
Pre-K: Access to Success in Arkansas

By Paul Kelly, Senior Policy Analyst


Executive Summary

Research continues to confirm the importance of high-quality early childhood education as a strategy for improving the social, emotional, and intellectual development of children as well as increasing the likelihood of their future academic and economic success. A 2008 study by Jay Barth and Keith Nitta, for example, found that access to quality pre-k in Arkansas has done more than any other intervention to help close the education achievement gap between white and minority children and between middle-class and low-income students. Numerous national campaigns, such as the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign (OTL) led by the Schott Foundation and the Grade Level Reading Campaign (GLR) led by the Annie E. Casey Foundation have made access to quality early childhood education a focal point of their campaigns to improve educational outcomes for all children.

Arkansas has made access to quality early childhood education a major priority over the past two decades. It created the original Arkansas Better Chance Program (our state funded pre-k program) in 1991 with a state appropriation of \$10 million. In 1997, Arkansas established the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (DCCECE) in recognition of the critical role that these programs played in the lives of working families and their children. After more than a decade, the demand for these programs remains constant as economic realities require more parents to work and the child poverty rate increases. The cost of child care competes with rent, food, and utilities for the limited resources available to Arkansas' many low-wage workers.

In 2003 the Arkansas General Assembly passed landmark legislation creating the Arkansas Better Chance for School Success (ABCSS) program for three and four-year-old children who live in families with incomes less than 200% of the federal poverty line (i.e., \$46,100 for a family of four in 2012). The ABCSS program built on an earlier Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) program that served a wider range of eligible children and continues to this day. However this 2003 legislation greatly expanded access to quality pre-school programs which required a lower student-to-teacher ratio, well qualified and compensated staff, proven curricula and learning processes, developmental screening and child assessment, meaningful parent and community engagement, and professional development. This report examines the current trends in access to both quality pre-K and regular child





care programs available to vulnerable Arkansas families. For the purposes of this report, quality pre-K programs in Arkansas include the original ABC, ABCSS, and Head Start programs.

Quality Pre-K Works

Children participating in the ABCSS program are assessed for readiness to learn as they enter kindergarten. Since the ABCSS program was implemented in the 2004-05 school year, the percent of children with developed skills in general knowledge, oral communication, written language, math concepts, work habits, and attentive behavior has steadily increased. The Arkansas Better Chance students had raw scores 3.5 percent higher in general knowledge, 2.7 percent higher in oral communication, 6.5 percent higher in written language, 4.6 percent higher in math concepts, 6.9 percent higher in work habits, and 8.1 percent higher in attentive behavior than students who participated in child care voucher programs.

The legislation establishing the ABCSS program requires a longitudinal study of children through completion of fourth grade. Rutgers University, in partnership with UAMS, will be releasing the first summary of this research, taking a look at data from 2005-2011 of Arkansas preschoolers in May 2012. Preliminary findings show that participation in an ABC program yields significant results. ABC students scored higher in language at the end of kindergarten and had better math and early literacy scores at the end of first grade. For example, attending the ABC program at age four yields 31% more growth in children's vocabulary at kindergarten entry, compared to preschool education experiences they would have had without attending ABC. Children who participated in ABC scored higher on a test of their early math skills—with 37% more growth at kindergarten entry. The ABC program also had a positive impact on children's understanding of print concepts, more than doubling growth over the year (116%) in print awareness scores.

The positive impacts of quality pre-K also carry into elementary school, as indicated by improved benchmark exam scores for all Arkansas students. Again we see the most significant improvements in benchmark exam scores following the full implementation of the ABCSS in 2007. Most notably, the percentage of third-graders with an advanced score on the math benchmark exam increased 37



percent (from 23 percent to 60 percent) between 2005 and 2011.

The Rising Demand and Shortage of Quality Programs

ABC and ABCSS programs enroll 29 percent of eligible three-year-olds and 59 percent of eligible four-year-olds in quality programs (those with low child-to-staff ratios, proven curricula and well-educated staff). Head Start enrolls an additional 18 percent of eligible three-year-olds and 21 percent of eligible four-year-olds in quality programs in Arkansas. Together, the state-funded ABC/ABCSS and federally-funded Head Start programs served a total of 47 percent of eligible three-year-old children (11,210) and 80 percent of four-year-old children (19,001) statewide.

High-quality, publicly-funded programs for low-income families are either at full capacity or their funding has remained stagnant for several years, making expansion impossible. This is particularly critical for at-risk three-year-old children. Less than half (47 percent) are enrolled in quality programs. These children cannot wait for learning opportunities to become available. The earlier a child is exposed to enriching learning experiences the more likely they will be to attain educational and economic success in the future.

The Crisis of Care for Infants and Toddlers

More than 59 percent of Arkansas children (95,464) from birth to age three live below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Only 2,191 of these infants and toddlers (2.23 percent) are enrolled in either publicly funded ABC or Early Head Start quality programs.

There is, however, renewed support for home visiting programs for at-risk infants and toddlers. The Arkansas Department of Health received a Maternal, Infant, Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) grant that will be managed by Arkansas Children's Hospital (ACH) to expand three evidence-based home visiting models in Arkansas: Parent as Teacher (PAT), Healthy Families America (HFA) and Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPI). In addition, ACH plans to establish the Arkansas Home Visiting Training Institute and conduct rigorous program evaluation through the UAMS Department of Family Medicine.



Continuing Emphasis on Building Quality Programs in Arkansas

In 2010, the state of Arkansas implemented Better Beginnings, a voluntary quality rating and improvement system for all licensed child care providers. In a multi-step certification process, child care providers can obtain tools, guidance and training to conduct self-assessment of services. They receive a one-, two-, or three-star rating to represent their level of certification, which is made public so as to be a guide for parents seeking child care. This quality rating system is a very important development that signals Arkansas's increased commitment to standards of care. After one year of operation the program, has engaged only 35 percent of child care centers and only four percent of the child care family homes in the state.

Looking Forward

Arkansas has a lot to be proud of. It has developed some of the most effective pre-K programs in the country, invested over \$111 million in state funds to expand programs for more low-income children each year, and continues to improve the standards of care. As the state continues to look for ways to improve its educational outcomes and the competitiveness of its workforce, a continued investment in high quality pre-K programs makes sense.

Better Beginnings offers great promise for achieving higher standards of care for all child care programs. All children deserve a strong start in life that high-quality care can provide. For infants and toddlers who are most at risk, we must provide them with safe, stimulating, and valuable learning experiences that enhance the capacity of their developing minds. The implementation and evaluation of model home visiting programs do hold some promise for expanding effective services to this population but it will have to be expanded beyond the 2,200 families currently being served.

All of these early investments are as sound an economic investment as we can make at a time when significant challenges and great change await us all.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families
1400 W. Markham, Suite 306
Little Rock, AR 72201

Northwest Arkansas Office
614 E. Emma, Suite 107
Springdale, AR 72764

www.aradvocates.org