

Arizona Daily Star

Estimated printed pages: 2

February 2, 2009

Section: EDITORIALS

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Local businesses know the value of good schools

Our view: Plan to give internships to teachers will improve education, make learning relevant and help businesses
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Education and the economy are inseparable, as the quality of one depends on the quality of the other. Employers depend on schools to turn out students who are well-educated and qualified to take jobs, and public schools depend on businesses and residents for a tax base to operate.

In the best sense, schools are more than factories churning out potential workers. But Arizona is so broke we can't afford to be high-minded about education - and our state lawmakers have neglected public education long enough to make it clear that they don't get it at any level.

Business leaders do understand the connection, however, and they're stepping up to help through Tucson Values Teachers, an effort by business and education leaders to attract teachers to local schools and then retain them.

The connection goes deeper, however. Kids do better in school when they can see how what they're struggling to learn in the classroom will be useful in "real life." Remember your own school days, the times you sat in class, listening to the teacher drone on and asking yourself: "Why do I need to know this?"

A partnership between Tucson Values Teachers and the University of Arizona aims to help teachers answer that fundamental question. Teachers in the program will enroll both in a master's degree program at the UA and do a paid internship at a local company. The Science Foundation Arizona gave a three-year grant for the program, dependent on industry putting up matching funds.

The benefits are clear: The teacher will gain a better understanding of how classroom lessons apply on the job, and employers will receive the immediate benefit of an intern with professional skills and eventually better-educated students who gained from their teacher's first-hand experience in industry.

The first group of teachers in the program will be those who teach so-called "STEM" - which stands for science, technology, engineering and math - subjects in middle and high school. The effort will also focus on teachers who have been in the classroom for fewer than five years.

Success will depend on businesses' willingness to take in a teacher for an internship, and their ability to pay an expected \$6,000 to \$8,000 in compensation. We understand that these are hard times for many businesses, but we hope they are able to find a way to invest in our community's future by investing in education. This arrangement benefits all parties.

Jacquelyn Jackson, executive director of Tucson Values Teachers, said that while the first group will be in the STEM fields, the organization plans to expand to other disciplines soon. This kind of effort has great potential and we hope it will be offered as widely as possible.

The Science Foundation Arizona will allow the UA and Tucson Values Teachers to enroll up to 30 teachers in the master's/internship program, Jackson said. Raytheon is taking up to 10 interns and spending as much as \$170,000, she said. "They're really leading the pack."

The Legislature should take note. Teachers and parents are not the only people who see the value of education and how a solid public-education system is a requirement for a thriving economy and community.

Business leaders - the very people lawmakers say they're trying to protect when they want to cut taxes that fund education - are leading this effort to improve education.

Tucson is fortunate to have entrepreneurs who recognize that supporting education is a necessary part of any successful business plan.

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ON THE WEB

For more information about Tucson Values Teachers, go to www.tucsonvaluesteachers.org

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