

## Arizona Daily Star

### The Truth about Calvin Baker and the Vail District's Charter School Conversions

RE: "Calvin Baker – The whole truth on charter school funding"

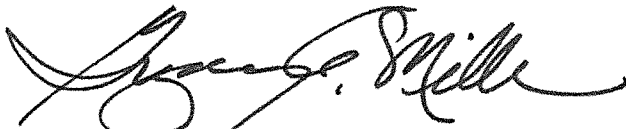
Superintendent Baker knows that anyone can make his or her case or agenda using statistics, or in this case, very complicated financial systems that support our children's education. If he truly believes what he advocated at the end of his Arizona Star Special Letter to the Editor: That districts and charters need to work together; as he outlined in his last two paragraphs, he would have opened his AZ Star Special Letter with that. But no, Mr. Baker opened citing a district where tax-payers didn't support a local request for an override of up to 15% of the State Formula: or incorrectly suggest that all State Sponsored Charter Schools get an extra \$1800 per student/year, where in fact just the opposite is true. On average, statewide, the districts get approximately \$1700 per student/year more as defined by the State Superintendent's Annual Financial Report. A report that is a collation of all school and district Annual Financial Reports submitted to the Arizona Department of Education each year; or suggesting that State Charter Schools are out of compliance with Federal Law and not providing a Free & Appropriate Education to students under Section 504 or IDEA statutes concerning Special Education. All charter schools are public schools and are held accountable to all the same Federal laws and requirements impacting Special Education Services as the districts, by the same State & Federal agencies.

His approach indicates Mr. Baker is still very much a part of the Educational Status Quo. Where the aim is to eliminate the parent choice option of the open marketplace. District Conversions of existing schools to charter schools is only a money grab; one of those pesky little "quirks" in State Law where districts can change up to 50% of their schools' names and call them charters and get an extra \$1600 per student/year. Vail District "charter conversions" alone will hit the "state's stressed general fund" for approximately \$6,400,000 a year. Money that will only increase the existing deficit between Districts & State Sponsored Charter Schools. So much for his concern for tax-payers statewide and the overall health of the General Fund.

State sponsored Charter Schools have saved the property tax payers of this State BILLIONS yes with a B! Due to the lack of access to both the secondary property tax and the Student First Fund for the facilities of our schools. Yes we invested our own money to secure revenue streams for facility construction and maintenance. Without the robust school choice opportunity in Arizona, the 140,000 currently enrolled charter school students would have had to be accommodated by new district facilities, costing Billions in state property tax payer dollars.

As I stated in the beginning of this response, Mr. Baker is absolutely right when he said “The important truth is that for both district schools & charter schools funding is shamefully inadequate. Both ... are struggling ... educational funding is among the very worst in the nation. It is a funding level that cheats our children, our future, and our economic development”. I couldn’t agree more.

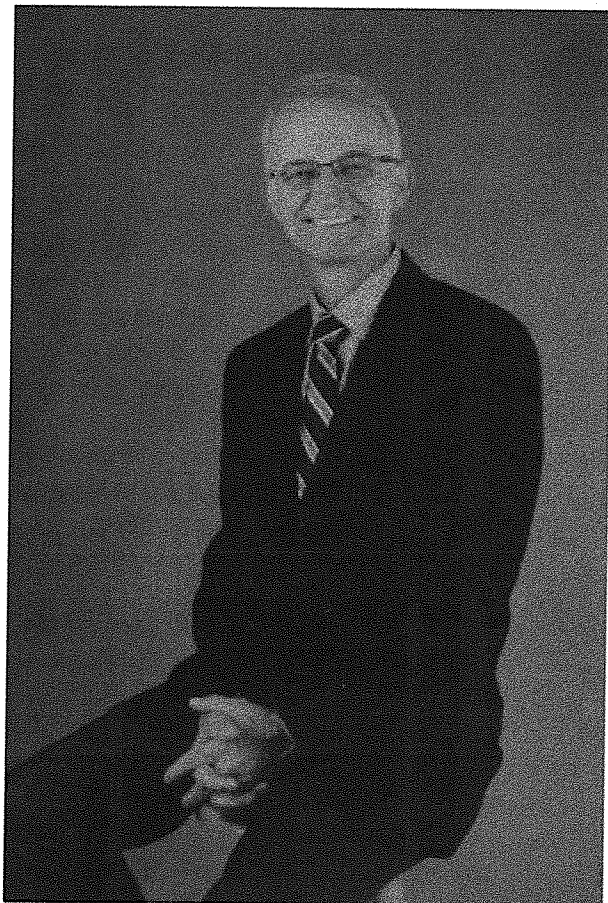
I would like to close with two very important statements. The 1<sup>st</sup> is that we all owe Mr. Baker and all the employees of the Vail School District a major thank-you for providing their students a robust and challenging educational opportunity. Their “A” rating is well earned. They have set high expectations and held their students accountable while still creating an exciting environment to learn in, as many other successful charter schools and districts have. The 2<sup>nd</sup> is that due to the woeful underfunding of education in this state, the resulting scarce resources available, and the competition for them, it is hard to have a truly honest discussion about how to fix this issue among those who are in positions of policy and legislative leadership. But the time is now!



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## Calvin Baker: the whole truth on charter school funding



12 HOURS AGO • BY CALVIN BAKER SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The recent article (“Charter schools seek fund hike,” Dec. 2) regarding charter schools asking for \$135 million in additional funding missed the mark. It told only half the truth.

The article presented arguments regarding the financial advantages available to district schools while ignoring the significant financial advantages enjoyed by charters.

The whole truth is that Arizona’s school-finance system provides different and distinct advantages to both district schools and state-sponsored charter schools.

Under the law, the state gives charter schools about \$1,000 more per student than it does to school districts.

In addition, due to a quirk in the law, state-sponsored (not district-sponsored) charters are also able to obtain “small school funding.” These funds provide up to an additional \$800 per student.

Providing state-sponsored charter schools with this funding is a \$56 million annual hit to the state’s stressed general fund. Taxpayers receive no benefit for this additional cost.

Do the math:  $\$1,000 + \$800 = \$1,800$  per student of additional funding for state-sponsored charter school students. In other words, a classroom of 30 students in a state-sponsored charter can generate as much as \$54,000 more than a similar classroom in a district school.

Take, for example, the well-run, successful and financially struggling Altar Valley School District on the west edge of Tucson. Its low property wealth makes it essentially impossible to obtain voter approval for an override. The cost per taxpayer is simply too high. If Altar Valley’s two schools were a state-sponsored charter system, they would automatically receive more than \$1 million in additional revenue — almost three times the amount their recently failed override would have generated.

Some of the most highly acclaimed state-sponsored charters also enjoy a large financial benefit due to the fact that they somehow have no special-education students. The actual

cost of providing legally required and expensive services to special-education students is significantly higher than the additional revenue those students generate. District schools subsidize the cost of special education with money from their "regular" education programs.

Charters that serve very few or no special-education students escape this expense and thus have more money to spend on their regular education programs.

District schools do have the advantage of access to bond money to purchase land and facilities — if they can manage to pass a bond election. State-sponsored charters look to the many grant sources promoting charters (i.e., federal government, Gates Foundation, Walton Foundation, etc.) or their own financing for land and facilities.

The absolutely critical difference, however, is that district facilities belong to the local taxpayers who paid for them. Owners of state-sponsored charter schools retain full property rights to their facilities. If they quit charter-school operations, they keep the facilities taxpayers helped to fund. Conversely, if a district converts one of its schools to a charter and decides to quit the charter, local taxpayers must return all of the additional charter funding the district received.

Again, the whole truth: Both district schools and state-sponsored charter schools have their own financial advantages.

The far more important truth is we are wasting time arguing about those differences between charters and district schools. In fact, we are putting education at risk as the Legislature has a history of equalizing perceived funding differences by taking money away.

The important truth is that funding for both district schools and charter schools is shamefully inadequate. Both charter schools and district schools are struggling. Our education funding is at a level among the very worst in the nation. It is a funding level that cheats our children, our future and our economic development.

It is time to let go of what divides us and focus on what unites us. It is time for supporters of both district schools and charter schools to work together to address the embarrassingly low level of funding for education in Arizona.