

EXPANDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES WITH EXISTING POVERTY FUNDING

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WE CAN HELP KIDS CATCH UP

Low-income students often start school behind and stay behind throughout K-12. The good news is that proven, targeted programs can give these students better learning opportunities, like pre-K, afterschool and summer programs and tutoring.

Arkansas recognized this and set aside state funding in 2004 for programs targeted to children in poverty. Schools with high numbers of students living in poverty receive extra “categorical” funding from the state each year, based on the number of children who qualify for the National School Lunch program. Because this is the measure, the category is known as “NSL” funding, though it’s all revenue raised in Arkansas that the state controls, and it’s not used for school lunches.



When it was originally created, state NSL funding was intended to be used for the following things proven to help low-income kids: pre-K; afterschool and summer programs; tutoring; or student support, such as additional school counselors.

WHAT’S STANDING IN OUR WAY?

The problem is, many schools aren’t using this categorical funding for proven interventions. Many laws passed since 2004 now allow schools to use NSL funding to plug holes in their budget for dozens of other things that are not directly targeted to helping low-income students succeed.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ABOUT IT?

The state should do more to require schools to use NSL funding as originally intended.

Research shows that students who attend quality pre-K programs are better prepared when they start school, especially low-income kids and English language learners. Using NSL funding for pre-K can help improve program quality and eliminate waitlists for low-income families.



High-quality afterschool and summer programs are proven to help these students keep up with their peers once they enter K-12. These programs also help kids have a safe place to play, explore, and develop social and emotional skills.

Act 1044 of 2017 provides a new incentive to use NSL money to help kids most in need: It created a \$4.3 million matching grant program to reward districts that spend state NSL funds on before-school, afterschool or summer programs; pre-K; or tutoring. Unfortunately, the program just reimburses schools for things they were already doing, instead of focusing on improving program quality, evaluating effectiveness, ensuring that tutors are trained in effective reading instruction, or creating incentives to partner with community organizations.

AACF RECOMMENDATIONS

AACF recommends that the state create new rules to require schools to apply for these grants before receiving funding and set aside any grants for afterschool or summer programs to fund the Positive Youth Development Act. This 2011 law has yet to be funded. Until the state fulfills its promise to fully fund this act, we must do a better job of focusing NSL spending on opportunities that help kids most.

To learn more about how NSL funds can be leveraged for proven interventions like afterschool and summer programs, see AACF's 2018 report, ["Focusing Education Funds: Clearing Barriers to Success by Redirecting Poverty Funding."](#)



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