



Statement

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Statement from ABOR Chair Bill Ridenour Regarding the Attorney General's Lawsuit

"We welcome the Arizona Attorney General's suit. We have long resisted filing a challenge against the state regarding the funding of universities and had chosen instead to work with Governor Ducey and the Arizona Legislature for a solution that would reduce the financial burden for students and their families. This suit will allow us to present the facts to a court of law and seek clarification of our constitutionally mandated obligation to provide "instruction as nearly free as possible." We can now address who will pay for that mandate.

Although we welcome the suit, we are disappointed in the attorney general's tactics. The announcement of his concerns, and his decision to sue the board over them, came as a surprise, which we first learned of through the news media. The board knew the attorney general was being pressured regarding DACA students, but he has never registered his concerns about the board, its performance or that of the university system.

The AG's lawsuit - while it makes for good headlines - does nothing to change the burden for students and their families. The suit is full of attacks, but offers no constructive remedies. The justice he seeks will not, and should not, be found at the courthouse. The challenges of rising college costs and student debt are not news. Rather, they are largely the result of a massive defunding of public higher education accompanied by a seismic cost shift that has moved education from a shared responsibility to an individual responsibility. Arizona is not unique in this regard; what is unique is that in FY 2017, Arizona ranks 48th in per capita support for higher education.

State budgeting in the wake of the Great Recession upended the traditional university financial model. The federal government has become a dominant player in the total state budget with health care, not education, now the state's top funding priority. It is hitting university students the hardest: Just 10 years ago, the state funded approximately 75 percent of the educational costs for a resident student (this excludes the University of Arizona Colleges of Medicine). This year, the state will fund approximately 34 percent. Even so, we have taken every step to minimize the financial impact on Arizona's students during the past 10 years. It's important to remember that most students receive some type of financial aid and, as a result, the average tuition paid by resident students has only increased about \$1,900 from 2007 to 2016. During the same time period, our universities added about 55,000 students.

The right to be educated at the highest levels is one of the greatest privileges granted to us as Americans, and it remains one of the surest paths to economic success. Education is the great

“equalizer” in that it allows students and families of limited means and from all walks of life to pursue the American dream. More and more, that dream can only be achieved with financial aid and support.

To ensure that our universities remain accessible to all Arizonans, this board has been working diligently within the bounds of the law to create a new approach to university financing that curbs the actual cost of education for Arizona students.

Our resident student funding model has received broad community support as well as student support. Over the past several years, we have dramatically reduced the price increases for Arizona students, stabilized the costs of education, enhanced need-based aid and significantly increased accountability for results. At the same time, we have increased the system’s performance, raising graduation rates and enhancing quality that has been recognized across the nation and around the world. All the while, we have consistently and respectfully advocated for additional state support in the wake of the largest cuts to higher education in the United States, often with students by our side.

While much more remains to be done, we are proud of our progress on behalf of our state. Today we are home to more than 170,000 students, more than half of whom are Arizonans. Our universities are among the largest and most diverse in the country.

As the citizen board appointed to oversee university education, we struggle every day with the paramount issues of access and affordability. There needs to be a rational statewide discussion, without political pandering, regarding our entire education structure and funding model for K-12 and higher education, including university education.”

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