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Three Arizona Schools Candidates Hold Differing Views

By Patricia Hawke

Three candidates are running for the post of Superintendent of Public Instruction for the Arizona

schools in the September 12th election. Current Superintendent Tom Horne is running as the unopposed Republican candidate, seeking his second term in office. Two Democrats are challenging Horne — Slade Mead and Jason Williams. Mead is a sports agent, a former state senator, a former Kyrene School District board member, and a former Republican. Williams is a former middle school math and science teacher, and a former executive director of a nonprofit organization that recruits teachers for low-income and rural areas.

Two major issues that will be facing the newly elected superintendent are the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) tests and school vouchers.

AIMS. This year was the first to require all high school seniors in the Arizona schools to pass the AIMS test in order to graduate. The candidates have differing views on AIMS and its use.

Horne is a strong advocate of the graduation requirement, believing that it makes students accountable for what they learn. He commented that it makes Arizona schools students take their education seriously, because they will not be handed a diploma if they fake their way through school.

Williams would like the graduation requirement eliminated and to use AIMS as a benchmark for learning, gauging just how well Arizona schools students are retaining knowledge. He believes this would take the pressure off students, when used as a diagnostic tool. Williams disagrees with Horne concerning students taking learning more seriously because of AIMS. He noted that 15,000 students, who enrolled as Arizona schools freshmen in 2002, had dropped out of school before the Class of 2006 graduated.

Mead agrees with Williams that AIMS would make a better assessment tool for the Arizona schools and that the passing requirement for graduation be eliminated. He has stated that the current administration of AIMS is a "sham" with only a passing grade requirement of 59 percent. A "C" average student within the Arizona schools only need answer six mathematics questions correctly out of 56. He also would like to see AIMS administered as the state of Wyoming does its testing — students take the

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test directly on a computer, the results are instantly scored, and then the scores are immediately sent to the teachers for evaluation.

School Vouchers. Another hot button for many educators, parents and the community are school vouchers, whereby some students may attend private schools funded by the taxpayers. Under a newly passed budget, that state has authorized \$5 million in private school vouchers for disabled and foster-care students. All three candidates are opposed to vouchers for private schools.

Incumbent Horne stated that Arizona schools already are the leading proponent for parental choice in the nation, with charter schools, open enrollment policies, and tax credits. He noted that the Manhattan Institute ranks the Arizona schools as number one out of 50 in parental choice. He also pointed out that the state constitution prohibits the use of public funds for religious or private schools.

Because the state legislature already passed the use of school vouchers into law, Mead only stated his

opposition to them and that, if elected, he would ensure that the Arizona schools accounted for every cent used for school vouchers.

Williams pointed out that private schools do not automatically do a better job than public ones. He sees the voucher system as a way of giving up on public education in the Arizona schools.

Though these are the two hot-button issues in this upcoming election, undoubtedly there are many more for which the parents and communities of the Arizona schools should be concerned. Ensure that you check out the three candidates and what they have to say about all of the issues -- and make your voice heard in September by voting for the candidate of your choice.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K-12, providing free, in-depth reports on all U.S. public and private K-12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more information on Arizona schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk-12.com/Arizona/index.html>

Spotlight On Success Program To Benefit Arizona Schools

By Stacy Andell

For many years, the Arizona schools have experienced a lot of negative publicity that affects its ability to recruit talent, garner extra funding, and keep students in the public school system. Current superintendent Tom Horne says that much of this publicity is unwarranted and unfair to the Arizona schools that have made many positive strides toward improving education.

To counter this unwanted publicity, Horne developed the Spotlight on Success program for the Arizona schools. Basically, the program works to put as much positive publicity about the Arizona schools into the public spotlight as possible. The superintendent, himself, seeks as many opportunities available for

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public speaking and voicing his opinions and facts about the Arizona schools to the media. His goal is to emphasize the positive inroads Arizona schools have made both in his public statements and when quoted in the media, and he to refutes any false negative publicity with ruthless tenacity.

Not too long ago, many newspapers within the state of Arizona and across the nation carried a negative story where a Kansas company designated Arizona as the "dumbest state in the country". The story was quite untrue. Arizona schools students performed above the national average in Terra Nova (the only nationally-normed test), which is taken by essentially all Arizona schools students. Though Arizona schools ranks 49th out of 50 states in expenditures per student, the funding handicap has not affected the ability of the Arizona schools to educate their students above the national average. Horne is quick to remind the media of these statistics.

Another example of false negative publicity is that the Arizona schools have one of the highest dropout rates in the country, according to the "Kids Count" measurement. Horne says the count is incorrect, since the census was used for the measurement — otherwise, whenever the census reporter was told a child between the ages of 16 and 19 was not attending school, it was used to blame the Arizona schools. Many of these children were beyond the control of the Arizona schools, such as children from other countries who have never been enrolled with the Arizona schools, or those who had attended only private schools. If the Arizona schools do not know a child exists, they have no opportunity to educate them.

Three national organizations that keep valid comparative statistics on graduation rates across the nation are Manhattan Institute, Urban Institute, and United Health Foundation. Their most recent figures are from 2002, and all three report that the Arizona schools are at the national average of about 70 percent (plus or minus one percent). Since 2002, the Arizona schools graduation rate has grown from 72.7 percent to 77 percent. According to Horne, unless the rest of the country has had an equally dramatic growth in graduation rates, the Arizona schools are now substantially above the national average.

Horne plans to continue his efforts to refute the erroneous negative publicity about the Arizona schools, which he believes continue to do an excellent job in improving their educational standards.

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