Tutors Filling Arizona’s Curriculum Chasm
By: Erin Fox

Arizona’s education woes have increased business for tutors and learning centers in the Phoenix area, with many centers supplementing the gaps in the current educational system.

Despite the increase in state funding, test scores show that students are not consistently meeting academic standards developed by the state.

The State of Arizona’s Budget for the 2016 fiscal year shows a $148 million increase in K-12 education spending from the previous year. According to the budget, nearly $4.7 billion will go toward education within the state.

While Governor Doug Ducey’s executive budget proposal for 2016 shows an increase in spending, it will also reduce non-classroom expenditures by five percent for the 230 school districts.

The purpose of the reduction is to shrink the size of school administrations and refocus on students and teachers. However, the category of student support and instruction support is included as a part of the five percent reduction.

The state currently spends close to $8,000 on a student annually, according to the Arizona Joint Legislative Budget Committee reports. That is below the national average. The National Education Association says the national average student cost is $11,000.

In addition, overcrowded classrooms and minimal incentives for teachers have added to the breakdown of the academic climate. Tutoring companies are providing much needed supplemental education for students not receiving individualized attention in class.

The gap in instructional support for core subjects has led to an upscaling of private tutoring business.

Core Subject Assistance

Denise Dotti, 50, is the Director of Education at Sylvan Learning Center in Ahwatukee. She said she has seen an increase in business since last year. Dotti said last year students mostly needed homework support. This year more students need help with core subjects.

“In a classroom everything might have been bunched together, so within a week they might have had everything sort of thrown at them. Here we are giving them every little piece to find, where was that part, where was that part that they didn’t quite understand,” Dotti said.
Middle school math was one area she saw many of her students struggle. Dotti said the common core shift to move pre-algebra math to middle school, required a more abstract approach to mathematics.

She said that students struggle to keep up with the pace of classroom instruction and not every child develops abstract thinking skills by the sixth grade. Inevitably, some students fell through the cracks.

“Every student who walks in here, you kind of have to expect that they are coming in the door a little bit broken. They wouldn’t be here if they haven’t experienced failure,” Dotti said.

Centers like Sylvan are doing all that they can to increase a student’s desire to learn again.

Dave Franek, 52, is the franchise owner of Mathnasium Ocotillo in Chandler. He knows that when students walk through the door they might already have adverse feelings toward approaching math.

“When kids really struggle with math, they hate everything about it... I do a lot to make this as different from school as I can. So, the set up is not like you would see in school, it's more friendly. I specifically hire younger people as instructors,” Franek said.

Franek wants students to feel like they can relate to their instructors.

Franek's center immediately gave the impression that the space was academic but not school. Popular music funneled from the office into the learning space and created an upbeat atmosphere. A large table in the corner had a fully stocked snack bar complete with flaming hot Cheetos and blue Gatorade. Franek said that even sometimes he brings in his dog Frank despite cautions from headquarters.

Franek says it's not like he is using a secret ingredient to make children understand math. He simply has more freedom then a teacher does in the classroom.

He feels when it comes to math the traditional approach is best.

“Our method is the right method and I’m not just saying that boasting, I’m just saying it’s the right method because it’s the way it’s been done for centuries. And there was no reason to change it,” Franek said.

Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) assessment test in 2014 showed only 51 percent of students ranging from third grade to 12th grade passed the math portion of the examination. That is only a three percent increase in passing students within the last five years.
However, the weakest subject among students that take the AIMS examination was science, with only 41 percent of students passing. Only 16 percent of high school seniors passed the science portion of the exam in 2014.

**Learning Vs. Class Size**

Learning center instructors feel subject proficiency is linked to classroom size.

Often at learning centers, student to teacher ratios are smaller, allowing the teacher to understand the nuances of a child’s learning process.

Krystal Kolstad, 33, is the lead teacher for Athena Learning Centers in Arizona. Previously she taught kindergarten in public school.

She was the only instructor with 30 pupils in the classroom. Many of her students didn’t attend pre-school and lacked the educational foundation needed for the kindergarten curriculum. She didn’t have time to reach them all individually.

“I know for me it was a lot of rush, rush, rush. I mean I felt horrible but it was the situation I was put in,” Kolstad said.

Like many other learning centers, Athena wants to incorporate a STEM program within their facilities. STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and math. They are currently in talks with the LEGO Corporation to begin an elementary and middle school robotics STEM program.

By implementing these programs in learning centers, students have more individualized instruction in subjects like math and science where students are already struggling.

“The fact that we are having a severe teacher shortage in Arizona... Students are falling through the cracks.” Kolstad said.

She attributes overcrowded classrooms to lack of pay for teachers. Kolstad said she worked nearly 80 hours a week compared to other careers, teachers earn far less in salary.

“It’s just the stress and teachers leave, so we don’t have enough teachers. So what do you do when you don’t have enough teachers? You just put more kids in a classroom,” Kolstad said.

A presentation given by the Arizona Educator Retention and Recruitment Taskforce in June 2015 reported 700 open teacher positions within the state. Within the first two years of employment in Arizona, 31 percent of teachers leave the job.
A January 2015 report by the taskforce said that teacher salaries have increased by 20 percent from 2003.

The national average for a teacher’s salary is $57,000, according to a March 2015 National Education Association report. The average salary for a teacher in Arizona is $45,000. The median household income for Arizonans $50,000 according to the U.S. Census Bureau 2009-2013, American Community Survey Five-Year Estimate Report.

The taskforce’s report referred to an Arizona Department of Education Survey claiming 54 percent of districts and charter schools said salaries were the “primary obstacle” in recruiting new educators from outside the state. Arizona currently ranks 42nd nationally for average teacher salary. The report stated that salary was one of the three top motivations for teachers to leave their current organization position.

**Burdened Teachers and Restricted Students**

Tutoring instructors feel there is enormous pressure on teachers to produce results each year.

Susan Morris, 63, is the owner of Morris Tutoring Associates. Morris says there are always some students who will not be top performers in some subjects and teachers can’t always force children to grasp concepts that are more sophisticated.

“Anybody who thinks that we can make all our children be above average does not understand math,” Morris said.

She said when a strong positive spirit of cooperation occurs in public schools, it is a rare and miraculous occurrence.

“I think teacher retention is tough because why would you want to stay in something where you are being judged by what you can accomplish with too many kids and not enough money,” Morris said.

She said that the increase in pressure on teachers has an effect on the students. Fear of failure grows and inhibits the student from wanting to learn more.

“They [students] are not proud of what they are doing and they recognize the difference between them and the achievers in the classroom. They judge themselves very harshly,” Morris said.

Morris often works as an academic detective, discovering a struggling student’s strengths then helping them rebuild their confidence.

“I think it is important to first figure out what they do know...Pull together those things and then incrementally add on to that,” Morris said.
**Tutors Supplement the Gifted and Talented**

Morris doesn’t just help students that are falling behind. Some of her pupils excel in school and need supplemental instruction to keep them challenged academically.

Rick Gillis, 47, is a business consultant and both of his daughters do exceptionally well in school. He brought his eldest daughter, Sullivan, to Morris Tutoring first. Gillis said while she was testing well and meeting state requirements, she wasn’t showing improvement from year to year.

He said the lack of stimulating material caused his daughters to lose interest.

“We got into the situation where my one daughter was not being terribly challenged in school. And she was starting to lose interest. As simple as the homework was for her, it was starting to become an issue and it was taking long periods just to get through it because she was bored. She wasn't enjoying it,” Gillis said.

Sullivan Gillis, 8, is in the third grade and she says she enjoys coming to tutoring so she can improve her handwriting, especially cursive. She says she also enjoys math.

“I like learning new strategies,” Sullivan said.

Many subjects interest Sullivan and when she is a “grown up” she wants to be a veterinarian, despite her allergy to cats, or an artist.

Kenna Gillis, 7, is in the first grade and is Sullivan’s younger sister. Kenna came to Morris tutoring to work on her reading comprehension. Her father explains that she was able to read at a third grade reading level when she was in the first grade.

Kenna said she likes reading.

“Chapter books. [About] nonfiction and animals,” Kenna said.

Her favorite school subject is math but she wishes they would work on multiplication tables in class. She says one day she hopes to become a National Hockey League star.

**Online Education Becomes an Alternative for Students**

Some students are leaving the classroom altogether and choosing to pursue online education.

Tina Kanelos, 39, is co-director of Peak Academics. She has a handful of students that have left school altogether and enrolled in online classes.
She believes it is quickly becoming an alternative method for students who don’t feel like they are getting what they need from a classroom learning experience.

“For a kid that has it together and is motivated and has the executive functioning skills to manage that, it can give them flexibility to work,” Kanelos said.

She feels that the increase of tutoring services in the Phoenix area is a coping mechanism for the current state of the educational system.

“Charter schools and tutoring companies, all these things, we are coping with the fact that our people don’t spend enough money on education,” Kanelos said.