



## Executive Summary

### 2026 Biennial Education Adequacy Study Recommendations

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families recommends the following changes to strengthen Arkansas's public school funding formula and improve student outcomes:

- 1. Increase Special Education Funding**  
Increase the special education teacher weight from 3.2 to 4.05, which aligns with evidence-based practices, and establish a funding weight and salary increase for paraprofessionals.
- 2. Fund Dyslexia Screenings and Services**  
Add a 2% funding weight to support universal screenings and defray the cost of services, ensuring students receive early intervention and literacy support.
- 3. Strengthen Enhanced Student Achievement (ESA) Funding**  
Upgrade to a linear model that provides a base weight of 10% per student receiving free-or-reduced price lunch (FRL) with additional funding up to 30% of the base depending on a district's FRL population.
- 4. Invest in School-Based Mental Health Services**  
Add a dedicated funding stream for school social workers with a weight of 1.5 per 500 students in the matrix to ensure substantial access to mental health support.
- 5. Maintain Current Levels of Professional Development (PD) Funding**  
Maintain the PD funding at the current levels so that teachers continue to receive necessary supports.
- 6. Increase English Language Learner (ELL) Funding**  
Increase the ELL weight to 10% to support additional instructional support and resources for ELL students to thrive academically.
- 7. Incorporate Student Feedback**  
Survey high school juniors and seniors to provide valuable insight into how funding impacts learning experiences.

Through these strategic investments that are grounded in evidence-based practices, the legislature will ensure an adequate and equitable public education system in Arkansas.



## 2026 Biennial Education Adequacy Study Recommendations

### **Introduction**

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) appreciates the opportunity to provide written testimony to the Arkansas House Committee on Education and Senate Committee on Education as part of the biennial education adequacy study. AACF is committed to advocating for strong public schools so that all Arkansas children, regardless of their zip code or background, have a chance to reach their full potential.

We thank the legislature for increasing the foundation per-pupil amount by the largest percentage in 20 years during the last adequacy cycle, and we hope that progress will continue during this process. The Arkansas Supreme Court has made clear that public education must be considered and funded first, and this adequacy process should therefore remain a top policy priority for our state.

Our testimony focuses on several areas where targeted investments would strengthen Arkansas's school funding formula and improve student outcomes:

- Increasing special education funding
- Creating dedicated funding for dyslexia screenings and services
- Protecting and improving Enhanced Student Achievement (ESA) funding
- Better implementing and funding school-based mental health services
- Maintaining professional development funding
- Increasing and protecting funding for English Language Learners (ELL)
- Adding student feedback to the study process

### **Increase Special Education Funding**

**Problem:** A growing percentage of students receive special education services, and special education funding was identified as the number one area in need of additional funding in the superintendent survey. Despite this growing need, the staffing weight for special education teachers has only increased by 0.3 since FY2005, which was during the last adequacy cycle.

**Solution:** Follow Picus and Odden's 2019 recommendation and increase the special education teacher weight from 3.2 per 500 students to at least 4.05. Additionally, funding should be added to the matrix for special education paraprofessionals.

Superintendents provide critical insight during the adequacy process because they directly manage district finances and services. This year’s survey had an exceptionally high response rate, with 256 out of 258 superintendents participating. Among all components of the foundation funding formula, special education teachers were the area identified as being the most in need of additional funding with 67% of superintendents saying they were “extensively in need” of more funding and 25% reporting they were “moderately in need.” This means that 90% of superintendents reported a significant funding gap for special education staffing.

In 2024, the legislature increased the weight for special education teachers in the matrix for the first time since at least 2005. This is the first school year that the new weight of 3.2 has been in effect. For the previous two decades, the weight was 2.9. While AACF is deeply appreciative that the weight was increased after being held steady for 20 years, the survey results demonstrate that this increase was not enough to address the problem. In 2019, Picus and Odden published evidence-based special education recommendations, which were accepted, in part, by the legislature. Picus and Odden recommended a total staffing amount of 8.1 per 1000 students or 4.05 for 500. This staffing weight would include 3 teachers, 0.55 staff for related services, and 0.5 psychologists<sup>i</sup>. As mentioned previously, the staffing ratio was updated to 3.2 per 500 students, but the suggestions for related services and psychologists were not addressed<sup>ii</sup>.

AACF suggests that the staffing ratio for special education teachers be increased from 3.2 to 4.05 per 500 students.

Adopting this recommendation would align Arkansas with evidence-based best practices and reflect the increasing costs and complexity of special education services since the 2019 study.

Based on FY27 teacher salary and benefits and the current public school enrollment data, this change would increase funding for special education teachers by approximately \$60,832,619.

### Paraprofessionals

The number of support staff, including paraprofessionals, has increased significantly in recent years<sup>iii</sup>. These staff positions play an essential role in delivering special education services; however, districts have difficulty filling instructional support positions. According to salary data, Arkansas’s average paraprofessional salary ranks 50<sup>th</sup> among all states and D.C. with only West Virginia paying less<sup>iv</sup>. AACF suggests creating a weight that is equal in proportion of teachers to paraprofessionals suggested in 2019 by Picus and Odden. They suggested the staffing weight for “related services” be 18.33% of the weight for special education teachers. If the suggested weight of 4.05 is adopted for teachers, the new paraprofessional weight would be 0.74.

AACF also recommends increasing the average paraprofessional salary by \$2,000, bringing the average to \$27,879 annually. That salary adjustment would place Arkansas 46<sup>th</sup> in pay for paraprofessionals, which would move the salary more in line with the state’s cost of living.<sup>v</sup>

Benefits are equal to 23% of the salary for other listed staff positions in the funding formula. If paraprofessional benefits are based on the same percentage, the cost for benefits would be \$6,412. This would bring their total salary and benefits to \$34,291.

Adding this new line with the weight of 0.74 would increase resources by \$23,620,432.

These new investments in special education would total \$84,453,051 and would increase the number of special education teachers and create a new funding stream for instructional paraprofessionals.

### **Dyslexia Screenings & Services**

**Problem: Arkansas law requires dyslexia screening and intervention for students exhibiting characteristics of dyslexia, but there is no dedicated funding stream for these services. Given the state's increased focus on literacy and the science of reading, targeted funding for dyslexia services would reinforce Arkansas's commitment to improving reading outcomes.**

**Solution: Implement a 2% weight to either categorical or school-level resources to fund dyslexia screenings and defray the cost of interventions that districts provide.**

A 2013 state law recognized the prevalence of students with dyslexia and the need for early identification and intervention and required a literacy screening for all students in kindergarten through second grade<sup>vi</sup>. Screening results could indicate a need for intervention and a dyslexia evaluation. The new K-3 evidence-based literacy screener, as required under the LEARNS Act, qualifies as the dyslexia screener as well<sup>vii</sup>. Latest estimates put the number of Arkansas public school students exhibiting characteristics of dyslexia at 95,000<sup>viii</sup>. According to the Nelms Dyslexia Center, 1,050 Certified Academic Language Therapists (CALTs) are needed to reach students at every school, but we have fewer than 300 trained in the state<sup>ix</sup>.

The LEARNS Act also mandated a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade promotion policy, and beginning with the current school year, students who score a level 1 on the ELA portion of the ATLAS summative exam will be retained unless they qualify for a good-cause exemption. With policies and services placing a heavy emphasis on early literacy, the funding formula needs dedicated funding for dyslexia screenings and interventions by qualified therapists. Therefore, AACF suggests a weight of 2% of the foundation formula for each student since the law requires screenings for all. This weight would help districts defray the costs of dyslexia services as well as pay for screenings.

This proposal would add \$74,811,772 for dyslexia screenings and services.

This significant investment would provide services to 20% of public-school students to ensure they can read on grade-level, matriculate past 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and gain lifetime skills to read fluently.

## **Enhanced Student Achievement (ESA) Funding**

**Problem:** There has always been an achievement gap between students from low-income families and students from higher-income families, but evidence indicates that that gap is widening following COVID-19.

**Solution:** Other research has shown that categorical funding, funding in addition to the foundation amount, targeted toward low-income students is extremely effective at closing the achievement gap. ESA funding is paid out based on the percentage of students in a district that receives free-or-reduced-price lunch. This funding should be protected; any reduction in ESA funding would jeopardize the adequacy and equity of our state's education funding.

Targeted categorical funding to districts based on the number of low-income students they have enrolled is the best way to close the achievement gap between students of different socio-economic backgrounds<sup>x</sup>. Enhanced Student Achievement (ESA) funding is paid to districts based on the percentage of the district's population that receives free or reduced lunch (FRL).

- Less than 70% FRL: \$553 per student
- 70-90% FRL: \$1,103 per student
- Above 90% FRL: \$1,653 per student

This means the weights for poverty funding in Arkansas range from 6.8-20.25 percent of the foundation amount.

ESA funding gives districts flexibility to implement programs that improve student achievement and growth, and because funds are distributed at the school level, they benefit every school in the state. Additionally, both students on FRL and those not in the program benefit from this funding.

Arkansas-specific research on student growth has been less conclusive than national research about the effectiveness of targeted poverty funding closing the achievement gap, but of the 31 other states that use a single or multiple weight funding approach for this funding stream, 24 allocate a higher percentage of their foundation funding than Arkansas<sup>xi</sup>. Additionally, most states using multiple weights have more categories and smoother cliffs than Arkansas.

A linear funding model for ESA should be developed, so there is a less drastic decrease for districts that hover around the 70 percent FRL mark. To increase efficiency of ESA funding, it should be set at 10 percent of the base amount per student receiving FRL with an additional weight of up to 20 percent, for a maximum of 30 percent per student. The additional weight should increase linearly between 60 percent and 90 percent FRL. This model would mean for every 1 percent increase in a district's FRL population, between 60 and 90 percent, it would result in an increase of 0.67 percent of the foundation funding amount.

For example:

A district with a FRL population of 30% would receive \$816.20 per student on FRL if this policy was in effect this school year.

A district with a FRL population of 65% would receive \$1,089.63 per student (13.35 percent of the foundation) on FRL if this policy was in effect this school year

A district with a FRL population of 89% would receive \$2,402.08 per student (29.43 percent of the foundation) on FRL if this policy was in effect this school year.

This recommendation is based on work done by a task force led by the Office of Education Policy at the University of Arkansas. According to the task force's online simulator, this model for poverty funding would increase targeted investment by \$123,790,571<sup>xii</sup>.

### **Mental Health Services**

**Problem: Mental health is the root cause of many student behavioral problems. The legislature has previously taken steps to expand school-based mental health services, but funding for those services has not been added to the funding formula. In the superintendent survey, 71% answered that they have some school-based mental health services, and the principals' survey revealed that on average 15.5% of students receive school-based mental health services beyond those offered by school counselors. Additionally, mental health services were one of three areas identified by superintendents as something not in the funding formula that they would like to see added.**

**Solution: School-based mental health has become a critical need in the state. The legislature has shown a willingness to pass legislation to address this issue, but additional funding streams are needed to ensure services are effectively implemented. To ensure sustainability of these services, a new line item for social workers should be added to the "school-level salaries and benefits" portion of the matrix. The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) suggests that there should be at least one social worker per 250 students; however, they acknowledge that the ratio is not universally applicable, especially when school counselors receive additional training in mental health counseling and have the flexibility to assist in providing mental health services<sup>xiii</sup>. Therefore, ACF recommends a weight of 1.5 for social workers in school-based mental health.**

Creating a new line for social workers would create a dedicated funding stream for districts to maintain their school-based mental health services. The recommendation of a weight of 1.5 is based on the recommendation of the SSWAA of 2 social workers per 500 students with less if school counselors are trained in mental health services.

Additional investment in mental health services would address the root causes of many behavioral issues. According to a May 2025 survey of over 2,300 teachers, managing student behavior is the top source of job-related stress and "supporting my students' mental health and

well-being” is the 4<sup>th</sup> highest stressor<sup>xiv</sup>. These factors highlight the importance of addressing the mental health crisis via additional school-based mental health resources.

BLR should conduct a study to determine the exact salary and benefit amounts that should be listed in the funding formula, but a social work position at DHS has a salary range of \$52,137- \$77,163. Since school-based social workers would likely work on a 9- or 10-month contract, the average salary would be on the lower end of the range.

If the salary in the formula is set at \$52,137 and the benefits for social workers are the same proportion of their salary as they are for teachers, principals, and secretaries at 23%, benefits would cost \$11,991.51. Therefore, additional funding per 500 students would be \$96,192.75, with a total investment of approximately \$89,540,252.

### **Professional Development**

**Problem: Research has demonstrated that professional development (PD) improves teacher morale, increases how supported teachers feel, and enhances educator quality<sup>xv</sup>. A majority of superintendents (63%) say funding for PD meets or exceeds their district’s needs. Teacher retention is heavily affected by morale and level of support.**

**Solution: PD funding should be held steady because quality PD increases teacher retention and educational quality. Even if attempts are made to make the funding formula simpler, as recommended by the Arkansas Education Funding Task Force, special care should be taken to ensure that funding for PD will at least remain at current levels so teachers can be trained in relevant topics and deliver high quality instruction.**

PD funding should not be reduced. Currently, districts receive \$41 per student for PD, and a \$16.5 million supplemental PD fund expired at the end of FY25<sup>xvi</sup>. Arkansas teachers are currently required to take 36 hours of approved PD each year with some districts requiring more<sup>xvii</sup>. Maintaining strong PD funding ensures teachers in every district receive training in areas such as:

- The science of reading
- Mental health awareness
- Career pathways and workforce preparation

While reclassifying PD funding within the formula may improve clarity, as recommended by the Task Force, the per-pupil student amount should remain at least \$41 to maintain current support levels.

### **English Language Learners**

**Problem: The last time a census of English Language Learners (ELL) was taken was in the 2018-2019 school year. The analysis determined there were 38,564 ELL in public schools and open enrollment charter schools. Since then, the number of ELL has risen nationally.**

**ELL education is important because becoming fluent or proficient in English is a prerequisite for academic and cultural success in the United States. As we continue to emphasize literacy as a state, making sure this growing population continues to have its needs met is crucial for the state's holistic success.**

**Solution: Increase the ELL weight to 10%. This increase would support additional instructional support and resources for ELL students to thrive academically. This solution was offered by the Arkansas Education Funding Task Force.**

Increasing the ELL weight would provide districts with the additional resources they need to serve a growing population of students and would put Arkansas's funding weight in-line with other states<sup>xviii</sup>.

This increase would add \$17,714,157 and increase total ELL spending to \$32,526,543 to ELL.

### **Student Feedback**

**Problem: During the adequacy study process, survey data is collected from superintendents, principals, and teachers, providing legislators with valuable insight into essential conditions. Students are one crucial group missing whose feedback is missing. The absence of student perspectives leaves a gap in understanding how resources and funding decision impact those they are ultimately intended to serve.**

**Solution: Implement a student survey administered to high school juniors and seniors and present the results alongside the existing surveys from educators and administrators.**

Collecting student feedback on the effectiveness of school resources would offer a unique and essential perspective. Adequacy is fundamentally about ensuring students have the tools they need to learn and succeed, yet their experiences are not directly measured. Including student input could reveal whether funding efforts are meaningfully reaching classrooms and supporting learning outcomes.

While special consideration must be given to surveying minors, student data is already collected in many educational and research contexts. With appropriate consent procedures and strong data protection policies, student surveys can be conducted responsibly and ethically.

Incorporating student voices would not only provide legislators with more comprehensive data but also foster greater engagement by involving them in decisions that directly affect their education.

## **Conclusion**

Arkansas children are entitled to an adequate and equitable public education system. Schools are the backbone of our communities and play a central role in creating opportunity and prosperity across the state.

Arkansas's school funding formula can be strengthened by:

- Increasing the staffing weight for special education teachers
- Creating a new staffing weight for special education paraprofessionals
- Establishing dedicated funding for dyslexia screenings and services
- Improving ESA funding with a linear poverty funding model
- Creating a funding stream for school-based mental health services
- Protecting professional development funding
- Increasing the weight for English Language Learners
- Adding some student feedback to the adequacy study process

These changes would make Arkansas public education system more adequate and equitable and invest an additional \$390,309,821 in education.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony. Please let us know if we can provide assistance or any follow up information during the remainder of the 2026 adequacy study.

## References

- <sup>i</sup> <https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Home/FTPDocument?path=%2FEducation%2FAdequacyReports%2F2022%2F2022-02-07%2FEX-D2+Funding+Report%2C+BLR%2C+07.pdf> (p. 13)
- <sup>ii</sup> <https://arkleg.state.ar.us/Home/FTPDocument?path=%2FAssembly%2FMeeting+Attachments%2F098%2F14538%2FEXHIBIT+E-+Special+Education+in+Arkansas+Presentation.pdf#:~:text=Picus%20and%20Odden%2C%20in%20a%202014%20report%2C,informing%20parents%20of%20their%20rights%20and%20options.>
- <sup>iii</sup> <https://arkansasadvocate.com/2024/03/28/data-from-9500-school-districts-shows-another-boom-year-for-staffing-even-as-fiscal-cliff-looms/>
- <sup>iv</sup> 2023 Average Paraprofessional Salaries: Top-Paying States
- <sup>v</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>vi</sup> <https://arkleg.state.ar.us/Home/FTPDocument?path=%2FACTS%2F2013%2FPublic%2FACT1294.pdf>
- <sup>vii</sup> <https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Home/FTPDocument?path=%2FACTS%2F2023R%2FPublic%2FACT237.pdf>
- <sup>viii</sup> <https://leadingwithcare.uark.edu/2025/09/college-collaborates-to-grow-arkansas-dyslexia-therapist-workforce/>
- <sup>ix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>x</sup> ED609061.pdf
- <sup>xi</sup> K-12 Funding 2024 - Education Commission of the States
- <sup>xii</sup> Arkansas State Funding Formula Simulator Last Updated: September 30, 2025
- <sup>xiii</sup> [https://www.socialworkers.org/News/News-Releases/ID/1633/NASW-Highlights-the-Growing-Need-for-School-Social-Workers-to-Prevent-School-Violence#:~:text=The%20National%20Association%20of%20Social%20Workers%20\(NASW\),needs\\*\\*%20A%20lower%20ratio%2C%20such%20as%201:50](https://www.socialworkers.org/News/News-Releases/ID/1633/NASW-Highlights-the-Growing-Need-for-School-Social-Workers-to-Prevent-School-Violence#:~:text=The%20National%20Association%20of%20Social%20Workers%20(NASW),needs**%20A%20lower%20ratio%2C%20such%20as%201:50)
- <sup>xiv</sup> 2025 Arkansas Teacher Working Conditions & Wellbeing Survey Report
- <sup>xv</sup> Varela, Daniella Understanding Professional Development for Teachers NFEASJ V40 N4 2022 .pdf
- <sup>xvi</sup> <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2025/may/10/school-districts-vendor-support-paid-for-by-state/>
- <sup>xvii</sup> Division of Elementary and Secondary Education - Offices - Learning Services - Professional Development - Scheduled Professional Development (K-12)
- <sup>xviii</sup> Arkansas Education Funding Task Force Recommendations Report - Copy.docx

## Appendix

### Funding Recommendations Calculations

#### **Special Education Teachers Weight**

- $3.2 \times \$76,885 = \$246,032$ —Current SPED teacher weight
- $4.05 \times \$76,885 = 311,384.25$ —New total with increased weight
- $\$311,384.25 - \$246,032 = \$65,352.25$ —increase per 500 students
- $465,421/500 = 930.842$ —Scaling factor based on 2025-2026 public school enrollment
- $930.842 \times \$65,352.25 = \$60,832,619$ —Total approximate funding increase

#### **Paraprofessional Weight**

- $\$34,291 \times 0.74 = \$25,375.34$ —Paraprofessional funding per 500 students
- $\$25,375.34 \times 930.842 = \$23,620,432$ —Pay multiplied by scaling factor for approximate funding total

#### **Dyslexia Screenings and Services**

- $\$160.74 \times 465,421 = \$74,811,772$ —Suggested funding multiplied by total 2025-2026 public school enrollment

#### **Enhanced Student Achievement (ESA)**

- $\$229,242,065 + \$5,636,400 = \$234,878,465$ —Current ESA budget plus ESA matching grant funding
- $\$358,669,036 - \$234,878,465 = \$123,790,571$ —Task force recommended total minus current total spending

#### **Mental Health Services**

- $\$64,128.51 \times 1.5 = \$96,192.77$ —Suggested salary and benefits multiplied by suggested matrix weight
- $930.842 \times \$96,192.77 = \$89,540,270$ —Scaling ratio multiplied by funding per 500 students

#### **English Language Learners**

- $\$14,812,386 / \$366 = 40,471$ —current total funding divided by per-pupil funding
- $\$803.70 \times 40,471 = \$32,526,543$ —suggested funding multiplied by estimated ELL student total
- $\$32,526,543 - \$14,812,386 = \$17,714,157$ —suggested funding total minus current ELL funding