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CARL & MARILYNN THOMA FOUNDATION

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## Thoma Foundation Awards \$1 Million to Arizona Student Opportunity Collaborative

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**A three-year grant to Arizona Student Opportunity Collaborative will create access to high-quality, virtual college & career advising for rural students.**

The Carl & Marilyn Thoma Foundation, a private family foundation now headquartered in Dallas-Fort Worth, has awarded a \$1 million grant to Arizona Student Opportunity Collaborative (AzSOC) to support the expansion of the organization's college & career advising offerings. AzSOC is a virtual platform created by rural educators for rural students, offering students in Arizona the chance to take advanced courses with top teachers from across the state. The program particularly benefits students at smaller or underserved schools that do not have the capacity to provide a full line-up of AP or dual credit courses. AzSOC's main innovation lies in recruiting underutilized teachers; existing or retired instructors who are certified to teach advanced courses but are not currently deploying these skills.

Earlier this year, AzSOC received \$6 million in federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) III funds, allowing the program to scale to reach more than 6,000 students annually across Arizona over the next three years. The Thoma Foundation's grant will increase impact by funding an integral expansion of college & career advising built on AzSOC's existing infrastructure. As AzSOC broadens access to advanced dual-credit and AP courses, advising is the next step toward improving long-term educational outcomes for Arizona's rural and underserved high school students.

"AzSOC's model is fundamentally driven by unmet student needs that exist within rural education across Arizona and the nation," said Holly Harrison, Director of the Thoma Foundation. "It is an elegant model that harnesses the talent of underutilized teachers to better prepare rural high schoolers for the rigor of college coursework and fulfilling, well-paid careers. We are thrilled to be supporting the expansion of AzSOC's college & career advising platform, ensuring that students have the support they need to pursue their educational ambitions."

This grant is one of only three \$1 million grants the Thoma Foundation has made to date. Harrison notes that at this level of funding, "The Foundation is looking for bold leadership, an entrepreneurial idea, and a demonstrated commitment to improving educational outcomes for rural students." Over the last three years, with the support of the Helios Foundation, AzSOC has developed a proof of concept and grown from the brainchild of two rural educators to a platform serving around a thousand students and dozens of teachers in rural Arizona.

AzSOC Director Glen Lineberry explains, "AzSOC is about filling the gaps that every rural school faces. These gaps – teaching positions we can't fill, courses we don't have space for in the master schedule, curriculum unavailable within our budget restrictions – are magnified in small and remote schools. But if we collaborate, if we share our resources and do so over the

internet, we can eliminate geography as a barrier to the sort of cooperation that happens daily in urban and suburban districts.”

In Wickenburg, a rural Arizona town of around 7,500, Principal Mark Gorman, Wickenburg High School, has seen the results of this collaboration on the ground. According to Gorman, “This partnership with AzSOC allows students from Wickenburg High School to take courses that may not be offered here on our campus due to limitations with staffing or the numbers of students interested in taking a course.”

The Thoma Foundation grant will take partnerships such as that between Wickenburg H.S. and AzSOC to the next level through the addition of counseling opportunities. Director Lineberry views counseling as essential to success in high school and beyond: “School counselors are critical to helping students master the academic and social travails of high school, to identifying and planning a career, and to getting into the college or training program necessary to succeed. Arizona's [notorious ratio of 905 students to each counselor](#) means that most rural students never see a qualified school counselor. The Thoma Foundation's support means that we can start to fill that gap and level the playing field for our kids.”

## Contact



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