



Foster youth celebrate/ P. 3

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An edition of the East Valley Tribune

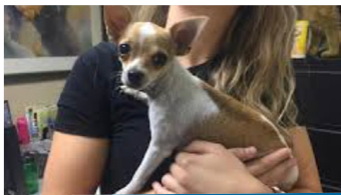
TempeNews.com | Sunday, June 21, 2026

## Inside This Week



NEWS ..... 10

GOP lawmakers end 2026 session with 10 ballot measures.



COMMUNITY ..... 15

Tempe animal rescue looking for help.



BUSINESS ..... 16

Valley renters are benefiting from the apartment glut.

COMMUNITY ..... 14

BUSINESS ..... 16

OPINION ..... 19

CLASSIFIEDS ..... 23

## Testy EVIT fight heading back to court

BY PAUL MARYNIAK  
Tribune Executive Editor

The bitter dispute between nine school districts and the East Valley Institute of Technology is scheduled to return before a Maricopa County Superior Court judge on Wednesday with both sides appearing no closer to an agreement

than they were a year ago.

While an estimated 3,400 students who attend EVIT's Mesa campuses for Career and Technical (CTE) programs five half days a week are wondering how they'll get there, Judge Christopher Coury will confront two major issues at the heart of the dispute.

One issue is whether districts may continue using tens of millions of dollars previously received through EVIT for district-operated CTE programs after the parties' agreements expired.

The other is who has the authority over

SEE EVIT PAGE 8

## Kyrene shows progress on student goals

BY PAUL MARYNIAK  
Tribune Executive Editor

Kyrene School District has reached two major milestones in its five-year strategic plan two years ahead of schedule, with kindergarten literacy scores surpassing district goals and middle school students reporting a stronger sense of belonging on campus.

District administrators at a June 9 study session shared the results with the Governing Board on the progress Kyrene has made on its

SEE KYRENE PAGE 6

## Ward Warrior

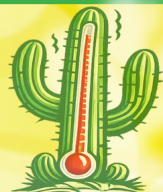


Bobby Elam will soon be wrapping up 52 years with the Tempe Elementary School District and before the school year ended last month, he got a sendoff from students at Ward Traditional Academy, where he worked in Nutrition Services. He's holding some of the many greeting cards he received from students and you'll learn why on Page 14. (Laura Hallstrom/Tribune Contributor)



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# Foundation celebrates foster youths' graduations

BY SAMANTHA REA  
Tribune Staff Writer

Last weekend, more than 80 current and former foster youth celebrated their recent graduation from high schools, community colleges and universities, thanks to the Arizona Friends of Foster Children Foundation.

Themed "Igniting the Spark" the lunch and ceremony at Dave & Buster's in Tempe Marketplace recognized every graduate enrolled in the nonprofit's Keys to Success and Post-Secondary Program. The event was co-sponsored by iHeartIMPACT, 1st Choice Tax Services, and Rush Tax Resolution.

The ceremony also included two awards, the Kim Jenkins Memorial Award presented to Alseny Bah and, for the first time, the



Hosted by Arizona Friends of Foster Children Foundation, over 80 current and foster youth celebrated their graduations at Dave & Buster's in Tempe Marketplace. (Courtesy of Arizona Friends of Foster Children Foundation)

Community Champion Award, presented to the Johnjay & Rich #LoveUp Foundation.

"When you are a young person in the system, nobody's waiting for you on the other side of the stage to say congratulations. Yet, you had to do so much to get there," said foundation President/CEO Luis De La Cruz told the honorees.

"That's what this is about. It's about celebrating the reality and saying 'we're so proud of you, we see you, and what you just did matters.'"

The Phoenix-based foundation serves children and youth in the foster care system ages 0-26, funding services to enrich their life experiences and ensure successful transitions into post-secondary education and adulthood.

Through AFFCF, caretakers and foster youth can access help with childhood activities, athletics and music programs, or bikes and scooters; baby and toddler resources such as car seats, strollers and child care start-up costs; educational expenses like tutoring, school supplies, GED testing and graduation costs; and other essentials like bus passes, prom expenses, vital documents and apartment or dorm set up.

Keys to Success is its transition support program providing specialized career, education, and life skills support, education, and training to foster youth ages 16-26. Specifically tailored to each client based on their individual goals and needs, Keys to Success served 644 youth across Maricopa, Pima and Yavapai Counties in 2025.

Alseny Bah, recipient of the Kim Jenkins Memorial Award, is a product of Keys to Success. Bah moved to Arizona from Guinea, West Africa, in 2023, and recently graduated from high school.

Giddy with excitement, Bah said graduation celebrations like the one held by AFFCF don't happen in West Africa, and said the support they give is one of the most important things a person can experience.

"They helped me a lot," Bah said. "They helped me find scholarships, they helped me apply to college, all of these times they helped me with."

Hitting the ground running, Bah has already begun the process of applying for an electrical apprenticeship with the City of Phoenix, and hopes to start in September.

"There is no failure, only success," Bah said. "I cannot put failure into my mind because I cannot afford to fail. I will continue to focus on being successful."

Nicholas Nevarez, 18, is a participant in the Keys to Success program. With high school completed, he plans to continue working his current job at Little Caesar's Pizza and move on to a veterinary technician program at Mesa Community College.

He first entered the foster care system as a young boy before reuniting with his mom briefly and then re-entering the system at age 13. He spent the next five years in a group home called Inspire Youth before aging out into independent living this month.

He said that while he's gone through

SEE FOSTER PAGE 5

## WHAT SAY YOU?

June 21, 2026 poll question

Will you be voting in the July 21 Primary Election?

Scan the QR Code to answer.



view results: [tempenews.com](https://tempenews.com)

### LAST WEEK'S QUESTION:

Are you happy with Arizona's new three-year moratorium on tax incentives for new data centers?



● 66.7% Yes  
● 33.3% No

Disclaimer: The poll's intent is to hear the opinions of those who complain over their coffee but rarely testify at public meetings. It is unscientific, not limited by residency and is only restricted by an individual IP address, meaning a person with multiple devices could vote more than once. Please don't skew the results; vote once.

Send suggested questions to [pmaryniak@timeslocalmedia.com](mailto:pmaryniak@timeslocalmedia.com)

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**FOSTER** FROM PAGE 3

some ups and downs, he managed to get through it, and is thankful for the supportive group home he spent many years in.

He also expressed gratitude for the help he received through Keys to Success, which helped him land his current job. With their help, he said he's confident moving forward in his education and career.

"It just shows how much they helped to get me to this accomplishment, and it's just very nice that they're doing this for us, because it shows that they are showing us their support — congratulating us for the way we did it, and how we managed to get through it," Nevarez said. "From the beginning, not knowing, to now because they've taught us everything."

The foundation's post-secondary scholarship programs serve foster youth ages 18-26, providing financial aid for tuition and fees, as well as critical support to help manage any obstacles they may encounter while pursuing their education.

Brittney Burbulis, a post-secondary program participant, said she felt "a pit of darkness" at age 16 when her mother passed away and she entered the foster

care system.

She never expected to reach an accomplishment like this while missing the support that comes from family.

Originally from Las Vegas, Nevada, Burbulis met her AFFCF caseworker in Arizona.

With her help, Burbulis was able to pay off her school loans, get furniture for her and her partner's new residence, and pay for her American Academy of Professional Coders (AAPC) certified professional coder exam, a gold-standard credential for medical coders working in outpatient and physician-based settings.

"I definitely love how they don't make us feel alone," Burbulis said. "They don't make me do it alone. If anything, they're like your parents. You don't have parents, so now you do."

She has already landed interviews for multiple positions at Banner hospital with AFFCF's help. While working, she will continue to study and prepare to take the AAPC exam. A particularly long and laborious test, she has a 12-month window to pass the four-hour, 100 question exam in two attempts.

"A lot of people just don't understand

what it's like having no support — and that's not their fault, no one should know how that feels like," Burbulis added.

"But if they were to just take that moment in perspective outside their box and understand that you can't do it all alone, you need help, you need a village. It takes a village to — as they say — raise a child."

As a former foster youth himself, it's that kind of resilience

— building a future despite the challenging circumstances of the foster care system — that De La Cruz said the event is ultimately meant to honor.

"Foster care is not your identity, is not your deficit, but what you take from it is what shapes the architecture that informs who you get to become," said De La Cruz.

"Today, we're here to celebrate your educational milestones as much as we're



Every teen and young adult was individually introduced at the Arizona Friends of Foster Children Foundation luncheon celebrating their graduation. (Courtesy of Arizona Friends of Foster Children Foundation)

here to celebrate your courage and conviction that you showed to forge your identity without a mold."

Information: affcf.org. This story was made possible through grant funding from the Arizona Local News Foundation's Arizona Community Collaborative Fund. ■

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