



ARRA Funding for Education in Arkansas: A Jump Start for Moving From Adequacy to Excellence

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Arkansas has dramatically increased education funding in recent years in order to meet the state Supreme Court’s mandate to provide adequate and equitable education for all students. However, overall academic achievement still lags behind that of other states and nations, and vast gaps in achievement among students of different income levels and races persist across the state.¹ The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) provides an unprecedented opportunity for Arkansas school districts to target more resources to research-proven strategies for closing these gaps.²

Two of the largest and most flexible pots of money in Arkansas’s stimulus package are the state fiscal stabilization fund (\$341 million for K-12 education) and Title I funding (\$142 million) for low-income schools.³ Since Arkansas has not had to lay off teachers, cut salaries or benefits for school employees, or halt critical services or programs for students, our schools will have much more flexibility in their use of ARRA funds than most other states. The federal and state Departments of Education have outlined how school districts may (and should) use stimulus money; generally speaking, it must be “timely, targeted, and temporary,” not spent on new programs that cannot be sustained beyond the one-time federal infusion of cash.⁴ Nor is the stimulus intended for across-the-board salary increases, sports facilities, parking lots, or other non-academic purposes.⁵ Beyond these basic parameters, districts have a great deal of flexibility in how they chose to spend the money. In fact, local school district superintendents (and school boards) are among the most powerful decision-makers in how nearly half of Arkansas’s federal stimulus package will be spent.

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Taxpayers and advocates will be watching school districts to make sure that tax dollars are spent wisely and on students who need help the most. If the state and school districts do not spend money in a way deemed appropriate,

voters and legislators will remember their poor choices when it comes time to pass new budgets, raise mills, or enact other school policies in the future.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) believes that we *should* afford our state’s most valuable natural resource—good teachers—greater pay and a better working environment. That support should be provided through an adequately funded school funding formula. School districts should use the one-time windfall in federal stimulus dollars on other research-proven solutions to closing the achievement gap, such as:

- 1) **EXTEND THE SCHOOL DAY AND YEAR THROUGH AFTERSCHOOL AND SUMMER PROGRAMS:** As U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said, we need to “educate our way to a better economy.” Our students will never be able to compete with other states or other countries unless they have more “time on task.” Our school system’s nine-month, agrarian calendar is an anachronism in the 21st century and does our students and teachers a great disservice. It will take a few years to reach this inevitable reality, and Arkansas needs to get started *now*.

Until then, it is crucial for our state to at least invest in afterschool and summer programs to help fill in the learning gaps that expand when the bell rings at 3 p.m. and the building is closed for business for nearly a third of every year. Children in afterschool programs do better in school, are more likely to graduate, and are more likely to explore pathways to new careers.⁶ Through hands-on learning, they are developing the critical thinking, leadership and problem-solving skills that employers say are vital. Investing in afterschool programs now is a down-payment on tomorrow’s workforce and Arkansas’s economy.

The Governor’s Task Force on Best Practices for After-School and Summer Programs knows what works and where it is needed most.⁷ A modest investment of stimulus dollars could go a long way toward laying a foundation and demonstrating the success of investments in quality programs in Arkansas:

- Invest in pilot programs that test the state’s ability to create high-quality programs modeled on task force recommendations.
- Expand and improve the quality of current programs.
- Invest in professional development and training to build the capacity and quality of existing afterschool and summer programs.
- Develop a statewide structure to bring community and state organizations together to share and maximize federal, state, local and private resources.

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- Provide summer jobs and employment training programs as a part of afterschool program offerings.

Beyond the major education funding provided by the ARRA—the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund and Title I—states can also use Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funding, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), and AmeriCorps volunteers to build capacity for out-of-school learning.⁸

- 2) **COORDINATE AND EXPAND SCHOOL HEALTH PROGRAMS.** It’s hard to read when you can’t see (or have a toothache, undiagnosed medical condition, etc.).

Again, it is no surprise that achievement is highly correlated with student health, and school-based health services can improve both health and academic outcomes.⁹ ARRA’s funding streams for education and health programs could be used to invest in the technology and equipment needed to ramp up such services in districts that need them most. Funds can also boost resources to the state’s Coordinated School Health Initiative. For more information, see AACF’s “ARRA and Arkansas: Investing in Health Care for Children and Families.”

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- 3) **PROVIDE INTENSIVE TUTORING IN MATH, READING, AND WRITING:** Our teachers often do not have time to give individual attention to the hundreds of students that pass through their classrooms each day. Decades of research has shown that intensive, one-on-one tutoring (or tutoring in small groups) by well-trained tutors—whether by for-profit organizations, community volunteers, or student peers, either before, during, or after school—can make a significant difference in improving student achievement.¹⁰ Since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted in 2001, schools that have failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for at least two consecutive years should have already been using their Title I funding to provide supplemental education services (SES) to students who ask for them. However, research in Arkansas and across the nation reveals that very few eligible students are receiving the tutoring they were promised—and for those student who are, we still have no idea whether such services are actually help improving their achievement.¹¹ With additional ARRA funding, school districts can now evaluate the effectiveness of supplemental service providers and make greater efforts to give students the remediation they need—whether by state-approved SES providers or through teachers in their schools’ own tutoring programs. Hiring temporary or part-time tutors can also stimulate local economies without adding new staff to permanent, full-time payrolls—and just might bring struggling students up to grade level.

- 4) **RESTOCK THE BOOKSHELVES (OR IN ARRA PARLANCE, BUY “UNATTACHED EQUIPMENT”):** Here’s a simple but often ignored solution to a widespread problem in many districts: buy current textbooks and age-appropriate reading materials that ignite students’ passion for reading. Not surprisingly, research shows that the number and quality of books that students are exposed to is correlated with their achievement.¹² For years, parents and teachers across the state have told AACF that too many students are having to share decrepit textbooks and are not allowed to bring them home to study at night. Furthermore, although our state has smartly invested a great deal in technology for school media centers in recent years (formerly known as “libraries”), many bookshelves often gather dust, with yellowed copies of outdated books that simply do not engage students in the 21st century. It we want to improve literacy, we must demonstrate that we *value* reading by making good reading materials available to all students. Better yet, buy some books for students that they can call their own.

- 5) **MODERNIZE SCHOOLS’ DATA SYSTEMS AND ADE’S CAPACITY TO MONITOR:** The ADE has made many good recommendations for ARRA expenditures in “Building Capacity to Enhance Student Achievement,” including investing in data systems to identify individual students’ needs early and foster continuous school improvement.¹³

At the same time, it would be wise to increase the ADE’s capacity to implement and monitor the use of ARRA funds and the effectiveness of the programs they support (and the myriad of other new things we expect the ADE to be accountable for each year). The Governor should step in and use part of the state’s government services fund under Section 14002(b) of the state stabilization fund to enable ADE to do its ever-expanding job and make sure that our tax dollars are well spent and achievement is improving at the local level.

Arkansas should set an example by turning around the worst-performing schools and give students a better chance at a decent education before they graduate (or drop out).

- 6) **TURNAROUND SCHOOLS THAT CLEARLY AREN’T WORKING.** President Obama has made it clear that he wants to see 5,000 failing schools close within the next five years and reopen with new principals and teachers—perhaps as conversion or open-enrollment charter schools.¹⁴ With ARRA funding, Arkansas should set an example by turning around the chronically worst-performing schools in the state and giving students a better chance at a decent education before they graduate (or drop out). Many school districts could use ARRA money to begin turning around schools that are on their fifth or sixth year of “school improvement status.” The U.S. and

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Arkansas Departments of Education can provide many examples of best practices for transforming low-performing schools. For instance, the KIPP Delta schools in Helena/West Helena are an amazing example of what public schools can do in even the most impoverished communities, in large part due to their longer school day and school year—giving students about 60 percent more time on task than other public schools—and using data to continually improve instruction.¹⁵

These recommendations are not exhaustive, but neither is the money.¹⁶ Although ARRA funding cannot possibly address all of our students' needs in such a short time, it can help set Arkansas on the right track toward excellence—not just adequacy.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families is a statewide, non-profit child advocacy organization established in 1977. Our mission is to ensure that all children and their families have the resources and opportunities to lead healthy and productive lives and to realize their full potential. Reach us at (501) 371-9678 or online at www.aradvocates.org.

For more information on the ARRA in Arkansas, contact Rich Huddleston, AACF executive director, at rhuddleston@aradvocates.org or Ginny Blankenship at gblankenship@aradvocates.org.

¹ See AACF's 2008 report, *Education in the Post-Lake View Era: What is Arkansas Doing to Close the Achievement Gap?*, by Drs. Jay Barth and Keith Nitta. http://www.aradvocates.org/images/pdfs/2008Education_AchievementGap.pdf

² See AACF's recent policy brief, *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: What's in it for Arkansas Children and Families?*, for an overview of the resources Arkansas is getting in the federal stimulus package. Available online: <http://www.aradvocates.org/images/pdfs/45--ARRA%20distribution%20in%20Ark.pdf>

³ To learn how much ARRA funding Arkansas school districts will receive, see the ADE's Recovery website: http://recovery.arkansas.gov/ade/ade_index.html

⁴ See http://recovery.arkansas.gov/ade/ade_index.html

⁵ Transcript from ADE summit at North Little Rock High School, April 10, 2009: http://recovery.arkansas.gov/ade/video/american_recovery_and_reinvestment_act_of_2009.pdf

⁶ C.S. Mott Foundation, "A New Day for Learning"(2007): <http://www.newdayforlearning.org>

⁷ See the Task Force's report at: <http://www.aradvocates.org/images/pdfs/AACFafterschoolsmall.pdf>

⁸ See the Afterschool Alliance's webpage on the economic stimulus: <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/policyEconRecovery.cfm>

⁹ See Barth & Nitta (2008); Berliner, D.C. (2009): "Poverty and Potential: Out-of-School Factors and School Success." Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit: <http://epicpolicy.org/publication/poverty-and-potential>

¹⁰ CITE: Campbell Collaboration

¹¹ Blankenship, G. (2007). *NCLB's School Choice and Supplemental Education Services in Arkansas*, unpublished dissertation, The George Washington University; U.S. Department of Education (2009). *State and Local Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, Volume VII--Title I School Choice and Supplemental Educational Services: Final Report*: <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/choice/nclb-choice-ses-final/index.html>

¹² See Rothstein, R. (2004). *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Education Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

¹³ See <http://recovery.arkansas.gov/ade/pdf/Appendix%20A%20-%20Building%20Capacity%20to%20Enhance%20Student%20Achievement%20Rubric.pdf>

¹⁴ "Obama wants to see 5,000 failing schools close," Associated Press, May 11, 2009.

¹⁵ See Barth & Nitta (2008).

¹⁶ Coalition for Student Achievement: http://www.coalitionforstudentachievement.org/economic_rec.asp