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# Providing Arkansas Students A Public Education System Of Excellence

## A Joint Statement from Arkansas Education Stakeholders

**March 1, 2017**

Quality public education that gives students the opportunity to succeed is so fundamental to our democracy that it is written into our constitution. Any hope of expanding opportunity in Arkansas depends on us moving our public education system to excellence.

And there is good news to report. Arkansas has one of the fastest improving education systems in the country because we've had a bipartisan consensus to invest in research-proven strategies to boost learning.

- Arkansas graduation rates are improving.
- The achievement gap, while still substantial, has closed significantly.
- College remediation rates are down to their lowest points since the state started tracking them.
- Our improvement in 8th grade math National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores since 2003 is the 5th highest in the country, and we're improving in many other categories as well.
- The Urban Institute ranked the overall improvement in Arkansas's NAEP scores as the 8th best in the country relative to what would be expected from a student population with Arkansas' demographics.

The bipartisan investments the state made into proven strategies to boost student learning is working, but we all know we have a long way to go.

Luckily, Arkansas has the work of many education stakeholders to build on. They worked independently to make recommendations to boost opportunities for our childrens and for moving our education system to excellence. They looked at the data and best practices, and arrived at a remarkably similar set of recommendations.

Consider the following groups who've released recommendations for Arkansas education that are nearly in-line with one another:

- The Arkansas Department of Education adopted the Forward Arkansas strategic plan, formed with the input of 10,000 Arkansans in a process funded by the Walton Foundation and the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation.
- The Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators -- made up of our state's principals and superintendents -- released a vision for improving Arkansas' schools this summer with a very similar set of recommendations.
- The Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign collected input from 30 parent, community and education organizations to create an agenda that focuses on the same things.
- The Arkansas Education Association, the state's largest association of educators, put forth similar recommendations.
- The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) issued a report last summer that compared American education systems with the highest performing systems in the world and made a set of similar recommendations.
- Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families conducted studies on what our schools need to improve, and they arrived at many of the same conclusions.
- The National Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) adopted by Congress makes many of the same recommendations, particularly around community engagement, transparency and accountability.

This broad consensus among parent groups, teachers, education experts, school administrators and others is irrefutable. These research and practice-proven education reforms would boost learning for every student in Arkansas. We don't have to figure out what to do, we already know the next steps that our kids need.

Our lawmakers must focus on these recommendations to provide our state's children the excellent opportunities they deserve.

These are not divisive proposals. The recommendations in these reports are not theoretical or ideological experiments. They have been proven effective and are already in use in the highest performing schools around the globe.

There is no reason Arkansas shouldn't be implementing these proven, best practices as well.

### **The recommendations fall into four categories:**

#### **First, we need to promote student centered learning environments, by:**

- Ensuring high-quality pre-K is available to every child whose family needs it.
- Improving interventions and individualized plans for students who fall behind.
- Expanding after-school and summer programs to give students a safe environment to continue learning and developing outside the classroom.

- Ensuring wrap around services that make sure kids have access to food, shelter, healthcare and other necessities of life. 1 of every 4 children in Arkansas lives in poverty and they will not reach their potential unless we invest in their basic well being.
- Improving discipline policies that will embrace conscious discipline, restorative justice and other strategies to teach kids how to make good choices and hold them accountable in a constructive way when they fall short.
- Ensuring local control and high standards by expanding community schools, finding effective interventions for schools in academic distress and stopping the take-over and close culture that leaves many vulnerable students behind.
- Making sure special education students have the resources they need to reach their full potential.
- Improving engagement between parents, students, educators and policy makers. Education requires a collaborative approach between all stakeholders, and a student's family and community are most often the greatest resources they have.
- Improving counseling resources for low-income students to help them transition into higher education or meaningful careers.

**Second, we need to attract, develop, support and retain more high quality teachers and administrators, by:**

- Improving professional development by aligning it with school improvement goals and promoting more professional learning communities.
- Ensuring that administrators and teachers have the supports they need to meet the needs of their students.
- Improving teacher preparation programs while maintaining high standards, creating incentives to attract more teachers into high need areas and developing more grow-your-own models.
- Ensuring that educators are paid competitively, respected, and treated professionally.
- Improving the cultural competency and diversity of our educators to meet the needs of our students.

**Third, we need to support infrastructure and resources that students need to move to excellence, by:**

- Ensuring proper funding of educational adequacy to support the education system our students need to excel. Investing in proven education strategies is investing in our future.
- Providing adequate facilities, transportation and communications systems. Too many Arkansas students endure long, expensive bus rides to arrive at a school with substandard buildings and live in communities without high-speed internet access.
- These recommendations must be implemented with sufficient resources for them to have the proven positive impacts on student learning that they are capable of.

**Fourth, we need shared accountability for meeting the needs of ALL students, by:**

- Changing our student assessment tools to use multiple assessments instead of a single standardized test, and using assessments that account for individual student needs.

- Protecting the instructional day to ensure that educators have the planning and other time they need to meet the needs of their students.
- Increasing transparency and accountability for ALL schools that receive public funding from taxpayers. Any school or educational program that receives state dollars should meet the same standards for transparency and accountability.
- Ensuring accountability for schools that have waivers from state standards. Waivers from important state standards must be evaluated and held accountable for success.
- Holding the state, communities and schools more accountable for meeting the needs of underserved students. Poverty is one of the biggest barriers to learning, and it takes a comprehensive, collaborative approach to meet the needs of low-income students.
- Holding schools more accountable for having student populations that match the demographics of their communities to fight racial, ethnic and economic segregation.
- Empowering and supporting locally elected school board members to provide proper governance and resources to meet the needs of the district's staff and students.

These are the reforms that Arkansas lawmakers, educators and communities need to implement to take the next leap forward to an excellent education system for ALL students.

Every one of those reforms has a broad consensus of Arkansas stakeholders behind it, and research proving its effectiveness. Arkansas can't afford to be distracted by failed experiments that have hurt children in other states. There are no silver bullets in public education, and we must be wary of polarizing and untested experiments on our state's children, especially when so many proven reforms are left unimplemented.

Educators are at times accused of protecting the status quo. However, those that work with children on a daily basis will always support programs that are good for children, such as, Governor Hutchinson's computer coding and RISE Arkansas (Reading Initiative for Student Excellence) initiatives and the recently renewed emphasis on career and technical education. These programs have the full support of educators because they meet the needs of our children.

We know the path forward that will truly create an excellent education system for all Arkansas children. We call on lawmakers to focus on these reforms with evidence and consensus to move our students forward.

Arkansas Association of Education  
Administrators  
Arkansas Education Association  
Arkansas School Boards Association

Rural Community Alliance  
Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign  
Arkansas Citizens First Congress  
Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families  
Arkansas Rural Education Association