

Madam and Mr. Chairpersons and members of the Committee, my name is Dr. Michele Ballentine-Linch, executive director of the Arkansas State Teachers Association (ASTA). I am submitting this written testimony outlining members' perceptions and insights into the state's current funding for its public education system. ASTA members are comprised of school employees of all types. While a vast majority of our members are classroom teachers serving in traditional district public schools, some are also administrators, public charter school educators, and other education professionals.

ASTA's education policy and advocacy contributions are driven by our members. We are committed to serving as an authentic voice for education professionals and as such have polled members on several issues related to the impact of current public education funding. While ASTA members tend to be aware of court cases involving adequacy issues as well as the nature of the funding matrix, our members are concerned with the day to day aspects of their classrooms. They do however have strong opinions about spending in their individual districts and are able to provide valuable frontline accounts of the impact that national, state, and local decisions have in Arkansas classrooms. As several teachers expressed in a variety of ways, "Legislators and policy makers need to talk to teachers." The most recent ASTA poll revealed several clear, concise themes and opinions regarding funding of public schools as well as discrepancies that exist in leadership capacity, resource alignment, and implementation issues.

SUMMARY

- A majority 59% of participants reported regularly observing areas where districts could align funds to retain high quality teachers.. Thematic synopses that emerged from open-ended questions include:
 - The need for adequately funded and quality health insurance benefits. About 94% of members polled felt insurance was "critical" to recruiting and retaining quality school employees, while 73% felt their own districts could contribute more to premiums,. Over 90% believe the state should contribute more toward health care premiums.
 - Approximately 81% were not confident in the Employment Benefits Division's (EBD) ability to effectively represent their health care plan needs or manage the Public School Employ (PSE) programs.
 - The desire to have more relevant and helpful professional development resources was notably a more prevalent theme than previous surveys.
 - The Teacher Excellence Support System (TESS) was repeatedly identified as a time consuming process that interfered with teachers' and administrators' abilities to adequately manage time and serve students. However, there were a number of respondents who indicated TESS was effective and not a huge burden. This implementation gap is something we observe on a regular basis and why adequacy issues can be difficult to speak on without an understanding of the district's leadership capacity and how the district aligns its resources.
 - While increase pay is always a concern, it's important to note that a majority of those listing pay raises for teachers as a need were from districts that had not had raises in four to ten years.
- When asked if they observed specific areas where their districts allocate excessive funds, 49% responded they were unsure while 34% responded "yes" and explained perceptions they held. Clear themes emerged from these comments as well:
 - There is the opinion that resources and benefits applied to various administrative positions - depicted as excessive in number and pay and further described several times as "undefined" or "We do not know what they do" - could be better spent to meet learning needs of students and to support teachers.

- Athletics was the other most mentioned area of perceived excessive expenditures. One comment stated, “Athletics receives a large share of funds, while we have ten-year-old texts for science and none for history.”
- Anecdotal comments included opinions of excessive spending on unused software, technology resources that are unavailable to students and teachers, extravagant buildings and facilities, and ineffective professional development opportunities.
- Adequacy in terms of sufficient classroom resources is one of the most critical issues education professionals face. ASTA members were asked, “What type of classroom support is needed in your school to improve instruction and student learning?” The overwhelming needs indicated by our members related to:
 - Sufficient technology resources and equipment that is operational and accessible, as well as higher internet speeds and more broadband. One respondent stated their school had no WiFi at all and no computers for student use. However a vast majority of technology needs spoke to efficiency, professional development, and accessibility.
 - *Effective and qualified* instructional coaches and interventionists. This was a new and very strong theme that emerged in this most recent survey.
 - Resources to collaborate on and develop curriculum and instruction aligned to current state standards.
 - Training and resources to work effectively with students who struggle behaviorally.
 - More support staff to assist in classrooms, alternative learning environments (ALE) for staff, and in-school suspension (ISS) programs.
 - More time allotted specifically for collaboration with colleagues.
- When asked what was working, comments reflected the implementation and leadership capacity issues we regularly observe in surveys. While initiatives like ALE, ISS, Response to Intervention (RTI), teacher-paid after school tutoring, and readily available instructional coaches and interventionists were reported as effective, these same initiatives were also reported as “inconsistent” and “unsuccessful”.

Three things are clear from ASTA members’ feedback: 1) Serious discrepancies still exist related to funding issues. 2) Teachers and other education professionals must have a stronger voice with regard to adequacy decisions. 3) Arkansas has serious leadership capacity and implementation issues that warrant a deep exploration of exactly how districts are aligning resources, spending funds, and staffing leadership, instructional coach, and interventionist positions.

These discrepancies and issues make it difficult to determine where many funding inadequacies exist versus alignment issues. We continue to recommend a rigorous study into how districts spend and align resources be conducted in order to identify effective practices. A valid and reliable study would build an understanding of where additional funding is needed versus where poor spending practices need to be addressed. Finally, funding systems should be transparent and shared with the professionals on the frontlines as they are the most qualified to assist districts in more effectively aligning resources.

ASTA members are forward-thinking professionals who put students first. We support efforts that ensure equitable and adequate allocation of resources, regardless of zip code or school type. We look forward to working with the state and its policy makers in their efforts to improve education in Arkansas by providing insight into the impact of funding issues and decision-making within our schools.

Thank you for this opportunity.
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*The Arkansas State Teachers Association (ASTA) is the fastest growing education association in Arkansas. ASTA is a **non-union** professional association that provides benefits and services to educators such as liability insurance, professional development, scholarships and a voice on education policy both statewide and nationally. ASTA is a state chapter of the Association of American Educators.*