

Quality Pre-K expansion in Arkansas: Lessons Learned
Executive Summary

During the special session in 2004, the Arkansas General Assembly passed landmark legislation, greatly expanding access to ABC programs. Act 49 created the Arkansas Better Chance for School Success programs, a state-funded quality preschool program for at-risk 3 and 4 year old children estimated to cost \$100 million per year when fully implemented. During the special session of 2004 legislators appropriated \$40 million in new revenues for the initial expansion of this quality public preschool for children with family incomes under 200 percent of poverty. An additional appropriation of \$20 million during the 2005 session brought total new state investment in this program to \$60 million per year.

As with any major program expansion, the state faced major challenges. The pre-k expansion provided a rare case study on how to undergo a major expansion of quality pre-k to at-risk children over a very short time frame. This report is an analysis of what happened during the eight months following the enactment of this new program, the initial \$40 million appropriation, and the additional \$20 million expansion during 2005.

This study used three primary data collection strategies:

- Existing administrative and program data from the Department of Education and the Division of Childcare and Early Childhood Education to assess the state's effectiveness in providing services to children in areas with the greatest need.
- Three focus groups were conducted in Pulaski, Phillips, and Union Counties. Participants included providers, parents, and state agency personnel.
- Forty in-person or telephone interviews with child care providers, parents, state agency personnel, local school district officials, and community leaders were conducted. These included both providers/parents who participated in the program and those who did not.
- Additional information on the impacts of the 2005 expansion was also obtained through group discussions, attendance at legislative committees, and personal interviews with key stakeholders across the state.

The Challenges:

As with any large program expansion, there were growing pains and challenges. The major challenge was the short implementation time and the significant increase in the pool of funds suddenly made available. Other issues included:

- Tough funding decisions had to be made about which areas would receive funding and which providers would be selected to provide services;
- In some areas of the state, there was a shortage of quality pre-k providers;
- There were initial concerns that such a large expansion could lead to programs being approved that might not have the capacity to meet quality standards.
- The perceived lack of qualified staff and possible parental resistance to enrolling their children in the new programs.
- The potential for small providers to lose current preschoolers to other programs and talks at the federal level about reforming Head Start were also looming in the background,

A Win for Arkansas Children:

As a result of efforts by the Arkansas General Assembly, Governor Huckabee, early care advocates, the DHHS of Child Care and Early Childhood Education, the Department of Education, and

others, over 18,000 at-risk children in Arkansas in all 75 counties are now receiving a quality pre-school education from trained staff, with a developmentally appropriate curriculum, and engaged parents.

Arkansas' ABC quality preschool program also received the highest ranking of 10 from the National Institute of Early Education Research for quality. It was the only state to receive this score and was another source of pride and momentum for those seeking additional funding to further expand these programs at the end of this current fiscal year.

How was all of this accomplished in less than two years? The DHHS Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education and the Arkansas Department of Education worked long hours, held many meetings, and had hundreds of individual discussions with providers, parents, legislators and pre-k advocates across the state to make sure the necessary pre-k resources were put into place. Legislators who were contacted by their local providers and parents were forgiving and understanding of the implementation process.

Areas of concern were openly discussed by state agency officials, local providers, and early care advocates. A better understanding of the needs of children, parents, teachers, and providers was developed to expand preschool opportunities in local communities. Clusters of small towns were cooperating to take care of preschool transportation problems, parent involvement in preschool programs increased, and those active in the campaign to expand pre-k understood that their voices do count in making policy changes.

This expansion effort also could not have occurred without the support of the business community. Not only was the preschool legislation strongly supported by the Arkansas Chamber of Commerce, but Tyson Foods of Springdale and Arkansas Entergy committed resources to produce a major statewide outreach campaign to enroll children in the programs. More than 50,000 brochures and posters in English and Spanish were distributed across the state. Radio spots were created with a toll free number and broadcast statewide to help ensure that eligible families were enrolling their children.

The new program's targeted approach addressed policy maker concerns about the state's limited resources. Its flexibility and openness to "any willing provider" helped ameliorate fear of competition among providers. The statewide pre-k network's organization, trusting relationships, and previous experience working together enabled administrators, providers, schools, and academic institutions to implement the program in such a short period of time.

The Challenge Ahead

The future challenge for Arkansas will be to maintain the highest quality standards as the state reaches all children eligible for this new program. Nearly 15,000 eligible at-risk children still need access to quality pre-k and an additional \$40 million in new revenues will be needed during the 2007 legislative session. Arkansas must not only meet the needs of these eligible children but must also take steps to someday make quality pre-k available to all Arkansas children, regardless of their family's income. Additional steps must be taken to expand the number of providers able to provide quality care.