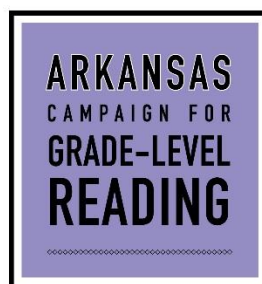


OPPORTUNITIES TO PROMOTE EARLY LEARNING AND GRADE-LEVEL READING IN ARKANSAS'S EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA) PLAN

ARKANSAS CAMPAIGN FOR GRADE-LEVEL READING (AR-GLR) AND ARKANSAS ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES (AACF)

by Ginny Blankenship, Ed.D., AACF Education Policy Director
February 2017



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (AR-GLR) was founded to help ensure that all children in our state can read by the end of third grade—a critical predictor for students’ success throughout the rest of school and beyond. Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) has been a proud partner of the AR-GLR campaign since its inception, given its long-time advocacy for high-quality early childhood education (ECE) and out-of-school learning opportunities for all students. Together we have researched the opportunities the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) may provide Arkansas’s students and schools in these critical areas. In contrast to the previous federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, which focused almost entirely on third grade through high school graduation, ESSA allows Arkansas to leverage its successes in ECE and develop a more coherent birth-to-third-grade system that would increase the likelihood that all Arkansas students can read by the end of third grade.

Our recommendations for the state’s ESSA plan are summarized as follows:

- 1) **IMPROVE ECE & PRE-K QUALITY AND ACCESS:** Improve the quality and capacity of early childhood programs, coordinate instruction and policies with the K-12 system, and support communities in expanding pre-K access for more families.
- 2) **IMPROVE K-3 READING INSTRUCTION AND POLICIES:** Use early warning systems to address reading difficulties; ensure that all elementary teachers have the skills and tools they need to teach children to read; encourage and support schools and districts to provide differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all students; report K-3 assessment scores in school and state report cards; and adopt grade promotion policies that use retention as a last resort.
- 3) **EXPAND HIGH-QUALITY AFTERSCHOOL AND SUMMER PROGRAMS:** Provide funding and support for high-quality out-of-school programs that have proven to help improve grade-level reading.
- 4) **REDUCE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM STARTING IN EARLY GRADES:** Define chronic absence in state statute or rules and regulations and use it as a School Quality and Student Success indicator; require schools and districts to publicly report chronic absence rates by grade level; promote chronic absenteeism as a diagnostic tool for school improvement; and educate parents about the importance of regular school attendance.
- 5) **ADOPT POLICIES TO IMPROVE DISCIPLINE AND REDUCE RACIAL DISPARITIES:** Adopt research-based discipline policies that keep kids in the classroom and reduce racial disparities in discipline.
- 6) **PROMOTE AUTHENTIC FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:** Define family engagement and hold districts accountable for implementing effective policies and programs; provide funding or incentives to expand the Community Schools model; increase access to books in students’ homes; and encourage parents and caregivers to read and talk to their children.

- 7) **ADOPT AND REPORT MORE MEANINGFUL MEASURES OF SCHOOL QUALITY:** Adopt multiple measures of school success that consider the whole school and the children they serve—not just a single letter grade; use standardized tests as early diagnostic tools for students, parents, and teachers—not as a punishment; include school climate and teacher and principal turnover in state and school report cards; and maintain focus on equity by continuing to disaggregate data and target resources to children who need greater educational investment.

Our recommendations are based on extensive research and coordination with the Arkansas Department of Human Services' (DHS) Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (DCCECE) and other stakeholders to create a new vision for birth-through-third grade education in Arkansas under ESSA. The first two sections of this white paper focus on recommendations for the early grades, while the latter part of the report apply to the entire education system.

1) IMPROVE ECE & PRE-K QUALITY AND ACCESS

The ECE community in Arkansas has been working to raise the quality of all programs serving young children from birth to third grade and to improve capacity and coordination between and across programs at the state and local level. There are several core components of this work, including expanded partnerships for professional development and credentialing; improved connections between community-based programs and schools to align goals and expectations with kindergarten readiness standards; and adoption of the new Arkansas Child Development and Early Learning Standards for children from birth through 60 months, which are aligned with Arkansas's kindergarten standards.¹ DCCECE has also brought more ECE programs into the Better Beginnings quality rating system under Level 1 ("getting ready") and helping and incentivizing them to move to the higher-quality Levels 2 and 3.² ESSA provides the opportunity to build upon this progress at the state and district levels, including the following recommendations:

A) Improving ECE & ABC Program Quality and Coordination with K-3 System

- 1) **Improve the quality of Arkansas Better Chance (ABC), Head Start programs, and other pre-K programs:**
 - a) Require school districts that use available funds to operate ABC or other pre-K programs—such as state National School Lunch (NSL) poverty funds or federal Title I, III, or IV funds—to meet the highest quality levels in Better Beginnings;
 - b) Ensure that all kindergarten screeners approved by ADE accurately assess school readiness on the range of domains covered by the new Child Development and

¹ Arkansas Department of Human Services' (DHS) Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (DCCECE). (April 2016). *Arkansas Child Development and Early Learning Standards: Birth through 60 Months*: <http://asuchildhoodservices.org/docs/AR%20CDELS%20April%202016.pdf>

² See Better Beginnings' website at <http://arbetterbeginnings.com>

Early Learning Standards (e.g., cognitive, social-emotional, and physical health), and include these results in state and school report cards; and

- c) Identify promising practices that support school readiness and provide technical assistance to schools and districts to replicate these models.

2) Improve coordination between state agencies, school districts, and ECE providers:

- a) Develop ADE's ESSA plan in coordination with various other agencies and federally-funded programs, including the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistant Act, and the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. The state's ESSA plan should clearly demonstrate how ADE has engaged these stakeholders and incorporated other federal programs, as well as how funds are being leveraged to meet the state's goals, including joint professional development (PD) opportunities (e.g., Title III, CCDBG PD plan); services for young children who are homeless (e.g., Titles I and IX, McKinney-Vento, CCDBG); and services for preschool children with disabilities;
- b) Clearly indicate the areas of coordination with DCCECE and the Arkansas Head Start State Collaboration Office (HSSCO), including PD for child care and Head Start workers; templates for transition planning and development of formal MOUs with local Head Start agencies and schools, as well as other ECE programs; and inclusion of children with disabilities and their providers in data collection, PD planning, and expanding access to high-quality ECE slots; and
- c) Require districts to create grade transition plans in collaboration with ECE programs, schools, administrators, and families, with a shared understanding of and joint professional development on what children should expect in their transitions from ECE to kindergarten, first grade, and second grade.

B) Building ECE Capacity

- 1) **Create an integrated system of professional development uniting the early childhood sectors.** Using Title I, Title II, and Title III funds, ADE, and school districts should work with DCCECE and Head Start to implement joint PD opportunities for child care, Head Start, and pre-K teachers; elementary school administrators and teachers; and early intervention and special education providers in the following areas:

- a) Appropriate instructional and assessment practices, tied to the Child Development and Early Learning Standards, that foster learning across the range of developmental domains, including social and emotional;
- b) Transition practices for children from early childhood programs to kindergarten and between the early elementary grades (K-1, 1-2, 2-3);
- c) Identifying and supporting children with special needs;
- d) Understanding and implementing standards for social-emotional learning;
- e) Effective parent and family engagement strategies and best practices; and
- f) Identifying and supporting children who are English language learners (ELL).

- 2) **Apply for all competitive funds available to the state through ESSA.** Several state initiatives can be supported through opportunities in the new law, and the state should dedicate resources and engage in public-private partnerships to develop strong, successful applications for literacy grants through the Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation (LEARN) program and for statewide coordination of early learning programs through the revised Preschool Development Grants (PDG). School readiness teams should be included in all planning and needs assessments for grant applications through Title IV and schools identified as in need of improvement (comprehensive and targeted support schools).
- 3) **Use Title I and Title II or other funds to help educators earn their Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, bachelor's degree, or other advanced degree.** Arkansas already requires all lead teachers in the ABC program to have earned at least a bachelor's degree. ESSA funds should be used to help all non-lead teachers and paraprofessionals earn at least the CDA or Birth to Pre-K credential, especially those working in rural communities or working with students who have special needs, are English language learners, or are considered at-risk.
- 4) **Increase the number and capacity of local school readiness teams.** In partnership with DHS' DCCECE and HSSCO, ADE can use Title I and II funds to help more local school readiness teams provide technical assistance in collecting and using data, developing needs assessments, providing PD to ECE providers and school leaders, and creating transition plans. This strategy may be particularly effective if focused on schools receiving comprehensive or targeted support under school improvement.

C) Increasing Access to Quality Pre-K

- 1) **Encourage school districts to use Title I funds or state NSL funds for high-quality ECE.** ADE, DHS' DCCECE, and HSSCO can provide technical assistance to help districts use available funds for ECE from birth through kindergarten. These can include direct services or comprehensive supports such as pre-K, home visiting, developmental assessments, joint PD, or resources to improve quality or extend the day or year for existing programs.
- 2) **Include ECE in needs assessments.** ESSA requires school districts to develop a needs assessment for schools and the district in several areas, including Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants (SSAEG) grants and when schools are identified as in need of improvement. ADE's plan should include the criteria for these needs assessments, including:
 - a) Information from existing needs assessments, including those from Head Start;
 - b) Population information, such as in Early Development Instruments (EDI) or other inventories; and
 - c) A description of the landscape of ECE opportunities for children in the catchment area with information and data on:
 - Where are the ECE programs in the area served by the low-performing school?

- What is the quality of those programs (as defined by a Better Beginnings, accreditation, funding source such as Head Start or state pre-K, licensing, etc.)?
 - Who is served, including age, income, neighborhood, race and ethnicity?
 - What other ECE resources (home visiting, early intervention, library programs, book access programs, kindergarten readiness measures, before and after-school programs, etc.) are available in that community?
 - What are the rates of chronic absenteeism in ECE programs in the area?
 - How can Title I resources be used most effectively through community programs or schools to provide increased access to quality ECE?
- 3) **Gather data to better understand where young children are being served.** State and district report cards will now be required to include the number and percentage of students enrolled in preschool programs. As “preschool” is not defined, using the broadest allowable definition in the denominator to define the level of need (including district pre-K programs, other ABC programs, Head Start, etc.) will require more comprehensive data collection and provide a better understanding of where children are enrolled, the types of programs they are attending, and the existence of potential service gaps.
- 4) **Require school districts, local agencies, and their partners applying for grant funding under Title IV (including 21st Century Community Learning Centers, SSAEG, and Promise Neighborhoods) to adopt evidence-based models that increase access to high-quality ECE.** DHS’ DCCECE and ADE should provide a list of evidence-based models that school districts can fund through Title IV grants. These may include quality afterschool and summer programs, the Community Schools model, and home visiting programs using Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) funds.

2) IMPROVE K-3 READING INSTRUCTION & POLICIES

We strongly support the Governor’s new campaign, R.I.S.E. (Reading Initiative for Student Excellence) Arkansas. Our organizations, along with the National Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (GLR)³, recommend the following, which are reflected in and build on the Governor’s initiative:

- a) **Implement early warning systems.** Include early warning and intervention systems in the state’s accountability plan for students in K-3, and use these systems to help districts and teachers identify struggling readers and provide timely intervention. Within these early

³ The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. (2016, September 2). “State ESSA Implementation Planning: Grade-Level Reading Policy Priority Checklist.” http://gradelevelreading.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ESSA-checklist-9_2_16.pdf

warning systems should be measures that gather data on a students' readiness for school in terms of health, language development, social-emotional skills, and participation in high-quality ECE programs (see Title I, Section 111, State Plans). ESSA plans also should be intentionally designed to connect to other state plans working on healthy development, including prenatal care; primary health care; vision, dental, and mental health care; comprehensive screenings; follow-up and early intervention; asthma management; and nutrition (Title I, Section 1013, Coordination Requirements).

- b) **Adopt grade promotion policies that use retention as a last resort.** The ESSA plan should require that schools provide early intervention for struggling readers, along with continuous parent engagement, before considering grade retention in early grades.⁴
- c) **Require coursework for licensure and ongoing PD in the science of reading.** All teachers, particularly at the elementary level, need deeper, ongoing training on how to teach reading, identify reading difficulties, and use Response to Intervention (RTI) to provide the individualized supports to help them catch up. ADE must also hold schools accountable for implementing the state's dyslexia law.
- d) **Improve services and supports for English language learners (ELL).** Provide training so that early English language learners' screening measures are designed to appropriately determine language proficiency, improve identification, and provide targeted support; and use Title II and III funds to provide PD for teachers to help build language and literacy skills and promote culturally-appropriate family engagement strategies.

3) EXPAND HIGH-QUALITY AFTERSCHOOL AND SUMMER PROGRAMS

Research shows that high-quality afterschool and summer programs have proven to help improve grade-level reading, among many other positive academic and behavioral indicators. We recommend that ADE emphasize the following opportunities in its ESSA plan:

- a) **Maximize existing funding.** Encourage districts to use state NSL and federal Title I funds on effective afterschool and summer programs.
- b) **Promote as an essential tool in improving grade-level reading.** Promote summer programs as an opportunity to address early literacy gaps, especially for lower-income children, and use summer programs as an opportunity to quickly get ELL students to English fluency (Title III).
- c) **Track data and disseminate best practices and PD opportunities.** Develop systems to track and share data and best practices between summer learning providers and districts. Shared professional development is also an effective strategy for aligning school-based and community-based programming during summer months to connect learning year-round (Title III, 3115(c)).

⁴ See the "Interim Study on Grade-Level Reading" (ISP 2013-01): http://www.ar-gl.net/media/1283/interimglr_report_resource.pdf

- d) **Engage parents.** Include effective parent engagement and support in related state and district policies to ensure that families have information about the “summer slide” (when kids lose ground in reading proficiency over the long three-month summer break) and how they can find the best learning opportunities for their children during the summer (Title I, Section 1010, Parent and Family Engagement).

4) REDUCE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM STARTING IN THE EARLY GRADES

ESSA requires states to add at least one measure of “school quality or student success” to its statewide accountability system. We recommend that ADE adopt chronic absenteeism as at least one additional measure of success. Attendance Works, a national and state initiative that raises awareness on the importance of regular school attendance, defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10 percent of the school year for any reason, whether those absences are excused or unexcused. Mirroring the findings of other state and national studies, AACF and AR-GLR’s recent report found that chronic absenteeism is a widespread problem in Arkansas, and it has a significant impact on our state’s educational outcomes.⁵ As explained in a recent report by the Hamilton Project, “When students are absent from school, regardless of reason, they are not learning what is being taught—resulting in lower performance on coursework, course exams, and standardized tests and lower rates of high school graduation.”⁶ Therefore, Arkansas’s ESSA plan should incorporate the following elements:

- a) **Define chronic absence in state statute or rules and regulations.** Based on research conducted in Arkansas and around the country in recent years, we recommend using 10 percent of the school year as the consistent definition of chronic absence.
- b) **Promote chronic absenteeism as a diagnostic tool for school improvement.** Measuring and addressing chronic absence is a critical part of any early warning system that identifies students and schools in need of early intervention. We recommend that chronic absence be used as an additional School Quality and Student Success indicator in Arkansas’s ESSA plan (Title I, Section 200.14).⁷
- c) **Monitor and publicly report school- and district-level chronic absence rates.** ADE should require schools and districts to report this data beginning in pre-kindergarten, by grade level and student subgroups. According to Attendance Works, reporting by grade-level is important, because the highest rates of chronic absence typically occur in the early grades and high school, particularly ninth grade. Not surprisingly, reasons for and solutions to

⁵ See AACF and AR-GLR’s 2016 report, *Make Every Day Count: Strategies to Reduce Chronic Absence in Arkansas Schools*: <http://www.aradvocates.org/publications/make-every-day-count-strategies-to-reduce-chronic-absence-in-arkansas-schools>

⁶ The Hamilton Project. (2016). *Lessons for Broadening School Accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act*: http://www.hamiltonproject.org/papers/lessons_for_broadening_school_accountability_under_the_every_student_succeeds

⁷ See section C-2 of U.S. DOE’s ESSA guidance on state report cards: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essastatereportcard.pdf>

chronic absence vary widely by grade— absences in Kindergarten often point to unmet family needs, while those in middle school more likely to require student-focused interventions appropriate for early adolescents. Thus, to reduce chronic absence and improve achievement, schools and district need data that will help them to develop focus areas and tailor strategies.

- d) **Educate parents about the importance of regular school attendance.** Preventing chronic absenteeism should be a core part of parent engagement activities under ESSA.

5) ADOPT POLICIES TO IMPROVE DISCIPLINE AND REDUCE RACIAL DISPARITIES

Traditional disciplinary actions (such as expulsions, suspensions, or in-school suspensions) keep students from progressing academically and increase their likelihood of dropping out of school or entering the criminal justice system. To make matters worse, research shows that there are significant racial disparities in school discipline in Arkansas and across the country.⁸ The state’s ESSA plan should require or incentivize schools to implement restorative justice and positive discipline practices to reduce racial disparities in suspensions/expulsions, increase school attendance, and stop the school-to-prison pipeline.

- a) **Adopt school discipline policies that keep kids in the classroom, starting in the early grades.** Research shows that in-school and out-of-school suspensions do not help improve student behavior and hurt students’ chances of being able to read on grade level. More effective practices, such as positive discipline and restorative justice, can better address both behavioral and academic difficulties and keep kids in school and on track to better futures.⁹
- b) **Include school discipline data as a measure of school quality.** State and school report cards should also include suspension and expulsion rates, disaggregated by students’ age, grade, race, ethnicity, and income level, as well as reason for suspension or expulsion.

6) PROMOTE AUTHENTIC FAMILY & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Effective family and community engagement is a key feature of all high-performing schools. Successful implementation of ESSA and progress towards educational equity also depends on meaningful inclusion of parents and communities, especially those that represent students who are racial or ethnic minorities, from low-income households, are English learners, or who have a disability. We recommend that ADE’s ESSA plan addresses the following:

⁸ See AACF’s *Keeping Kids in Class: Fixing Racial Disparities in School Discipline* (2013):

<http://www.aradvocates.org/publications/keeping-kids-in-class-fixing-racial-disparities-in-school-discipline>

⁹ Duke Center for Child and Family Policy. (2015). *Instead of Suspension: Alternative Strategies for Effective School Discipline*: https://law.duke.edu/childedlaw/schooldiscipline/downloads/instead_of_suspension.pdf

- a) **Define and implement effective parent engagement.** Establish a definition of and standards for effective parent engagement and parent support that focuses on proven and promising practices in engaging parents as essential partners in their own children’s education, starting in early childhood (see Title I, Section 1010, Parent and Family Engagement).¹⁰
- b) **Hold districts accountable for effective, culturally-appropriate parent engagement.** ADE can use the state’s ESSA plan to require school districts to demonstrate the strategies they are using to promote effective parent engagement and encourage them to adopt the family worker/parent advocate models used in Head Start or other programs, as well as collaboration with local evidence-based home visiting programs. The plan can also encourage the alignment of the family engagement approaches across the birth to third grade spectrum through required local coordination agreements with local early childhood programs.
- c) **Encourage districts to use Title I, Title IV, and other funding to implement the Community Schools model or hire community liaisons.** These models have shown promising results in other states and can help connect schools in need of improvement with the community organizations and resources they need to turnaround their performance.

7) ADOPT AND REPORT MORE MEANINGFUL MEASURES OF SCHOOL QUALITY

Previous federal and state accountability policies have focused on narrow measures of school success, such as a snapshot of standardized test scores in reading and math, without taking the growth of the whole school and whole child into consideration. As stated above, we recommend that ADE adopt chronic absenteeism as at least one additional measure of success, in addition to the following:

- a) **Adopt measures of school success that consider the *whole* school and the children they serve—not just a single letter grade.** Standardized tests should be used as early diagnostic tools for students, parents, and teachers—not as a method of punishment for educators or schools.
- b) **Include and teacher and principal turnover as part of the needs assessment for schools identified for comprehensive or targeted improvement.** These indicators provide a more well-rounded picture of the overall health of schools. This information should also be reported in report cards for all schools and districts.

¹⁰ See AACF’s 2016 report, *Helping Your Child Succeed in School: A Guide for Parents*: <http://www.aradvocates.org/publications/helping-your-child-succeed-in-school-a-guide-for-parents> and AACF’s 2015 report, *Parents’ Guide to Pre-K Advocacy*: <http://www.aradvocates.org/publications/parents-guide-to-pre-k-advocacy>

- c) **Maintain the state’s focus on equity in the accountability rubric.** ADE should continue to disaggregate data and target resources to children who need greater educational investment, including lower-income children, English language learners (ELL), homeless children, children in the child welfare system, and children with learning differences and disabilities.¹¹
- d) **Include data on English Language Arts (ELA) progress for K-2 students in the state accountability indicator.** Currently the state does not provide accountability data for students below third grade; therefore, parents and other stakeholders do not have a clear understanding of how our students are performing in reading until it is far more difficult to intervene.
- e) **Link ADE’s longitudinal data system to early childhood data sources for birth-to-five where possible.** The state should require this data (including information on chronic absence, suspensions and expulsions, and quality indicators such as group size and ratios) to be disaggregated by age and race in state and school report cards.

CONCLUSION

While our recommendations are not exhaustive, we hope that they will provide policymakers with a strong place to start in developing a more coherent, effective birth-to-third grade education system that sets students up for college and career readiness. Many recommendations appear to be aligned with Governor Hutchinson’s new R.I.S.E. Arkansas initiative, are low or no cost to the state or schools, and can have an immediate impact. We look forward to working with ADE and other policymakers to help shape our state’s vision for excellence in education.

¹¹ See U.S. DOE’s guidance on report cards: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essastatereportcard.pdf>

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families
1400 West Markham, Suite 306
Little Rock, AR 72201
(501) 371-9678

Northwest Arkansas Office
614 East Emma Avenue, Suite 235
Springdale, AR 72764
(479) 927-9800



Special thanks to the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, who funded the research and recommendations contained in this report.

LEARN MORE AT WWW.ARADVOCATES.ORG



facebook.com/aradvocates



[@aacf](https://twitter.com/aacf)



[@aradvocates](https://instagram.com/aradvocates)

