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Arizona's children deserve to be prepared for college, career and life

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Arizona school students are being done a disservice.

Students, many of them poor and minority students, are denied equal access to technology and information by the lack of a strong school library program with a certified school librarian at the helm.

School librarians work with every student in the school, providing students with the resources they need to support and enhance their classroom work. They are experts in technology and how to use it responsibly. School librarians work with teachers to develop curriculum. And in an era when we are concerned with "fake news," school librarians serve as a trusted guide as students navigate the often perplexing path of information sources.

But the latest data indicates that Arizona is only giving its district public school students half a loaf — and one doesn't have to stretch the imagination too far to tell who is getting served and who is going home hungry. The Learning Policy Institute recently reported that Arizona is above the national average in the percentage of both inexperienced and uncertified teachers in high minority schools.

Recent reports show that Arizona is near the bottom in teacher-pupil ratio and below average for high school graduation rate for low-income students, as well as per-student funding. This situation is not helped by open enrollment policies that siphon crucial dollars from public schools.

It should come as no surprise then that according to the National Center for Education Statistics, Arizona has 140 public school library staff holding certification, approximately 57 book titles available per 100 students, and an average school library budget of \$960. With approximately 1,089,384 students in 2,267 schools across Arizona, these resources cannot possibly be equitably distributed.

What does this look like in real world terms?

It can spell the difference between students who grow up to be financially secure, engaged citizens in a digital world and students who struggle just to meet their own needs and the basic needs of their families.

It isn't hard to recognize the two trajectories.

In one affluent high school district you might find a student who is well on their way to achieving success, thanks to access to up-to-date learning tools and a school librarian to help guide their proper use. Progressing from freshman to senior, this student developed communication skills in interacting both socially and scholastically with his peers. Those skills were honed in specific projects that fostered social media skills in blogging, uploading photos and videos and online publication.

Entering college life, this high schooler is ready for the challenge of a college curriculum that will provide the foundation for post-collegiate success.

Contrast that with a high school student who is deprived of the technological resources to succeed and the guidance of a certified school librarian. This student will lack the research skills to complete college course work. Also, the student will be at a disadvantage in collaborating with other students that rely heavily on digital and social media skills.

It is going to take a strong financial commitment from elected officials to ensure that Arizona's schools are fully stocked school libraries with school librarians.

It is what Arizona's youngest and most vulnerable citizens deserve.

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