

ARKANSAS
**Working
Families**
PROJECT

Poll Results:

**Arkansans Support
Public Investment in
Early Childhood Education**

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A Project of the Good Faith Fund, Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families, and the Arkansas Public Policy Panel



Arkansas voters overwhelmingly support making quality early childhood education available for the state's preschool population.

According to a recent poll of registered Arkansas voters, 75 percent think public schools or state-supported programs should make early childhood education available for all 3- and 4-year-olds.

The poll was commissioned by Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families (AACF) and the Good Faith Fund (GFF), partners in the Arkansas Working Families Project. Conducted in February by Opinion Research Associates, the poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percent.

The poll supports a May 2001 ruling by Judge Collins Kilgore in the *Lake View School District v. Governor Mike Huckabee et al.* Kilgore ruled the state should make early learning programs available for preschool-aged children. He based his ruling on three findings concerning the need for early childhood education:

1. a substantial number of children are entering

kindergarten and first grade significantly behind their peers;

2. those children entering first grade needing remediation will have a difficult time performing at grade level by the third grade; and
3. if a student cannot perform at grade level, especially in reading, by the third grade, then he is unlikely to ever do so.

Judge Kilgore's ruling requires the state take steps to remedy the situation. "The only possible conclusion is that in order to provide our children with an adequate education ..., the State must forthwith provide programs for those children of preschool age that will allow them to compete academically with their peers. The urgency of this need equals that of the deficiency in teacher salaries."

The Lake View case is currently on appeal with the Arkansas Supreme Court. The high court is expected to rule on the case late this year or early next year.

The poll findings also support preliminary recommendations from the Blue Ribbon Commission on Public Education: Arkansas should adequately fund early childhood education and make it available, on a voluntary basis, for all 4-year-olds. The Commission's final recommendations are due June 30.

MORE VOTER OPINION

IMPORTANCE OF EARLY LEARNING

In addition, Arkansas voters also recognize the critical role a child's first few years of growth and development have on his later ability to learn and perform well in school:

- 93% believe a child's experiences during the first 5 years of life are very important to the child's later ability to do well in school.
- 73% think the first 5 years of life are the most important age for developing a child's capacity to learn.

Most Arkansas voters (74%) say they would place their own pre-school-aged children in quality early learning program if the programs were "quality," free of charge and voluntary.

INVESTMENT IN EARLY LEARNING

Arkansas voters are willing to make a greater investment in early childhood education for children:

- 59% are willing to pay higher taxes so the state could offer quality early learning programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds.
- 58% are willing to pay at least a \$100 a year in higher taxes to make early learning programs available free of charge for all 3- and 4-year-olds.
- 62% favor raising the corporate income tax to

pay for quality early learning programs for 3- and 4-year-olds; 45% favored raising the sales tax; 38%, the personal income; and 24%, the property tax.

EMPHASIS ON EARLY LEARNING

When comparing other ways the state might spend its money to improve education, most voters (76%) place a higher priority on spending additional education money in the elementary school system; 70% place a higher priority on spending for middle school; 65% for high school; and 52% for early childhood education.

Even this finding, however, is good news for early childhood education. Historically,

early learning programs and pre-K programs have not received the same level of attention or priority as the K-12 public education system. That a majority of Arkansas voters place a high priority on greater spending for early learning programs, especially in an era of tight financial resources at the state level, clearly suggests strong public support for a greater state investment in quality early childhood education.

WHAT IS 'QUALITY' EARLY LEARNING?

Research shows quality early childhood learning experiences make a difference in a child's preparedness for school. Quality early learning programs are characterized by the following:

- Low student-to-teacher ratios for more personalized attention;
- Qualified, well-compensated teachers and ongoing professional development;
- Strong health, safety and developmental screening standards;
- Proven curricula and learning processes; and
- Meaningful parental involvement.

For More Information

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