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Schools in the Recession TRANSCRIPT

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JOHN MERROW: This year, Arizona faced a budget crater to rival its own Grand Canyon, a deficit of nearly \$2 billion.

Arizona communities anticipated cuts in schools. The state already ranks 50th in the nation in per-pupil spending. From there, Tucson schools took another hit this fall: 10 percent.

What happens when a major recession hits public education? How do schools survive when times are tough? Who gets hurt more, the rich or the poor? We went to Tucson to find out.

We started here, in Tucson's affluent East Side, a comfortable suburban community. Gale Elementary School has an excellent reputation, veteran teachers, a high-performing student body, and a commitment to the arts. In the cafeteria, everything looks normal, except that Paula Godfrey is the school principal, forced into kitchen duty, she says, because of budget cuts.

How does that feel, to be number 50? I mean...

PAULA GODFREY: It's terrible. When you're 50th in the nation in per-pupil spending, there's a lot of things that you cut out of education.

JOHN MERROW: Principal Godfrey says she lost \$140,000 this year.

What did you lose?

PAULA GODFREY: We lost our office manager. We were able to keep our attendance registrar. But the difference between keeping the office manager or the attendance registrar was exactly the amount we needed for orchestra.

JOHN MERROW: Meet Gale's new office manager.

PAULA GODFREY: I do the payroll. I do all the requisitions. I do all of the arranging for substitutes.

JOHN MERROW: Enrollment is up. Over 400 students attend grades kindergarten through fifth. But funding is not. Because its students are mostly middle-class, Gale qualifies for little federal money.

PAULA GODFREY: And, so, we're a school that relies on just that 50th level spending.

JOHN MERROW: Gale has few amenities. There's no gym. This is the auditorium. The computers are out of date. Extras like marching band have disappeared. Gale also made cuts in the classroom. Tutors and aides were let go. And classes are bigger.

KIM SVOB, teacher, Gale Elementary School: I have 31 students, and, as of yesterday, we will actually, for half of the day, have 32 students in our classroom.

JOHN MERROW: Second grade teacher Kim Svob says, in previous years, her classes had an average of 24 students.

KIM SVOB: And, you know, the extra five, six, seven children make a really big difference. At a second grade level, they need a lot of individual attention. And there definitely are children who are falling through the cracks. There's no question about that.

JOHN MERROW: What's happening at Gale is happening at schools in other hard-hit states. And although Arizona public schools receive \$473 million in federal stimulus funding, that has not been enough to fill all the gaps.

But in its struggle to survive, Gale has an ace in the hole: parents.

PAULA GODFREY: They're everywhere. We average between 5,000 and 6,000 hours a year of volunteer time.

JOHN MERROW: That's the equivalent of three full-time workers for a year. And that's not all.

PAULA GODFREY: We ask for copy paper. We ask for pencils. We ask for erasers. We ask for soap. We ask for everything.

JOHN MERROW: And?

PAULA GODFREY: They came through miraculously. I don't know what we would have done without them.

JOHN MERROW: Gale and its teachers are working overtime to make sure they can keep on doing what they have been doing. They have been lucky compared to

other Tucson schools.

Take 90-year-old Ochoa Elementary. It serves a poor, largely Hispanic population, but not very well. Scores were low and enrollment was dropping. And that made it a target. Looking to save money, the district put it on a list of schools to be closed.

HEIDI ARANDA, principal, Ochoa Elementary School: You think, what worse thing can happen to a school than school closure?

JOHN MERROW: Heidi Aranda is Ochoa's principal.

HEIDI ARANDA: Whenever you're in a crisis like that, it forces you to reexamine. I said, we need to think about our enrollment and what would it take to increase our enrollment.

JOHN MERROW: She has found what she hopes is the answer, here. A teacher, Pauline Baker, had just introduced a method from Italy called Reggio Emilia in her preschool class.

PAULINE BAKER: In a nutshell, the metaphor for Reggio is that children have 100 languages for learning.

JOHN MERROW: Reggio is guided by the idea that children learn best by doing. Everything about a Reggio classroom is planned, from the lighting, to the music, to the materials for children.

PAULINE BAKER: People think this is about art, and that this is an art studio. But, really, the studio is a place for inventing ways to do things.

JOHN MERROW: Soon, parents told Principal Aranda that it was their favorite class. Then, Tucson's new superintendent came to see what all the fuss was about.

ELIZABETH CELANIA-FAGEN: I was shocked. It really took me back.

JOHN MERROW: To?

ELIZABETH CELANIA-FAGEN: To just -- just see what it -- what was possible. You know, I just kind of had to pause and say, you know, what a difference this makes in -- in learning.

JOHN MERROW: It turned out to make all the difference to Ochoa. With community support, Principal Aranda proposed to model the whole school on the Reggio approach. The plans to shut it down were put aside.

Is it your hope that converting the school this way will attract parents from other parts of Tucson?

HEIDI ARANDA: Yes. Yes. It is a definite goal and strategy to increase the enrollment in our school.

JOHN MERROW: This year, Ochoa opened a Reggio kindergarten, next year, first grade. It will add a grade each year until the entire school is converted.

Meanwhile, classes like this fine arts class and this class in gardening have adopted the approach.

Now, suppose Ochoa, you know, liberates learning and the kids love it and the parents love it, but, on those very narrow tests, they don't do well. What then?

ELIZABETH CELANIA-FAGEN: Well, we have looked into schools across the country that have actually transformed themselves and taken a more progressive, you know, stance. And, actually, the students do better.

JOHN MERROW: Ochoa's new approach, born in crisis, is attracting visitors, including U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in October. But the attention and an improved performance rating from the state may not be enough to assure its survival.

Like other Tucson schools, Ochoa lost 10 percent of its budget, over \$100,000, and had to let two teachers go. It could get worse. In January, when Arizona's state legislature reconvenes, more cuts are expected.