

**Written Testimony Submitted to  
Arkansas State General Assembly  
House and Senate Education Committee**

**January 12, 2016 at 9 a.m.**

**By**

**The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation**

## Introduction

Good morning. My name is Sherece West-Scantlebury and I am the president and CEO of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. Building on the legacy of Governor Rockefeller, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation is a champion for a public education system that supports all Arkansas children. For more than forty years, WRF has invested in research and systems change that seeks to improve educational outcomes for our students.

During the era of *Lake View*, WRF provided important data and leadership around solutions to increase revenue for the state's K – 12 system. Today, the Foundation continues to use its time and resources to move Arkansas from among the nation's lowest performing in economic and education indicators to become one of the nation's highest ranking in measures of child and family well-being. We believe that all Arkansans fare better when our children have equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities.

In that light, we appreciate the opportunity to share our perspective on the need to *expect more* from our state's public education system. We can and we should work to ensure that all Arkansas schools provide an "adequate education," but today we urge the Committee to expect more. Expect *excellence for all schools*. Expect *opportunity for all students*. Expect *prosperity for all Arkansans*.

We should note that *this testimony does not reflect a position on any pending legislation*. Instead, with this testimony, we will share several recommendations that emerge from the Foundation's statewide grantmaking and research:

- Arkansans must commit to a **common vision** for a stronger education system.
- The state needs to **invest early** to ensure all students start school ready to succeed.
- We must address barriers that prevent **opportunity for all students**.

## A Common Vision: *ForwARd Arkansas*

If we are to expect more from our state's public education system, policymakers, business leaders, educational institutions, communities, parents, and students must commit to the vision that all Arkansas students graduate high school prepared for success in college and the workplace. To support the dramatic improvements and enhanced student outcomes necessary for that vision, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation launched *ForwARd Arkansas (ForwARd)* in partnership with the Walton Family Foundation and the Arkansas State Board of Education. *ForwARd* is led by a statewide steering committee of parents, educators, policymakers, business leaders, and engaged residents.

In 2015, *ForwARd* engaged more than 7,000 residents across the state through town halls, focus groups, and electronic surveys to gather local strategies and feedback on how to move the needle on public education in Arkansas. Based on that data, *ForwARd* crafted the 95 bold recommendations contained in the 2015 report *ForwARd Arkansas: A New Vision for Arkansas Education*. The recommendations address:

- Pre-K: All students have access to high-quality early childhood learning opportunities so they arrive at kindergarten ready to learn
- Teaching and Learning: Each student is supported in developing the full range of knowledge and skills she/he needs to be successful in college and career
- Teacher Pipeline: All schools, especially those in high-need areas, have access to talented educators who have been rigorously prepared.
- Support Beyond the Classroom: All students and families, starting with those in highest need, have access to and support in accessing the nutritional and health resources needed to come to school ready to learn
- Leadership: All education leaders put students at the center of their decisions, work tirelessly to build and support a team, deploy resources effectively, and hold themselves and their team accountable for enabling all children to be successful
- Academic Distress: All schools in academic distress and pre-academic distress receive support and interventions that enable them to transform their school cultures, dramatically improve student achievement, and sustain their improvement over time
- Systems and Policies: All school districts have sufficient funding and use resources in a way that most effectively supports student success

By way of reference, we would like to include the entire *ForwARd* vision document as a part of the official record of these hearings.

*ForwARd* provides a comprehensive roadmap to excellence in education in our state, as well as dedication to the ideal that educational quality should not be determined by ethnicity, geography, or economic status. We encourage this Committee to join the vision of *ForwARd* that all Arkansas students graduate high school prepared for success in college and the workplace.

### **Invest Early: Early Education and K-12 Success**

If we are to expect more from our state's public education system, we must make the early investments needed to ensure that all students enter the K-12 system equipped with the skills to succeed. That is why the Foundation invested significant resources in the *Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading* with the goal that by 2020, every Arkansas student will read proficiently by the end of third grade. Our 2012 report, *The Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading: A Call to Action*, makes the case that third grade reading proficiency is one of the most important indicators of future academic and career success.

It also makes some simple recommendations for improving third grade reading proficiency in Arkansas:

- Strengthen parent and community engagement by providing caregivers with the support and resources needed to be their child's first and most important advocates
- Improve school readiness by expanding access to quality pre-K and evidence-based home visiting programs
- Reduce summer learning loss by investing in high-quality summer and youth development programs
- Decrease chronic absence by ensuring our children are in the classroom every day and able to learn

By way of reference, we would like to include the entire *Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading* document as a part of the official record of these hearings.

If we want to ensure that all students can benefit from our K-12 system, we must make sure that all students arrive at school ready to learn. That starts by investing in early education and addressing barriers to reading proficiency in the early grades.

### **Opportunity for *all* students**

Finally, if we are to expect more from our state's public education system, we must ensure it benefits all children regardless of race, income level, geography, or any other factor. Based on research produced by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, Arkansas's economy loses \$142 million annually because of inequity in our education system. WRF supports the *Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign* – a coalition of statewide organizations, community leaders, parents, students, educators, and policymakers that are committed to strengthening public education in Arkansas. This diverse coalition has identified some key ways to expand opportunity:

- Build stronger parent, community, student, and school partnerships
- Increase accountability for how schools spend NSLA funding
- Create fairer systems of discipline that reduce suspensions and out-of-class time
- Make career and technical education opportunities more accessible for students

In addition to the recommendations above, to increase equity, we must ensure that our tax system is fair and create better parity in how school districts are funded. Since the Foundation funded *Tax Options for Arkansas: Funding Education After the Lake View Case* in 2003, the state has taken significant steps to improve the adequacy and equity of our schools but a regressive tax system in Arkansas continues to contribute to inequitable school funding. The public school system and its funding mechanism needs to be fair to create opportunity for all students in our state.

Equity and excellence are inextricably linked. To achieve excellence, we must address inequities and create opportunity.

### **Conclusion**

Strategic investments in education today are key to the long-term future of Arkansas. The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation continues to use its resources to identify and lift up best practices. Ultimately, it will require state investment to scale these best practices and make certain that all of our state's students are successful. But first, it requires a commitment to *expect more* from our state's public education system. We can and we should:

- Expect excellence for all schools
- Expect opportunity for all students
- Expect prosperity for all Arkansans

We will make the resources referenced in this testimony available electronically and in hard copy for inclusion in the official record of these proceedings. Thank you again to the Education Committee for providing this opportunity.