If you have a kid in public school (or know one), you need to follow this race

Opinion: Arizona’s education superintendent can’t change what we pay teachers. But it’s still a critical office for the state’s district and charter schools.

If you care about public education, about what Arizona students are learning and how well prepared they are to succeed in college and beyond, you should care who wins the election for superintendent of public instruction.

Even if the office is largely administrative.

The education superintendent alone can’t change what we pay teachers, what we teach students or how we grade schools’ performance.

That’s up to the Legislature, the state Board of Education and local school boards.

Why does the superintendent matter?

But the superintendent is tasked with putting state policy into practice.

And that makes who holds the job immensely consequential for the state’s district and charter schools, which educate 1.1 million students in Arizona.

Those schools need training, policy direction and data from the Department of Education, which the superintendent oversees, to make the best decisions for students.

The department — and, ultimately, the superintendent — also is responsible for dispersing $6 billion in funding to schools and overseeing early childhood, gifted education, special education, English as a second language, teacher training and a slew of other critical education programs.

It’s a big job with a lot of moving parts.

Who’s in the job now?
Republican incumbent Diane Douglas is a different candidate today than when she entered politics four years ago. Douglas is more poised and knowledgeable in debates. She doesn’t avoid the press as much and doesn’t get as frazzled at criticism. She even has sought additional funding for education — three times, no less — but her proposals have fallen on deaf ears.

That’s because Douglas killed any chance she had of being an effective superintendent in her first six months on the job, when she butted heads with the governor and the state Board of Education. Few people want to work with her.

There has been heavy turnover in the Department of Education during her tenure, and frazzled superintendents have complained about how hard it is to get good information from its various branches.

**What if I want a new direction?**

The good news is if you think the Department of Education needs a new direction — and we think it does — your choices in the Aug. 28 primary really do matter. There are four Republican and two Democratic challengers to Douglas with a diverse set of education backgrounds and views on public education.

**Who are the four Republican challengers?**

**Bob Branch:** The university professor often says he is most qualified for the job because he teaches our teachers. But Branch is the most politically conservative and least politically connected of the GOP candidates. And that combination could make it difficult for him to sell reforms, such as breaking ties with the federal Department of Education, to a diverse swath of educators and lawmakers. In that case, he might not be much more effective than outsider Douglas has been in the job.

**Jonathan Gelbart:**

Gelbart oversaw the development of 15 BASIS Charter Schools, which now serve more than 10,000 students. But he also knows the needs of district schools, having spent considerable time listening to county and district superintendents around the state. Gelbart is well spoken and politically moderate, and he already has a detailed plan to put the department on more solid footing in his first 100 days. We have no doubt he has the energy and ability to carry it out.
Tracy Livingston: The community-college board member and former public-school teacher has a long list of conservative lawmakers' endorsements. But her assessment of what ails public schools is too narrow (we disagree that testing is the biggest issue), and her grasp of high-level education policy is too thin (opponents corrected her on program names and other details in a meeting with The Republic). That makes us question how effective she would be at managing such a complex department.

Riggs: Riggs, who ran unsuccessfully for governor in 2014, has the resume to be superintendent. He knows a lot about education policy, and he served on education-related subcommittees in Congress representing California in the 1990s, where he sponsored school-choice legislation. But it's hard to get a good read on how he'd govern, as he at times tailors his answers to what he thinks his audience wants to hear. He portrays a conservative hard-charger with some and a centrist bridge-builder with others.

And the two Democrats?

Kathy Hoffman: As an educational therapist and bilingual teacher, Hoffman brings admirable compassion for students, particularly those with special needs. She is well versed in education policy and was there on the front lines of the #RedforEd movement, making her a great advocate for rank-and-file teachers. But she lacks the administrative experience and the political savvy to compete with her opponent in the primary.

MORE: Where the Democrats in this race differ
David Schapira: Schapira is a former teacher, school administrator and state lawmaker – a trifecta of experiences that would help him reform the Department of Education and catch the ear of elected leaders. He is well versed in what’s new and what’s proven to work in education policy. And he was one of few Democrats who got things done during the tumultuous Senate Bill 1070 days, because he knew when to throw bombs and when to build bridges. That experience would serve him well in this seat.

How can I make change happen?

Arizona needs a strong leader who can reboot the Department of Education, first and foremost. Someone with well-developed ideas to make it relevant to public-school educators. Someone who has their trust and can speak their lingo.

But why stop there? Arizona also needs a superintendent who also can explain and advocate for public schools. The superintendent hasn’t had an effective bully pulpit in more than a decade, but the focus on education this election gives whoever is elected a unique chance to seize it, to help guide the conversation on funding and testing and achievement.

Wouldn’t it be great to have a superintendent who can bring diverse interests together and find consensus for a change?

Gelhart and Schapira are the best of their field to make that happen. Choosing both in August would make this the most competitive race in November. A contest of ideas, not ideology.

Don’t public schools deserve as much?

This is an opinion of The Arizona Republic’s editorial board. What do you think? Send us a letter to the editor to weigh in.