



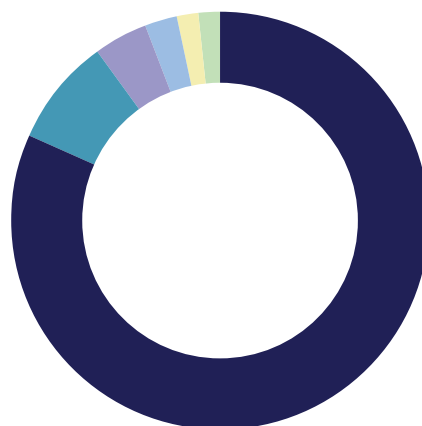
PHOENIX UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT



28,111
STUDENTS



78%
STUDENT
POVERTY LEVEL



- HISPANIC: 81.7%**
- BLACK: 6.3%**
- WHITE: 4.4%**
- NATIVE AMERICAN: 2.4%**
- ASIAN: 1.6%**
- OTHER: 1.6%**



Invest Forward is an initiative that encourages districts and states to prioritize investing a significant portion of their American Rescue Plan resources in helping students successfully access postsecondary education and succeed in future career pathways. As part of the effort to equip district and state leaders with high-impact strategies to guide their investments, Invest Forward will continue to highlight the work of **innovative local and state leaders** who are using the once-in-a-lifetime stimulus funding to give students a better tomorrow by investing in postsecondary pathways today.



“Phoenix Union’s partnership with Arizona State University is a game-changer, especially for youth of color and first-generation college-going students. First Gen college students, even those with excellent grades and ACT/SAT scores, are often reluctant to apply for college – they wonder if college is actually for them. In addition, many of our students do not have someone at home to help them with complex college and financial aid applications. The partnership with ASU helps eliminate those barriers. Students know from minute one: if they stay on track, they will get into ASU.”

—**CHAD GESTSON**, *Superintendent of Phoenix Union High School District and member of Chiefs for Change*

ACCESS TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IS ONE OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAYS TO ADDRESS INEQUALITY AND CREATE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY.

Investments in strong postsecondary pathways—the meaningful connections between K-12 education and college and career—are vital to ensuring a better future for our young people.

Phoenix Union High School District (PXU), under the leadership of Chiefs for Change member Chad Gestson, is one of five high school-only districts surrounding the Phoenix city center, serving a minority-majority student population. PXU leaders conducted **multiple listening sessions** and **surveys** with various stakeholder groups to identify the specific needs of the local community in light of the pandemic as well as the best ways to direct resources to meet those needs. Federal Covid aid spending decisions are tied to the **10 Commitments** outlined in the district’s Strategic Plan. The first such commitment is to ensure that students are College, Career and Life Ready Graduates.

EXPANDING DUAL ENROLLMENT



One example of the coherence between community feedback and the strategic plan was the decision to **expand dual enrollment** across the district. Parents and students indicated a desire for more relevant and meaningful curricula that would prepare young people for college. PXU responded by using stimulus funds to create a **new staff position** solely dedicated to providing **more dual enrollment opportunities** and **increasing access** for students. The person in this role streamlined processes for teacher certification and student enrollment, worked with local college experts to crosswalk and analyze all course offerings with high school and college catalogs to identify additional offerings, and developed workshops and training for educators and administrators on the process and qualifications needed.

Additionally, the district has allocated **\$200,000 for stipends and support** for teachers to become certified as dual enrollment instructors. Currently, **8 percent** of PXU classroom teachers are qualified to teach dual enrollment courses. The additional funding has led to another **2.5 percent** of teachers actively engaging in the certification process, with another **20 percent** reporting their interest in the opportunity.

IMPROVING STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS



At the start of the pandemic, the district launched a **Peer Influencer program**, allowing students to link together with classmates on social media to ease the transition from high school to college. This program remained strong throughout the pandemic and kept students connected, informed, and motivated. After careful analysis of data on students going to college, PXU determined that four-year college-going rates were not negatively impacted by the pandemic, attributing much of that success to programs such as Peer Influencer.

PXU partnered with **Valley of the Sun United Way** and **College Depot** to launch the program. While a peer-to-peer connection strategy is powerful, easy to deploy, and relatively low cost, PXU leaders recommend having a **clear vision for the desired outcomes** in mind. “Some districts focus solely on FAFSA completion, while others focus on college applications,” said Thea Andrade, the Chief Achievement Officer for PXU. “We decided to focus on both. We started small and worked through the continuous improvement cycle to get to where we are today. In 2020, we had three peer influencers. Today, there are nine influencers across four campuses with a goal of getting two or three on each campus in PXU.”



LOOKING AHEAD: STRENGTH AND SUSTAINABILITY



PXU and Arizona State University (ASU) recently launched a **new partnership** that allows for **automatic acceptance** and **direct enrollment** for PXU students who meet certain criteria. This year, **more than 1,450 students** (representing nearly half of the senior class) received ASU acceptance letters. Efforts such as these can strengthen postsecondary pathways and boost student opportunity even amid challenging circumstances. Now more than ever, students need **early exposure, ongoing assistance, and direct, intentional support** to help them achieve their postsecondary goals. PXU will continue to build upon and strengthen the postsecondary transition practices—working hand in hand with postsecondary institutions to increase dual enrollment opportunities and ensuring students feel connected to the schools and supported in their future plans.