



# **Arkansas Education Association**

2019 Written Adequacy Testimony

*Public School Funding and a review of Adequacy for  
Arkansas' Public-School Students*

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The Arkansas Education Association (AEA) appreciates the opportunity to give testimony to the educational Adequacy Committee for its biennial study. AEA has been advocating for public education in Arkansas for 150 years including serving as a resource for the General Assembly in support of legislative efforts to meet the constitutional education requirements for our students. Arkansas statute § 10-3-2102 requires House and Senate Committees on Education to evaluate the cost of providing an adequate education for each school-age child. The statute also calls for AEA to give evidentiary information on Adequacy.

Arkansas under the 2002 Supreme Court ruling in the landmark Lake View case over deprived school funding for the state's poorest students, has increased school funding at significant levels. While public education funding in Arkansas is a joint enterprise between local, state, and federal governments, only the State has a constitutional mandate. Much has changed in the education-funding landscape in our state since 2002, and it is time for a new credible study to be undertaken to ensure the issues under funding consideration meet the state's student-need landscape.

The AEA acknowledges the 2019 efforts by the Governor and the State Legislature in addressing the teacher salary schedule and providing funding to school districts to offset the increase in labor costs. The \$60 million investment is a good first step toward attracting quality teachers to our state's public schools. However, it is important to note that this is only one time funding. What we must do is ensure the long-term funding resources for the increase in starting salaries and review the overall salary schedule, as well as additional supports it will take to retain quality teachers in the classroom. Additionally, actual school expenditures are not being funded by the Matrix; as a result, districts are spending money on district Maintenance and Operations that otherwise could be invested in student achievement.

Our focus as educators in AEA, is successful outcomes for all students and to ensure their matriculation to college or career. To that end, our testimony includes considerations for the needs of Special Education students, broadband access inside school buildings, and Pre-K, as well as teacher salaries, support staff pay and school behavior.

The Matrix has not significantly changed to meet the demands on districts to implement new and relevant content, standards, and facilities. As a result, school district budgets are squeezed and are left to make funding decisions without the proper funding and alignment of state support. As the committee considers its adequacy recommendations ahead of the 2021 legislative session for FY22-FY23, it is important to understand since the Matrix was developed, it has not expanded to include the costs of content such as Computer Coding or the High Reliability School Program connected to Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). With the 3 phases of the PLC rollout, districts are responsible for a portion of the cost pertaining to training.

For example, in the North Little Rock School District, the PLC training was at a cost of \$15,000. The district was unable to participate in the training at their co-op, as they had no allowance in the school budget to accommodate this cost.

We know our state leaders work to support improved outcomes for students. As such, it is important to consider the full costs to implement important ideas and evolving issues. We recommend the Matrix include a line item that would provide support for districts to implement new programs directed by the legislature.

## **Pre-K**

According to Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), Arkansas has historically led the region in access to state-funded Pre-k for 3-year-olds and was fourth in the nation. This success is one our state should build on and invest in significantly.<sup>i</sup> However, that same report showed that that means that in 2016-2017 2016-17, only 50 percent of 4-year-olds were enrolled in publicly funded prekindergarten programs. According to the Education Commission on the States, the preschool through third-grade years are foundational in a child's journey towards lifelong learning. Developmentally, these early elementary years are when children best acquire the academic and non-academic skills upon which long-lasting educational success depends. As a result, experts argue that meaningful improvements in student academic outcomes, increases in graduation rates, and the success of students later in life depend on improving the quality of the educational foundation provided by a quality kindergarten through third-grade (K-3) continuum.<sup>ii</sup> In addition, ESSA calls for significant efforts in reducing the achievement gap. Funding Pre-K is one of the steps in pursuing and addressing equity, as well as closing the achievement gap.

While Pre-K is not formally part of adequacy, the evidence continues to mount that capturing early brain development is critical to success throughout a student's educational career. We ask the legislature to fund Pre-K at a level that provides that every student has access to a quality Pre-K program.

## **Teacher Quality**

Teacher effectiveness in the classroom is a strong determinant of differences in student learning, far outweighing the effects of differences in class size and heterogeneity. Students who are assigned to several ineffective teachers in a row have significantly lower achievement and gains in achievement than those who are assigned to several highly effective teachers in sequence (Sanders & Rivers, 2016). The effectiveness of teachers appears to be both additive and cumulative. Data from the studies also find troubling indicators for educational equity, noting evidence of strong bias in assignment of students to teachers of different effectiveness levels, including indications that African American students are nearly twice as likely to be assigned to the most ineffective teachers and half as likely to be assigned to the most effective teachers.<sup>iii</sup> A targeted effort to address the disparity is necessary with financial

resources to create incentives for high-quality teachers to be in classrooms where the achievement gap needs intensive intervention.

One component to address the need for quality teachers is to raise salaries in the funding Matrix and to address the funding shortfall in salaries that have shifted costs to school districts. Currently, the amount provided in the Matrix alone, cannot attract high quality teachers. Thus, shifting the cost to local districts in order to be competitive in attracting high quality teachers. That shifting to local resources demonstrates the difficulty many districts in access to funding based on property taxes. The wide range in local property tax revenues available creates a significant disparity in the revenues available to districts across the state leaving them at a competitive disadvantage to attracting high quality teachers.

The adequacy process should level the playing field statewide. The FY22 – FY23 that this adequacy funding plan is forecasting must address the need to keep Arkansas viable to improve the teacher pipeline, as well as attract quality educators to the state. The national average teacher salary is \$59,660. Currently, Arkansas ranks 38 in the nation with an average teacher salary of \$48,304.<sup>iv</sup> The state ranks 45<sup>th</sup> in the nation in the average starting teacher salary of \$34,323.<sup>v</sup>

### **Impact of Behavior, Discipline, and Violence Against Teachers on Classroom Success**

Behavior issues that interfere with teaching and learning have notably worsened, according to an astonishing 62 percent of teachers who have been teaching in the same school for five or more years. The results were reported in *Primary Sources: America's Teachers on the Teaching Profession*. The report, released by Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, shows that the increased level of behavior problems has been seen across grade levels: 68 percent of elementary teachers, 64 percent of middle school teachers, and 53 percent of high school teachers say the same.

The problem affects the whole classroom. Behavior problems distract other students from learning and require teachers to spend precious instructional time on discipline and behavior management. Over half of teachers report wishing they could spend fewer school-day minutes on discipline.

Concern about behavior issues was not limited to any demographic group. While teachers who worked in schools in low-income areas reported concerns about behavioral issues at a higher rate (65%), teachers who worked in high-income areas were not far behind. In high-income areas, 56 percent of teachers reported more behavioral issues that interfere with teaching and learning.

Teachers are committed to helping all their students succeed, including those with behavioral issues. They say, however, that they need help. Overall, 64 percent of teachers say that they need more professional development and training to meet the needs of students with behavioral issues, while 72 percent need more tangible school resources.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2017), approximately 20% of public-school teachers reported being verbally abused, 10% reported being physically threatened, and 5% reported being physically attacked in schools. In addition to the personal toll that violence may take on teachers, those who worry about their safety may have difficulty teaching and may leave the profession altogether, impacting teacher retention and recruitment. The American Psychological Association Classroom Violence Directed Against Teachers Task Force found that intervention by counselors trained in behavioral science and social workers can have interventions that mitigate school violence and disruptive behavior.<sup>vi</sup>

These two behavioral issues, students discipline and violence against teachers, have a direct impact on student outcomes and success, as well as school climate.

In Arkansas, students do not receive the services they need because teachers are discouraged from reporting incidents that reflect negatively on school reports cards. Because this data can shape outcomes of the report cards, some administrators are not supportive in addressing the severity of these issues. Funding for counselors and social workers can be addressed in the Enhanced Student Achievement (ESA) categorical funds.

### **Special Education**

In 2016, Arkansas's Special Education Task Force reported the need for an additional \$20 million in funding annually to meet school district costs of catastrophic special education for students identified as needing intensive support. While the Matrix does address funding for special education, it in no way differentiates between the levels of support within school districts. The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) made changes to the Catastrophic Funding Formula reimbursement rules for school districts. According to ADE, more than 90 districts chose not to participate in the 2017 Catastrophic submission. Under the current rules implemented for the 2019-2020 school year, districts can receive up to 100% of their reimbursement requests above \$15,000 and up to \$65,000 after adjusted offsets.<sup>vii</sup> These new rules shifts which districts benefit the most from catastrophic funds. This change has been helpful for some districts, but the administrative costs to execute the regulations discourage districts from submitting the reimbursement requests. Catastrophic funding must be available to meet the needs of our most vulnerable students and not just some.

### **EDUCATION SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS**

In 2018 Arkansans voted to increase the minimum wage to \$11/hour over three years. This increase has already had an impact on district budgets. It is important that the committee include that data in its adequacy considerations. Those cost increases can be considered in the Operations & Maintenance, Central Office, and Transportation line items of the Matrix. We know from a small sample of school districts, the pay for Education Support Professionals has not increased in the last 6 years. The first year of the minimum wage increase has already taken effect, so districts must address this immediate change in their budgets. We urge the

committee to take this impact into consideration as a direct need for a foundation formula increase for FY22-FY23.

## **FUNDING LEVELS TO KEEP UP WITH INFLATION**

The Matrix must be funded at the level necessary to keep up with inflation. In 2017, the Bureau of Legislative Research (BLR) presented Consumer Price Index (CPI) data showing that school districts would need a 2.5 percent increase to stay on par with the increase in costs.

Unfortunately, the legislature gave districts only a 1.1 percent increase. As a result, districts were forced to absorb the rest of the increasing costs to do business. This has impacts across districts' budget and spending decisions, all of which have direct impacts on students in our state. Simply put, when the increase in state funding is less than the Consumer Price Index, it is effectively a cut in funding.

## **ENHANCED STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT (ESA) FUNDING**

ESA funding use throughout the state by districts cover a wide array of programs. The challenge is to narrow the use of those resources on specific research-based programs that have shown to be successful and effective in supporting students who need interventions.

The Southern Education Foundation released a report on *Innovative Regional Support for Community Schools in Rural Arkansas: A Solution for Students' Home Communities and Schools*. In the report, researchers found there is a direct correlation between poverty and achievement. With significant resources, from state funding to foundation investment, there have been a few short-term success stories, but, across the board, little has changed for children of low-income families, particularly low-income children in small schools.<sup>viii</sup>

For students in Arkansas to achieve valuable outcomes, the state must consider and address student poverty in areas where poverty is highly concentrated.

AEA believes using ESA funding to target evidence-based programs such as Community Schools in both rural and urban schools that have a significant number of families categorized as Free and Reduced Lunch can close the achievement gap. The above-referenced report states, "One solution that empowers local communities and brings needed resources to low-income students and their families is community schools. Community schools provide both the K-12 curriculum and a much broader range of supports to students and families — high-quality academic instruction, as well as mentoring, health care, college-and-career counseling, financial advising, and much more. In many cases, the community school serves as a neighborhood hub."<sup>ix</sup> With one-third of Arkansas's children attending rural schools, to see significant strides in closing the achievement gap of students in poverty, combining the Community School model with ESA funding can impact successful academics.

The report further cites Southwest Regional Education Labs (REL), noting that about half of Arkansas's schools are rural, with more than one-third of the state's students attending a rural school. Because the unique needs of rural schools have not been evaluated in depth, separate

from evaluation of each district as a whole, the state is in jeopardy of failing to provide equity for these schools and students.<sup>x</sup>

## **FACILITIES**

As our state works to address school districts' access to technology by expanding bandwidth with a \$25 million investment for Broadband statewide, some school facilities are ill-equipped to participate in the technology opportunity because their facilities are not within the current standards to meet the needs of new technology. This lack of access in some schools across the state creates the case for facilities disparity. The lowest standard of warm, safe, and dry for the student learning environment should evolve to ensure students' access to high-quality facilities paired with technology access. The Facilities Partnership Program Fund projections continue to be underfunded. The facilities funding issue is quite obvious in low property-wealth districts where there is no other mechanism to raise facility funding. The transfer of \$16 million annually to health insurance for public school employees continues to have long-term implications for facilities funding. In addition, it sets up an increased burden on public school employee participants in their health insurance plan.

AEA recommends that (1) the Partnership Program be funded fully and consistently, through a dedicated and ongoing funding source to meet the evolving needs for students to access state-of-the-art facilities, and (2) restrictions are put in place to prevent these funds from being used outside of their designation.

## **CONCLUSION**

**The Arkansas Education Association, as the largest association of professional educators appreciates the opportunity to lift up the voices of the educators implementing the work in classrooms, cafeterias and school buses every day. Our recommendations for the 2019-2020 adequacy study include:**

- **Increasing the minimum teacher salary schedule to a level on par with the states with the highest educational outcomes for students.**
- **Ensure that the state prioritizes and ensures ongoing funding so that increased labor costs are not shifted to local school districts.**
- **Conduct a full, credible study of the need of public education in Arkansas including a deep look into the current funding matrix.**
- **Ensure that the funding matrix includes a line item that allows the state to fund legislative mandates.**
- **Reestablish Arkansas's status as a leader in Pre-K education. Ensure that all 4 year olds have access to a high-quality, public Prek program.**
- **Address the increase in behavior, discipline and violence incidents in the schools by expanding mental health care. Utilize Enhanced Student Achievement funds (ESA) to address these and other wraparound service needs to reduce the incidents that impact the teaching and learning environment.**

- Fully fund the special education catastrophic and suspend the use of a funding guidance that favors some school districts over others. Ensure that all students in need of special education services receive them to that all services to which they are entitled are met.
- Teachers are not the only educators that make our schools work. Education support staff such as school bus drivers, cafeteria workers, janitors, secretaries and others play an integral role in ensuring a well-run, safe and supportive learning environment. As such, these education support professionals deserve to have the line item in the matrix which provides for their services significantly increased.
- In addition, the voters of Arkansas in 2018 increased the minimum wage to \$11/hour over 3 years. This has had an impact on school district budgets. The state should assist in filling the increased labor costs for these critical support staffers instead of squeezing local district budgets.
- The adequacy recommendation should, at minimum, use the Consumer Price Index (CPI) as a baseline for increased state support for public schools. When the adequacy recommendation does not reach the level of the CPI, it is effectively a cut to our public school budgets.
- Rural and urban school districts can benefit from adopting and implementing Community Schools model. This model brings needed resources to low-income students and their families. This model allows the school to serve as a true community hub and should be adopted by the legislature as a best practice.
- Arkansas has been a leader on expanding broadband access to educational institutions. Unfortunately, many schools district facilities are ill-equipped to participate in the technology opportunity because their facilities are not up to current standards. AEA recommends that the facilities Partnership Program be funded fully, and consistently through a dedicated and ongoing funding source to meet the evolving needs for students to access state-of-the-art facilities.
- In addition, facilities funds must not, as they are currently, be transferred into other areas to fill funding gaps. These funds must be restricted to the purposes for which they are funded and any gaps that need to be filled in the areas where these funds were shifted to must be funded appropriately as well. This includes the shifting of facilities funds to cover Public School Employee health insurance costs.

**Educators are experts in education. As such, we appreciate your careful consideration to our recommendations.**

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.sreb.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/2018progress\\_ar.pdf?1529591379](https://www.sreb.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/2018progress_ar.pdf?1529591379)

<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/K-3\\_Policymakers\\_Guide\\_to\\_Action.pdf](https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/K-3_Policymakers_Guide_to_Action.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/49609974\\_Teacher\\_Quality\\_and\\_Student\\_Achievement](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/49609974_Teacher_Quality_and_Student_Achievement)

<sup>iv</sup> [State Rankings](#), FY 2017-18, NEA Research, April 2019

<sup>v</sup> [State Teacher Salary Benchmark Data](#), FY 2017-18, NEA CBMA, March 2019

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.apa.org/education/k12/teacher-victimization>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/divisions/special-projects/professional-learning-communities-in-arkansas>

<sup>viii</sup> [https://www.southerneducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Jerri-Derlikowski\\_Innovative-Regional-Support-for-Community-Schools-Paper.pdf](https://www.southerneducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Jerri-Derlikowski_Innovative-Regional-Support-for-Community-Schools-Paper.pdf)

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid

<sup>x</sup> Ibid