



The Coconino Coalition for Children and Youth exists to provide leadership in developing community-wide strategies that enhance the well-being of children and youth in Coconino County.

CCC&Y is non-partisan. Visit www.coconinokids.org to view candidate responses.

CCC&Y 2018 Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Name: **AUSTIN ASLAN** Office: **Flagstaff City Council**

1. What do you think the two most pressing issues are for youth and their families?

Education is woefully underfunded in Arizona, which ranks at or near the bottom in the US for funding per student. This results in high class sizes; sometimes under-qualified or inexperienced education staff; lack of important services for students experiencing difficulties or trauma; loss of essential whole-child development programs such as physical education, art, and music; and the distraction of poorly maintained buildings and infrastructure. My children attend the public schools in Flagstaff, and I am deeply in awe of the fabulous job their teachers do in spite of these barriers. Nevertheless, youth and families across the state are under-served and have few resources to turn to in the school system, resulting in young people that lack essential workforce and life skills when they become adults.

In Flagstaff, this problem is compounded by high poverty. Flagstaff was recently listed as the Arizona city with the greatest poverty problem by *USA Today*. We know from abundant data that poverty is linked to poor school performance and lack of access to important extra-curricular activities such as athletics and arts. Families struggling to keep food on the table and a roof over their children's heads are often unable to meet their children's needs for adequate academic support, nutrition, physical development, and creative outlets. Many such children lose pivotal opportunities for growth, at best, or turn to self-destructive behaviors, at worst.

2. What do you believe the role of elected officials is in their communities when it comes to serving and advocating for children and youth?

Although education funding is a state level issue, local officials can carry a strong voice to the state to demand that we do better and that we invest in our children. Additionally, local programs can help to fill some of the gaps left by our struggling schools and vulnerable families. As an example, my middle school daughter is in the East Flagstaff public library almost every day; I observe that the library is full of children using books and computing resources for hours after school each day. Providing and maintaining such safe, enriching sites must be a priority of elected officials. Ensuring that families know how to access critical services, particularly those that schools can no longer provide, is another important role of elected officials, who must prioritize such awareness and access among families and youth.



3. Within the duties of your elected office, how can you support the children and families of our community? If elected, how will this be expressed in your agenda?

I am deeply committed to ensuring that our community pick up the slack left by our defunded schools by maintaining and bolstering children's resources, including safe spaces such as libraries and computing centers, athletic fields and facilities that are accessible and well-distributed throughout the city, volunteer tutoring services, and safe, affordable, and stimulating summer experiences. We need to be aware that our families are struggling and to identify the opportunities our children lack, seeking creative ways to fill those gaps.

4. How would you, as an elected official, support an equitable school system for ALL students, cradle to career? As 90% of human brain development happens by age 5, please additionally share your thoughts on early childhood education and its role in the educational system.

State level funding in Arizona is abysmal, with the result that local bonds and similar efforts often fill gaps in certain communities. This can lead to disparities, with wealthier communities able to support higher-performing schools and modern facilities, technology, and programming. At the city level, I am sensitive to our state funding limitations and also the need to ensure that residents from the east to the west side are able to attend school in safety, learn in an undistracted environment, and receive the additional support services and enrichment they deserve and require. We can supplement state resources through volunteer programs, Parks and Recreation, and well-maintained and safe public facilities distributed throughout the community. Additionally, our city contains NAU, which is nationally recognized for its education program. I will prioritize seeking creative solutions with NAU faculty, students, and administrators. We have already held exciting conversations about the possibility of increased internships, volunteerism, and other routes of linking the skills and training available at NAU with our community youth throughout their schooling. Such efforts will target areas of inequity in our community, to ensure that all students have access to support.

Early childhood education is costly but can be critical to later student success, especially in a high-poverty community where many working families are unable to supplement early childhood education at home. We can do a great deal to beef up our early childhood education opportunities through both informal and non-traditional learning opportunities (e.g., Parks and Recreation programs, volunteer pre-literacy programs, home pre-literacy educational programs and materials) and more traditional learning opportunities such as subsidized or scholarship preschools and pre-Kindergarten. Community groups such as LAUNCH Flagstaff already leverage the concern and resources of generous members to help fill the gaps in early childhood education in Flagstaff. As an elected official, I must support these efforts and work to find additional resources for them from both outside and within the community.

5. As childhood abuse, neglect and foster care continue to be major issues in Arizona, what prevention and trauma response strategies do you support for our child welfare system, the Department of Child Safety and/or our local communities? How would you propose using local, state and federal funds to improve outcomes for youth experiencing foster care or additionally, work toward prevention of child abuse in our communities?

Our safety personnel are under-staffed and under-funded, both within Flagstaff and across Arizona. We must have the personnel and resources to be able to respond rapidly to crisis calls and also to be able to assist with crisis prevention by offering family interventions and family education designed to reduce stresses, bring awareness and tools to parents, and keep families together as much as possible. Improving retention rates and the high quality of our police force is part of this; with better trained personnel, our police would have more time to spend in the community in positive, proactive education and crisis prevention programming. We should also partner with NAU's education and family studies programs to learn and employ evidence-based methods of assisting families in trauma prevention. When abuse occurs and foster care is necessary, we should use local, state, and federal funds to carefully track foster cases, identify emotional and physical needs of children and provide routes to professional intervention, and link parents with resources that can help them learn coping skills and obtain help before further abuses occur.



6. Lastly, please feel free to share any further information with voters.

I have extensive training and on-the-ground experience with engaging youth in leadership roles. With almost a decade of professional youth development training under my belt, working with a diverse array of youth in Sacramento, I've learned firsthand that our young people can demonstrate genuine leadership when adults are properly trained to grant them a voice in decision-making. Indeed, research has proven time and again that youth are capable of making informed decisions for themselves.

Our youth need more opportunities to express their desires and to show leadership throughout Flagstaff. They need more resources, more things to do, and more say in what all of that looks like. I fully support the return of a Youth Commission to Flagstaff, and empowering that commission with as much authority to advise the city council as any other commission. I support more access to jobs for our young men and women, and will partner with local businesses to properly resource better youth employment, empowerment, and authentic leadership roles.

