

Invest in Education initiative passes, injects new funds into Arizona public schools

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Photo by Kim Klett

In a year that hasn't been particularly easy for students, teachers or parents, educators and community leaders are celebrating one piece of good news: the passage of the Invest in Education Act, or Proposition 208, which they say will provide much-needed funding to struggling Arizona schools.

"Quality education is at the core of who the Jewish people are and how we have survived for thousands of years," said Rabbi John Linder of Temple Solel, a member of the Arizona Interfaith Network Clergy Caucus. "And we look at quality education as reflecting the common good of the community."

AIN was among five organizations that worked for the last four years to pass the Invest in Ed initiative. Other coalition organizations include the Arizona Center for Economic Progress, the Arizona Education Association, Children's Action Alliance and Stand for Children.

Arizona has among the lowest spending per student on K-12 education in the country, and the state cut funding further during the 2008 recession. Proponents argue that over a decade later, it's time for the state to restore what was lost.

"It's doing the right thing, because it's getting us closer ... to that budget we had before they cut everything," said Kim Klett, Holocaust literature and AP English teacher at Dobson High School in Mesa. She is also on the board of directors of Phoenix Holocaust Association. "They took so much and it was never restored, and so it's going to be able to restore a lot of those things that we had before."

Pervasive spending cuts and low education funding have led teachers like Klett to spend their own money or hold fundraisers to purchase school supplies, such as a set of books for her classroom.

“We put in a lot of hours outside of our school day, and I just feel like fundraising for materials that you need in your classroom should not be one of those other things that we have to do,” Klett said, “and yet we do it all the time.”

To Linder, the Invest in Ed initiative represents a welcome change for education funding in Arizona.

“Things that we value, we invest in,” Linder said. “And the reality in Arizona is that our state has simply failed to keep up with basic needs and providing a competitive livelihood for teachers and keeping class sizes manageable.”

Proposition 208 creates a new revenue stream for Arizona public schools by imposing an income tax increase of 3.5% on individuals earning more than \$250,000 and married couples earning more than \$500,000. While opponents worry that imposing a higher tax rate on high-income Arizonans will result in less investment in small businesses and the Arizona economy, or in high earners shifting their income to nearby states, proposition proponents argue that investing in education is an investment in Arizona’s workforce and economy going forward.

The Joint Legislative Budget Committee projects that the tax will generate \$827 million in revenue. Half of that will be dedicated to personnel hiring and base salary increases for teachers and classroom support personnel; 25% will go toward personnel hiring and base salary increases for student support personnel; 10% will be used for grants to retain new classroom teachers in their first three years of teaching; 12% will fund grants for career training and workforce programs in high schools; and 3% will go toward the Arizona Teachers Academy to incentivize college students to pursue a career in education.

Retaining new teachers, in particular, is an important area of focus for the initiative, Klett said.

“We have teachers who come in and they’ve gone through the schooling and gotten the proper education but then they realize how hard it is, and they quit, they leave,” she said. “We just need more support for that.”

Linder also cited the low pay and high demands placed on teachers as a critical area for state improvement.

“Our public system is teetering because teachers can’t afford to stay in the teaching field or they choose to go to another state because they’re simply not valued here, and there are thousands of classrooms without a qualified teacher,” Linder said. “That should not be acceptable to the state of Arizona.”

The passage of Prop 208 was the culmination of four years of work by coalition organizations, which proposed an earlier version of the Invest in Ed initiative in 2018. While that proposition was removed from the ballot by a legal challenge, supporters rallied to place a revised version on ballots in 2020, which passed with 51.75% of voters in favor and 48.25% opposed. For director of the Arizona Center of Economic Progress David Lujan, the success of the ballot measure reflected the consistent support for Invest in Ed that ACEP and its partners have seen over the last four years.

“Voters, I think, were very frustrated about the continuing funding crisis in our schools,” Lujan said.

“They basically said they wanted to take matters into their own hands and come up with a solution, and that’s what I think they did with Prop 208.”

Linder hopes that Arizona voters will see the initiative and the infusion of funds into public education pay off within the next few years as quality of education improves.

“[Prop 208] is completely compatible with what we should be working for as Jews and a community at large,” Linder said. “I think that was reflected in the pretty clear vote for this proposition.”

In the months leading up to the election, Klett took to social media to tell other Arizona voters about her experience as a teacher and the need for new funding to retain new teachers, raise teacher pay and provide for counseling and other support services to students. After waiting several days for the outcome to be confirmed, she was relieved to ultimately see the initiative pass.

“I think that people overall do care,” Klett said. “They’re tired of seeing Arizona number 48 or 49 out of the whole country, and we want to be better, we know we can be better.” **JN**