



April 27, 2024

Testimony Submitted to the Arkansas House and Senate Committees on Education

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) appreciates the opportunity to provide written testimony to the Arkansas House and Senate Committees on Education as part of the biennial education adequacy study process. Like all of you, AACF believes that every child should have the resources and opportunities to receive a high-quality education so they can lead healthy and productive lives and realize their full potential. We applaud the Arkansas General Assembly, especially the House and Senate Committees on Education, for taking the steps and time to develop your adequacy recommendations for the 2025 legislative session and beyond.

Arkansas has made progress in the 22 years since the state's education system was overhauled following the Arkansas Supreme Court's 2002 decision in the Lake View case and the state's subsequent policy response. As part of the state's mandate to provide an adequate and equitable education, Arkansas education funding has increased significantly; many educational policy reforms have been enacted like the most recent LEARNS Act; and some educational outcomes have improved. However, while it is important to acknowledge the progress that has been made, we must also acknowledge that much more work needs to be done. With that in mind, AACF presents these recommendations for how the state funds the Arkansas public education system.

Close gaps in student achievement:

AACF is concerned that, by nearly any set of educational statistics you care to use, large gaps in educational opportunities and outcomes remain for many students in our state, and in some cases have worsened over the past few years. This is especially true for Black students and other students of color, English Language Learners, low-income students, and special education students, at least compared to their White or more affluent peers in the state. Reducing these gaps in educational resources, opportunities, and outcomes must become a greater priority for Arkansas if the state is truly committed to ensuring that every child receives a high-quality education so they can realize their full potential. This is what the original Lake View lawsuit was about, after all.

After 22 years of reforms, much has changed in our society, including the needs of our children and families and the needs of our educators and schools. We also know a lot more now about what works to close gaps in educational opportunities and outcomes for our most disadvantaged students. Now is the time to ask and answer the question, "What does an adequate education look like in the years ahead?" The adequacy matrix is critical to answering this question. The adequacy matrix has not changed significantly or fundamentally in many years and is insufficient to allow Arkansas to make the major progress it needs to make. The matrix, and our definition of what's included and what should be funded as part of adequacy, needs to change to stay aligned with the

needs of our society and our students. It must change if Arkansas is seriously committed to closing the gaps that exist for many students in our state.

Expand funding of early childhood education:

Early childhood education is one of the most studied and most impactful education programs. Not only does high-quality Pre-K lead to higher levels of Kindergarten readiness, but it also leads to lifelong benefits like higher salaries later in life. We also know that before age 3, 85% of a child's core brain structure is formed. These earliest experiences form the foundation for all future learning; they provide the "wiring" children use to learn how to read, think critically, set and reach goals, and adapt to new situations. While Arkansas makes a state investment in quality Pre-K for low-income 3 and 4-year-old children through the Arkansas Better Chance Program (ABC), it invests relatively little in state funding for infants and toddlers.

Many Arkansas families struggle with finding high-quality infant and toddler care. Statewide, just four in 10 working parents can find infant and toddler care, and only one in 10 can find high-quality infant and toddler care. As a result, families with infants and toddlers are likely to have lower labor force participation. High-quality care for infants and toddlers is more expensive to provide than care for older kids, and many working parents either don't have the resources to afford it, or existing childcare programs don't have the resources to provide it.

The ABC Pre-K program, Arkansas's largest state-funded quality early childhood education program, serves a small number of infants and toddlers but serves mostly 3- and 4-year-old children. ABC has essentially been flat funded for more than a decade, limiting the ability of programs to keep up with rising costs and meet quality standards, as well as limiting the capacity of the program to serve more infants and toddlers. ABC funding should be increased to help programs continue to provide high-quality care and allow programs that want to serve more infants and toddlers to do so. However, serving more infants and toddlers would be a major strategic shift for school-based ABC programs. Until this happens, many families with the greatest need will be unable to access high-quality infant and toddler care.

Investing in a comprehensive birth-to-5 system, with an emphasis on quality care for infants and toddlers, should be a priority for funding public education, especially given what the research shows about the importance of early brain development from birth to age 3 and the impact on student success in the K-12 system and beyond.

If we want the K-12 system and its students to succeed, we can't ignore the state's critical need for a comprehensive birth-to-5 system. Arkansas policymakers have the power to incorporate this crucial support for learning into the state's definition of an adequate education.

Fund out-of-school programs:

Middle-class children participate in many out-of-school activities that enrich and reinforce what they have learned during the regular school day. Without community-based after school and summer learning programs, lower-income students not only do not receive this enrichment but also lose much of what they gain in school. Research shows that students attending out-of-school programs improve their school attendance and achievement, are less likely to drop out of school, and are more likely to pursue higher education. The academic and cognitive benefits of these programs are needed now more than ever as we continue to navigate the learning loss and mental health consequences resulting from the pandemic.

In 2011, the Legislature passed the Positive Youth Development Act (PYD) to create a quality framework for community-based out-of-school programs including after-school and summer learning programs. However, this important law has yet to be funded. While Arkansas's out-of-school programs began benefitting in 2021 from federal COVID-related relief funding, that funding is running out. Arkansas's children need a permanent source of state funding to sustain our advancement, so we don't leave thousands of students without a safe place to learn and thrive while their families are at work.

Increase support for school-based mental health:

According to this year's presentations to the Legislature on what constitutes an adequate education, we believe that the state could be investing more in school-based mental health. Arkansas educators, superintendents, and principals all reported in individual surveys to the Bureau of Legislative Research that there is a growing student mental health need that goes beyond the expertise of guidance counselors. And in the survey of just superintendents, mental health specialists were among the most frequently cited resources needed.

Many educators will tell you that they have seen sharp upticks in students acting out and being written up for school disciplinary actions. This is also supported by state-level data collected by the Office of Education Policy at the University of Arkansas. Increasing mental health supports for students will in turn help address the increase in school discipline infractions because we know that many of these infractions occur because of mental or behavioral health issues that a student is struggling to cope with on their own. Overall, increasing support for mental health will help all students, even students who don't require this support, because their peers' mental health needs are being met.

Increase funding for special education:

Arkansas's schools need significantly more funding to adequately serve students with special needs. To meet those needs in the classroom, the state should consider following Picus and Odden's 2019 recommendation of increasing the current classroom ratio to 8.1 special education teachers per 1,000 special education students, instead of the current 2.9 teachers per 500 students. Additionally, we know that school districts are spending more on special education needs than is provided in the foundation funding. We hope that the state will consider other funding models for special education that will cover the true cost of providing special education services for students who need intensive support in the classroom.