

https://www.paysonroundup.com/news/local/aspire-az-gives-students-a-choice/article_7a338dbc-47c8-5cdb-b20d-b1ea65f0c0e0.html

FEATURED

Aspire AZ gives students a choice

by Michele Nelson, Roundup staff reporter

Mar 18, 2022



Sign to the Aspire breakfast on March 10, 2022 at the Rim Club

Matt Davis Axis Culture

Many Payson families struggle with poverty, so the thought of sending their child to college never enters their mind — but that’s where the Aspire Arizona Foundation steps in.

“The financial burden of college tuition was something that my family and I as well as many other families in the community were relieved of the past few years (by Aspire),” said Emeline Whaley, a Payson High School senior with 40 college credits under her belt.

Whaley, along with 46 other Aspire students, celebrated receiving an A in one of their college level courses during a breakfast hosted by the MHA Foundation and held at The Rim Club March 11.

“We give them all a certificate,” said Paul Brocker, president of the Aspire Arizona Foundation.

For the past six years, Aspire has raised money to cover the cost of Rim Country high school students attending the local community college, the Eastern Arizona College Payson campus.

Students take what are called dual credit classes that provide credits for both high school and college classes.

Brocker said Aspire has supported 458 students since it launched.

“When I talk to students, they indicate to me this has given them an opportunity with what they want to do,” he said.

Even if that means only a third of the students took three to five credits.

“The way I look at this, it indicates the students thought, ‘Gee, college isn’t for me,’ (but) it gives them a flavor,” said Brocker.

Another third took six to 13 credits, and the last third took 15 to 30-plus credits.

One thing none of these students had to experience, “They aren’t taking any financial hit to find out if college is for them or not,” said Brocker.

In Whaley’s case, her 40 units will significantly lower her cost to receive a bachelor’s degree at Northern Arizona University, where she plans to attend this fall.

“In a rural community like Payson, there are many students who come from families that did not pursue higher education and would not be able to themselves without this opportunity,” she said.

Something PHS alumna Veronica Volk shared with the Aspire students during the breakfast.

“Just six years ago I was sitting right where you are today,” she told the room full of students, Aspire board members and district staff. “Today — I am a proud NAU alumni with a bachelor’s degree in business administration, and work as a full-time faculty member at Eastern Arizona College. And to top it all off — I have absolutely \$0 in student loan debt. Yeah, that’s right, absolutely \$0 in debt. A lot of that I have to credit to the program you are all a part of right now, the dual enrollment program.”

Volk spent fewer than four years getting her degree, which reduced the amount she needed to cover tuition, books, room and board.

Board member Kristin Thorgeirsson Croak said, “I was brought to tears listening to them speak, and watching them connect with the generous donors that help create this opportunity for them.”

Ten of the recognized Aspire Arizona Foundation students received a 3.5 grade point average or higher for their dual credit classes. Aspire recognized them as honor roll students, said Brocker.

A final recognition went to those “who have completed 20 or more academic credits through the dual credit program,” said Brocker. Aspire called these students their Aspire Ambition students.

As a final recognition the organization handed out T-shirts that proudly identified the wearer as an Aspire student.

Whaley expressed gratitude.

“Your generosity and investment in the youth of Payson, Arizona is very beneficial to the future of our town, country, and world,” she said. “Thank you for your time and support of my peers’ and my education through your generosity. We would not be here today without you. With your support we are able to work hard each day to become the leaders of tomorrow.”

This touched Croak.

“I can’t begin to describe the joy that I have in being on the board of the Aspire Arizona Foundation,” said Croak. “There are some really great things happening in our schools, and I am proud to get to be a part of it through this organization.”

Contact the reporter at mnelson@payson.com



Aspire Arizona celebrated all the Payson High School students who received an A in one of their dual credit classes.

Matt Davis/Axis Culture

Michele Nelson

I cover the Town of Payson, courts, wildfire, business, families, non-profits, the environment and investigative reporting