

Group pushes school funding

Valley Interfaith Project leads effort to roll back state cuts

By Mary Beth Fallor
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The Valley Interfaith Project is sparking a grass-roots movement to increase school funding state-wide, and the Scottsdale Unified School District is the first to jump

on board.

The Scottsdale district governing board endorsed a resolution on May 30 calling on the state Legislature "to fulfill its constitutional duty to fully restore the recent cuts in school funding."

The resolution, which notes that

the state has cut base funding to the district by \$20 million since 2008, was drafted by a group of parents in the district who are working with the Valley Interfaith Project, a non-profit group of 40 churches and other institutions that promotes civic engagement. Valley Interfaith also

is active in advocating for the expansion of Medicaid in Arizona, and it supported a tax increase imposed by the Maricopa Community Colleges.

Education always has been a Valley Interfaith initiative, but the non-partisan consortium has stepped up efforts to increase school funding

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JOE RUBIO
Organizer for Valley Interfaith

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Valley Interfaith

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this spring.

Monica Dorcey, a volunteer with the Valley Interfaith Project, said the group has researched the decline of more than 20 percent in state spending on education over the last several years.

"Now it's time. We have to do something about this," she said. "There's a need to develop a strong parent culture on this, and that's our focus."

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that Arizona spent \$7,666 per pupil in fiscal 2011, compared with the nationwide average of \$10,560. Utah, Idaho, Mississippi and Oklahoma had lower per-pupil spending rates than Arizona.

Valley Interfaith's push coincided with a budget crisis in Scottsdale this spring. Parents were angry when the district proposed eliminating school nurses and art, music and physical-education teachers to close a budget gap that was partially caused by the failure of an override last fall. The proposal caused a fierce backlash, and the nurses and curricular teachers were saved, but the final budget calls for increasing class sizes to make up the \$9 million shortfall.

Margaret Ann Lippincott, who has two children at the Arcadia Neighborhood Learning Center in the Scottsdale district, said she, like many parents, did not closely follow the downward trend in education spending at the state level until the recent crisis.

Valley Interfaith put together a presentation on school funding, which was shown to parent groups in churches and school districts, including Scottsdale.

"A lot of people were thinking the district was the problem," Lippincott said of the group's first meetings with parents a

few months ago.

"We were not trying to get the focus off the district, but we wanted to show the big picture, that this is a legislative issue."

Joe Rubio, an organizer for Valley Interfaith and a parent of four students in the Scottsdale district, said that having the information come from other parents rather than from the schools re-frames the issue. "This is a different way to have this conversation," he said. "That's what's been missing."

He said the sometimes-bitter discussions over the spending cuts in Scottsdale presented an opportunity for action.

"We're fighting an ideology that says we need minimal investment in schools, and that's shortsighted."

Rubio is reaching out to parents in several other districts, including Dysart, Madison, Kyrene, Casa Grande and Prescott. He said the campaign is in the early, information-sharing stage.

"The Scottsdale Unified School District is an ideal place to be in the vanguard of this because we have an A-rated district, a very engaged parent population, which makes us credible, and a high-profile community to take on this leadership role," said Alice Burmeister, a Scottsdale parent.

The resolution calls for the state to bring Arizona schools "to a base funding level at least equal to the national average of per pupil funding."

"It's not going to be an overnight change," Rubio said. "But we didn't get into this situation overnight."

A letter will go to Gov. Jan Brewer and state legislators on the school district's letterhead.

The vote in Scottsdale was 4-1. Board President Pam Kirby voted against it, saying that while she supported the message, she was wary of having the district endorse a petition from another group.