

Arizona public schools find ways to adapt to funding cuts

By: Rachel Leingang and Katie Campbell July 28, 2017, 4:00 am



Students in Tucson's Amphitheater district receive Chromebooks paid for by the nonprofit Amphi Foundation to help them learn. The foundation funds programs the district would not be able to cover. (Photo submitted by Matt Stamp, Amphi Public Schools)

Arizona consistently ranks among the lowest in the nation for its per-student funding, a fact cited by advocates hoping for a better financial picture for the state's schools.

But, as funding levels continue to lag years after the Great Recession, schools find ways to

Some turn to the internet, searching for donations. Many crowd kids into classrooms or have principals step in as teachers. Others go to four-day weeks.

Environmental innovations, like solar panels and artificial grass, can help cut costs. And there is a company dedicated to helping schools find ways to save money on things like utilities.

The most obvious way to adjust for low state funding is increasing taxes at the local level through bonds and overrides. But voters aren't always willing to support tax increases, especially in a Republican-led state like Arizona.

Even so, don't discount the creativity of educators, say those who have worked in schools and found ways to save money.

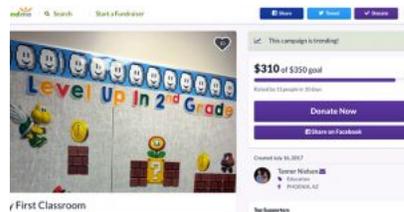
There is, of course, the question of whether schools should be forced into cutting costs at low funding levels.

"It's getting old, and it's high time that our Legislature steps up to the plate and starts funding schools the way they should," said Jim Lee, superintendent of the Paradise Valley Unified School District.

SEEKING DONATIONS

Dozens of teachers ask friends, family and strangers to pitch in on basic classroom costs through crowdfunding sites like GoFundMe and DonorsChoose. Do a simple search for your city and

word “teacher” and you can find a seemingly endless stream of teachers to help.



Tanner Nielsen, a 21-year-old new teacher at Union Elementary School in Tolleson, wants to create a Super Mario Bros-themed classroom, so he created a GoFundMe to ask for monetary help. (Screenshot from GoFundMe)

Tanner Nielsen, a 21-year-old new teacher, wants to create a Super Mario Bros-themed classroom to excite his future students. The second grade teacher at Union Elementary School in Tolleson has raised more than \$300 so far.

He said he has wanted to have a Mario classroom as long as he's known he wanted to be a teacher. The money will buy the supplies needed to make the dream a reality.

"I want to be the teacher that I wish I had when I was in 1st grade," he said.

One GoFundMe takes a big swing, asking for \$14 million to match Gov. Doug Ducey's proposed teacher raise. The campaign, started in February, has raised \$195 so far.

But crowdfunding is hit-or-miss and requires legwork – including near-constant sharing on social media – from teachers or their supporters. There's also a certain level of fatigue from people on social networks, who are always being asked to give money to GoFundMe campaigns for everything from health care to overseas adoptions.

In some cases, the easier ask may be for specific items, like library books.

More than 30 Arizona schools have received donated books from Kids Need to Read, a 501(c)(3) organization that donates 200 books to libraries in high poverty communities through its Grow Your Library Program. Program director and Phoenix resident Gary Mlodzik was at the Globe Public Library, according to an [April blog post](#), where donations satisfied the area's "dire need of non-fiction books."

The local elementary and high schools, he noted, have no libraries of their own.

And William T. Machan Elementary School's library may be closed this fall after the library was fired following federal funding cuts. According to *The Arizona Republic*, volunteers need to raise \$15,000 to keep the library doors open to its largely impoverished student body.

CLASSROOM CHANGES

Budget constraints and the state's ongoing teacher shortage go hand-in-hand. Schools struggle to attract new teachers in large part because of low salaries. In turn, the methods they use to fill missing teachers end up saving some money, though educators say they would rather find ways to fill those vacancies.

Lee, the Paradise Valley superintendent, said there are three main ways schools adapt to vacancies which end up cutting costs: increasing class sizes, skipping teacher prep periods, and putting principals in front of classrooms.

A few principals in the Paradise Valley district will teach classes, Lee said. One principal has a background in special education, so she filled in in that area when the school couldn't find substitute teachers, he said.

Classes in the district's high schools average 35 to 38 students, he said. The class size in small middle and elementary school and depends on the specifics of each school in the large district, he said.

Numerous teachers don't have a prep period and instead teach a class during that time, which increases their take-home pay, but saves the district overall because the person is already on payroll, Lee said.

"We get awfully creative when we need to," he said.

Most schools use some of the techniques Lee mentioned to some degree. They all find various ways to help their bottom-lines and do the best they can with the money they're given, Lee said.

And while he's proud of the way his district has found new ways to save and earn money, it's a philosophical question about whether they should have to find gimmicks to get by. State legislators simply must do a better job of funding schools, he said.

FOUNDATION SUPPORT

For Tucson's Amphitheater district and many others across the state, a foundation jumps in to cover costs that, under better financial circumstances, would be covered by the schools themselves.

The nonprofit Amphi Foundation started in 1983 and was mainly funded by district employees for many years, though Executive Director Leah Noreng said it's now mainly supported by the community, from parents to local businesses to corporate sponsors to grants.



"The sad reality is that we're supporting some things that are otherwise unfunded. We're not just adding to the top, we're filling in where these things wouldn't be funded otherwise," Noreng said.

Teachers in Tucson's Amphitheater school district need money for technology in classrooms, and the Amphi Foundation, a nonprofit that fills in funding gaps, helps. (Photo submitted by Matt Stamp, Amphi Foundation Schools)

The foundation provides some services typical of charities, like a clothing bank and shoe program for needy students. But it also helps fund technology in classrooms, like laptops and 3D printers. And it recently started a mini-grant program, topped out at \$500 per teacher, to help fund equipment or new programs.

The foundation will be giving a \$200 startup grant to every new teacher in the district to help fill their classrooms with needed supplies, she said.

"We don't want our teachers to have to pay for things out of pocket. No other profession expects you to pay for things out of pocket and not get reimbursed by your company. Teachers are doing that every day," Noreng said.

If the Amphi Foundation didn't exist, the programs would simply go unfunded, she said. And as she's constantly trying to grow the fundraising base, it's impossible to keep up with demand in a 14,000-student district.

"Every year, I feel that the burden is even bigger," she said. "The reality is, I will never be able to raise enough money because the need is so great."

Partnerships with local businesses have also helped bridge financial gaps through ongoing investments.

Pendergast Elementary School District spokeswoman Nedda Shafir said her district started (STEM plus arts = science, technology, engineering, arts and math) academies three years ago.



Garden Lakes Elementary School students enrolled in the GCON Design and Build Academy gather around a guest speaker. Sponsors like the construction management company invest in a variety of educational programs across the Pendergast Elementary School District. (Photo courtesy of Pendergast Elementary School District spokeswoman Nedda Shafir)

the help of business partners that give money to class bearing their brands, building hands-on curriculum with additional costs to the district.

Maricopa Integrated Health Systems sponsors a medical academy exposing students to forensics and medicine architecture firm Orcutt Winslow adopted the building and construction academy where students work with software, a design tool used by professionals in the field list goes on.

Those same partners sponsor field trips to their facilities guest speakers to offer guidance to the sixth, seventh and eighth graders in their elementary programs.

“The businesses are invested. They’re training the world the future, so they’re excited about that,” Shafir said.

GOING GREEN

A simple Google search will show there’s no shortage of Arizona schools cutting costs with environmentally friendly features, like artificial turf and solar panels.

Shafir from Pendergast Elementary School District said cutting back on appliances like coffee makers and mini-fridges in classrooms has saved about \$20,000 on electricity alone, and other energy-efficient appliances are estimated to have cut the district’s energy costs in half.

But Arredondo Elementary School’s facelift, to be unveiled on August 3, strives to be the most cost-saving solutions that also create a more comfortable learning environment.

Principal Alison Bruening-Hamati said some classrooms in the old building did not have wiring and lights had to be kept on at all times. Now, in the new facility, every classroom has energy-efficient light fixtures and access to natural light through windows or solar tubes.

Courtney Quesada, a project manager with the Tempe Elementary School District’s facilities department, described the tubes as mini-skylights going from the ceiling of a classroom to where the sun enters the reflective tube.

The added tubes and windows allow the school to “harvest” daylight, Quesada said. Sensor classrooms measure how much natural light is allowed in and dim the artificial lighting to save energy.

The cafeteria was equipped with garage doors to let in fresh air in the cooler months rather than relying on A/C, and students are incentivized to turn off unnecessary lighting or utilize outdoor spaces with a weekly Clean and Green Classroom Award.

Artificial grass in the campus’ outdoor amphitheater and a paved area featuring shade trees have made the school’s outdoor spaces efficient alternatives to indoor classrooms.

While faux turf may be more costly upfront, Quesada said, it pays off over time with little maintenance required.

Bruening-Hamati credited Tempe taxpayers for making the renovations possible through bonding. Without those additional



The upgraded Arredondo Elementary School includes an amphitheater with artificial grass. The turf

funds, her school and others in the district may not have been so lucky.

"In the state of Arizona, this is really an anomaly at this time because there isn't a lot of money," she said. "When it comes down to it, Tempe is really dedicated to their schools."

intended to reduce maintenance costs while providing an outdoor alternative to indoor classrooms in cooler months. (Photo by Garza/Tempe Elementary School District)

FOUR-DAY WEEKS

Some districts switch to four-day school weeks, hoping to save money on transportation, utilities and administration.

According to the Arizona Department of Education, 53 school districts have four-day weeks approximately 8 percent of all districts in the state. Most of the four-day districts are in rural areas.

There isn't a lot of long-term study into how the shortened school weeks affect students, but some research suggests morale and attendance improve for educators and kids. The instructional time remains the same, just in the form of four slightly longer days.

At first blush, it may seem like a district could shave off one-fifth of its budget by cutting out one-fifth of its school days. But the biggest line-item for schools – pay and benefits for teachers – is largely not affected by moving to a four-day week because many still work the same number of hours per week.

A 2011 analysis of the cost-savings aspect of four-day weeks by the Education Commission of the States, a policy think tank, found costs were reduced, albeit minimally. The report said the average district could save 5.43 percent by moving to a four-day week, though schools it reviewed saved between 0.4 percent and 2.5 percent on their total annual budget.

The Bisbee Unified School District moved to a four-day week in 2009. According to the Education Commission of the States, the district saved \$154,000, or 2.5 percent, in its annual budget.

UTILITY AUDITS

Keith Laake built his entire business on helping other organizations save money.

For a percentage of the savings his staff ultimately identifies, Laake's Cost Control Associates audits through utility and telecom bills for errors and missed opportunities for less costly rates. Payments for unnecessary charges can be refunded and ongoing costs can be reduced.

"Even if we were to work with a school district and find nothing, they feel better that they've had an expert look at it and make sure everything is being billed right and that their costs are optimized," Laake said. "Fortunately, for most school districts, we do find things."

And for districts working hard just to "scrape by," every dollar counts.

The Gilbert Public School District saved more than \$40,000 in the first year after the Cost Control Associates audit. The company found more than \$10,000 in telecom refunds and an additional \$23,000 in annual savings thanks to a rate change. Laake's staff also saved the district \$6,500 annually on electricity.

Teddy Dumlao, finance director for the district, said he believes the savings are really even greater than the initial dollar figure Laake quoted – perhaps tens of thousands of dollars each month. "All is said and done."

Because of the audit, Dumlao explained, the district was able to justify energy-efficient up facilities, like lighting and air conditioning units, and access federal funds to cover the cost improvements.

Dumlao said school districts have been left “hurting and scrambling” in the wake of cuts to capital funding, so being able to take advantage of more efficient technology has allowed h to cut costs that could very well cover someone’s salary.

Other districts have seen even greater savings. At Chandler Unified School District, Laake e his staff found more than \$100,000 in reduced costs there.

And even in smaller districts that may not yield such high dollar figures, Laake said someth simple as cutting utility costs could save jobs.

Issue: [ALISON BRUENING-HAMATI](#) [AMPHI FOUNDATION](#) [ARREDONDO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL](#) [BUDGET](#) [COST CONTROL ARSSOCIATES](#) [COURTNEY QUE](#)
[DONATIONS](#) [DONORSCHOOSE](#) [DOUG DUCEY](#) [EDUCATION](#) [GOFUNDME](#) [JIM LEE](#) [KEITH LAAKE](#) [NEDDA SHAFIR](#) [PARADISE VALLEY UNIFIED SCHO](#)
[PENDERGAST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT](#) [REPUBLICAN](#) [TANNER NEILSEN](#) [TEACHERS](#) [TEMPE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT](#) [UNION ELEMENTARY SCH](#)

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE



Lobbyists take leap of faith to open progressive firm in



Joe Arpaio convicted of crime for ignoring judge’s order

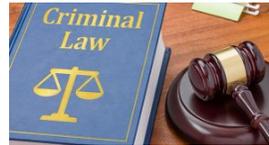
© July 31, 2017 , 12:05



Non-profit alleges campaign volunteers, school



The CEOs speak 
© July 31, 2017 , 4:30 am



Indicted lobbyist’s ex-wife gave FBI documents

© August 1, 2017 , 2:50 pm



Ex-DES director threatens to sue state over ammunition report 

© August 1, 2017 , 1:19 pm



ARIZONA CAPITOL TIMES
The piece you need to solve Arizona's political puzzle.
SUBSCRIBE NOW!