out improvement teams, very good teachers and principals, to help schools do better that need it. One of their projects dealt with the bottom 5% of the schools, about 90 some schools, after we worked with them for two years, 70% of them were no longer in the bottom 5%. We worked with a particular school to show a high poverty school that high poverty is not an excuse, if you teach them properly, kids can learn regardless of their economics. And we worked with the fifth grade, the math scores went up something like 26%. So we're doing everything we can to help the schools do better academically. That's really what we're all about.

C Christopher Conover 20:51

When it comes to the academics, I've heard you talk about in the past, the magic of tutoring.

T Tom Horne 20:59

Yes,

C Christopher Conover 20:59

I was an education major long ago, and that one on one time that a tutor can spend with a student who needs a little help, we have a lot of students that would take a lot of mentors and tutors is I know your office is looking at some ways to expand that though,

T Tom Horne 21:21

yes, we are. What happened again when I took office, ESSR funds, federal funds to make up for for COVID loss, a lot of funds had been distributed to my predecessor. We found that a lot of those funds had gone to institutions that were spending on things that were not affecting academics. So we sent a letter them, saying, show us evidence that the way you're spending the money helps academics. If they couldn't do that, we we clawed the money back. It was \$40 million we spent that on tutoring. All the kids made progress on tutoring. 22% of the kids made a half years progress in a six week tutoring period. Half years progress in a six week tutoring period, very effective. All of the studies show tutoring is the best way, but we can't afford a million tutors for a million kids. So what do we do? I have a solution, artificial intelligence. So we researched it. We found the best application of artificial intelligence for education is something called KahnMigo, and what it provides is, first of all, it doesn't take the place of teachers. It helps them so it gives them the equivalent of two assistants so they can focus more on on creative teaching. But even more important than that, it provides tutoring for the students anytime 24 hours a day on any subject. So what happens now is a teacher gives a test. Some of the kids get 90% some of the kids get 70% the kids who get 70% still go to the next grade, so they're missing 30% of what they need for further learning, and some of them get lost with KahnMigo, the teacher can look at the test and say, the student, here's what I taught, that you

didn't get go On KahnMigo and get the tutoring. And this creates a possibility that that all of the kids can get 90% before they go into the next grade. So this is my number one priority. It's it's the future, and I'm bringing the tools of the future today to the schools.

C Christopher Conover 21:22

And Arizona is not the first to use this Kahn company. I know Rhode Island, I believe, is using it, and some other states so well,

T Tom Horne 23:05

we were the third one to use it. So we're, we're a trailblazer with it, and I have a great faith in it. It's very, very important that students not go to the next grade without having learned materials and KahnMigo can enable to do that in the long run, that will greatly increase our proficiency rates.

C Christopher Conover 23:53

Any concerns, and I hear this from teachers my entire three decade career. I've heard this teaching to the test. Any concern that using AI will just do more teaching to the test and won't teach those critical thinking skills that you and I learned back when we were elementary kids.

T Tom Horne 24:13

Listen, I can't tell you how many hundreds of times I was asked that question. 24 years on a school board, four years at the legislature as Chair of the Academic Accountability Committee. I'm in my 10th year as state superintendent schools, and this is my answer, because I've read the tests. In the reading test, we ask people to read a passage and show that you understood it. The only way to teach you that test is to have kids do a lot of reading. Nothing wrong with doing that. Math test that we ask them to solve problems. The only way to teach that test is to give them the math skills and give them practice doing problems. Nothing wrong with teaching to that test. That's my answer.

C Christopher Conover 24:59

We started talking about the federal government almost half an hour ago, and I want to circle back to that as we begin to wrap up one thing that may be taxing some student mental health, which you also talked about, is fear of immigration raids right now at schools, the Tucson Unified School Districts and several other districts have said they'll abide by federal warrants, but they won't allow federal immigration officers on campus without a warrant. Dreamers or students who were born here to parents who lack legal status may worry about coming home to an empty house or being swept up in a raid. Where's the line for immigration enforcement in and around schools as you see it?

T Tom Horne 25:46

Well, I've been very concerned. I didn't want parents keeping their kids home out of fear what would happen to school. So what I have said in a number of interviews is is this, the acting head of Homeland Security, when he talked about going to schools, he said he would go to schools if there are criminals hiding there to find them. He didn't say we're going in there to harass students. There's no reason to harass students. They're starting out going after criminals. The criminals are adults, even if they go after people who are not criminals, but are here illegally, they're going to go after the adults, not the kids. So I don't want parents keeping their kids home out of fear of what will happen at the school. I don't think anything bad is going to happen at the school.

C Christopher Conover 26:32

All right. Well, Superintendent horn, thanks for making some time for us on your visit to Tucson.

T Tom Horne 26:36

Thank you very much. It's good, great to be here.

C Christopher Conover 26:39

That was Arizona superintendent for Public Instruction, Tom Horne, and that's The Buzz for this week. Tune in next week as we feature a collaboration between AZPM and AZ Luminaria on the mental health crisis affecting incarcerated people in the Pima County Jail. You can find all our episodes online at azpm.org and subscribe to our show wherever you get your podcast, just search for The Buzz Arizona. We're also on the NPR app. Zac Ziegler is our producer, with production help from Maggie Farmer, Our music is by Enter the Haggis. I'm Christopher Conover, thanks for listening.

N Nicole Cox 27:30

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