

PRESS RELEASE

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Quality Pre-K Expansion in Arkansas: Lessons Learned

Enrollment Increases - Growing Pains Experienced

LITTLE ROCK - Today Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) released an in-depth analysis of what occurred during the expansion process of the quality preschool program.

The report: "Quality Pre-K Expansion in Arkansas: Lessons Learned," details the successes and challenges of expanding access to the Arkansas Better Chance for School Success programs for an additional 7,000 eligible 3 and 4 year olds during the initial six month period.

"This expansion effort brought the state national recognition and significant investment by the business community into pre-k policy. Not only was the preschool legislation strongly supported by the Arkansas Chamber of Commerce; Tyson Foods of Springdale and the Entergy Corporation, they committed resources to produce a major statewide outreach campaign to enroll children in the programs," said Paul Kelly, senior policy analyst at AACF.

Kelly said that the support by the legislature and business community remains strong and he is hopeful that during the next General Assembly, the legislature will reinforce their support of quality preschool by providing the final \$40 million to complete the expansion.

The program initially received a \$40 million appropriation in 2004 during a special session and a subsequent \$20 million of new money during the 2005 legislative session. The final \$40 million is needed to reach the \$100 million estimated cost to fully implement the program.

Some of the success outlined in the report included:

- ☐ There was a significant number of low income children enrolled in quality preschools.
- ☐ Arkansas received national recognition as a leader in quality preschool expansion and standards.
- ☐ Strong support and investment were garnered from the business community.

As expected with any new program of this magnitude given the time frame, Rich Huddleston, executive director of AACF says there were growing pains and challenges that had to be worked out by the Department of Health & Human Services/Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education and the early care community.

Some of the challenges included:

- ☐ There was a short implementation time period during which a significant increase in funds were made available and tough funding decisions had to be made.
- ☐ In some areas of the state, there was a shortage of quality-approved preschool providers.
- ☐ Concerns that the major expansion might lead to approval of programs of "borderline" quality.

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“Despite all of the pitfalls and challenges posed by this very large and rapid expansion of quality preschool in Arkansas, great things happened in a very short time,” said Huddleston.

By the end of September 2005, more than 18,000 Arkansas children had access to quality preschool programs. Huddleston says this is a testament to everyone involved, including the Governor’s office, legislators, early care advocates, the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education, preschool providers and the Department of Education.

Huddleston is confident that Arkansas is definitely on the right tack with its quality preschool program and he hopes that one day all Arkansas children, not just those under 200 percent of poverty, will have access to quality providers.

Huddleston says that while Arkansas has made significant progress during the past two years, there is much more to be done.

“Arkansas needs to ensure that it does everything possible during the next legislative session to complete its expansion plan for serving all eligible at risk 3 and 4 year olds,” says Huddleston.

To view the report in its entirety or to view an executive summary of the report, log on to:
www.aradvocates.org.

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