

Arkansas
Advocates
for
Children
and
Families

**Testimony to the
House Education Committee
and the
Senate Education Committee**



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Submitted March 2014

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Arkansas is a poor state with one of the highest child poverty rates in the country. More than one in four children lives below the federal poverty level. Only four states have more low-income students in public schools than Arkansas. Sixty percent of Arkansas public school students live at an income level low enough to qualify for National School Lunch Act support. In addition to these statewide numbers, poverty is not distributed evenly throughout the state. Many of our schools are struggling with overwhelming numbers of low-income students.¹

Poverty is one of the biggest challenges Arkansas schools face. Students who live in poverty need more resources than their higher-income peers. They need small classes, individualized instruction and supportive responses at an appropriate level to meet their emotional and behavioral challenges. Without after-school and summer programs they lose much of what they gain in school. Middle class kids participate in many out-of-school activities that enrich and reinforce what they have learned. Children living in poverty may come to school hungry, sleepy, and without appropriate clothing.² They miss more school due to health problems and family problems.

Schools in the isolated and impoverished areas of the state have fewer resources available than schools in areas with higher property wealth. Schools in low-income areas have similar amounts of foundation and facilities funding. They have more categorical and federal funding to work with their low-income kids. What they don't have are the resources to pay teachers competitive salaries that districts with high property wealth prop up with additional operations mills. They don't have human capital to fill all the needs to staff extra programs some schools in other areas are able to provide. Ready access to student health centers is sporadic. Quality after-school and summer programs are in short supply. Innovative programs such as breakfast in the classroom and food backpacks for the weekend are not consistently available. Even activities such as school trips to cultural activities and other parts of the country that provide invaluable academic enrichment in other schools are not available in many of these low-income areas.³

Solutions to these resource needs are difficult. If it was easy we would have done it already. Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families is a partner in programs such as the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign and the Arkansas Grade Level Reading Campaign. These efforts seek to identify solutions and spread the word about best practices to improve achievement for all of our students. The following discussion targets some of the areas that can be approached through the existing funding structure.

After-school and summer programs. Sen. Key sponsored legislation in 2011 for the Positive Youth Development Act program. It hasn't been funded. The money wouldn't go through a school's budget first. It would be in the form of grants to community organizations such as churches and Boys' Clubs. It would foster cooperation between schools and these programs to reach kids who might not be willing to stay after school or spend their summer at school. Superintendents have claimed in committee meetings that they are unable to get students to participate in the after-school and summer programs they offer. Offering programs in other settings that students perceive as fun rather than just more

school is an alternative that could yield better results. These other organizations should be given an opportunity to address this need.

Teacher quality and supply. The disparity in beginning teacher pay is growing according to the March report on the subject by the Bureau of Legislative Research.⁴ The disparity is largely the result of failing to increase the state's minimum salary schedule since the 2007 legislative session. In 2010 the disparity was \$13,763. By 2013 it has grown to \$15,326. The district with the highest beginning salary pays over 150% of the minimum salary paid in eight other districts. This disparity results in districts that are unable to recruit an adequate number of fully credentialed teachers. They have no chance of competing with other districts for top quality teacher recruits. The committees interest in investigating costs to move the minimum salary schedule up are a great first step.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families participated in a recent discussion with Arkansas leaders in teacher preparation programs. When asked, those leaders agreed that teachers have nowhere near enough training and preparation for communicating with and meeting the needs of low-income and culturally diverse students. More of this type of training must be incorporated into the state's teacher preparation programs.

The Arkansas Department of Education is piloting the Teacher Cadets Program which bears potential for helping districts "grow their own" top quality teachers. Other existing programs such as the High Needs Priority program have not been successful in promoting long-term teacher retention in the eligible districts. New solutions are needed.

Broadband access. Broadband funding provided through the 2014 fiscal session will be an important first step to meeting internet access needs in rural and isolated schools throughout the state. It will be important to track where these funds are used and where needs remain. Despite this improvement in school-based access, there is still a need to move forward to help low-income families access broadband. Students who can work from home on their papers and other internet-based activities have an advantage over other students. Unless an effort is made to move forward with getting access to low-income homes the digital divide will expand.

Facilities funding. The following listing needs related to school facilities funding:

- 1) The biennial educational adequacy study should conduct a comprehensive reassessment of existing school facilities to assess facilities needs particularly in poor property wealth school districts in rural areas. The state's wealth index has lessened the inequities and inadequacies but has not eliminated them. Video documentation of these needs was presented to the Education Committees in April, 2013.
- 2) The large one-time influx of general improvement funding [\$500 million in 2008] has been spent down. Facilities expenditures for the last four years have averaged approximately \$105 million. Current spending levels cannot be maintained with the \$55 to \$60 million annually the state has been investing, even before the recent cut.

- 3) It has been suggested that the state's major school facilities needs have been met. First priority is being shifted to districts with student growth needing expanded facilities. This assertion is based on a very low bar—warm, safe, and dry.
- 4) One stream of funding for facilities from a pre-Lake View facilities program in the amount of approximately \$16 million per year was diverted to use for teacher health insurance. Certainly short-term solutions to the teacher health insurance problem were a necessity. However, robbing facilities funding merely creates a larger deficit in a program already needing to replace the depleted one-time general improvement fund revenue.
- 5) Many districts have aged-out buildings that should have been renovated or replaced years ago. They have instead been patched to meet the lowest possible facility standard of warm, safe and dry. This is in contrast to districts that have substantial local resources to provide up-to-date modern facilities for their students through major renovations or new construction.
- 6) Districts with substantial local resources are to be commended for using them to the benefit of their students, but the needs of districts without these resources must be addressed. Low property wealth districts still cannot raise as much income per student as the districts with fewer mills but greater property wealth. The state wealth index has reduced but not eliminated the disparities.
- 7) Facilities standards have not been updated in the past ten years to incorporate up-to-date research on adequacy for current technology, current collaborative learning processes, current integrated career and academic education programs, and current research on school climate and culture.
- 8) The Special Masters who reported to the Supreme Court in 2005 listed language in Act 1426 of 2005, "in order to satisfy the constitutional expectations of the Supreme Court, the state should: (1) provide constitutionally appropriate public school academic facilities for the education of each similarly situated child in the public schools of Arkansas, **regardless of where that child resides within the state.**" ⁵

Pre-K. Pre-K hasn't been considered as a part of adequacy due to a narrow interpretation of the constitutional duty to "maintain a general, suitable and efficient system of free public schools."⁶ This wording familiar to many is followed in the same sentence by this clause, "and shall adopt all suitable means to secure to the people the advantages and opportunities of education." The reasons listed below document the need to maintain our existing pre-K program and even to expand it to serve unmet needs. ⁷

- 1) Arkansas pre-K is not serving all eligible three- and four-year old children. There are waiting lists for parents seeking these programs in many areas of the state including Northwest Arkansas.
- 2) Arkansas has been a leader in early childhood education as a result of our pre-k program. However, other states are moving forward with pre-K at a time when ours is being strangled through flat funding. Oklahoma is making tremendous investments, as are Georgia and

Alabama. New efforts are needed to keep Arkansas from moving backward. Doing nothing when others are investing is a step back.

- 3) Pre-K is important for the state's economic success which is dependent on improving our educational achievement. Pre-K is the foundation of that improvement.
- 4) Most importantly pre-K is essential for kids. It helps **low-income kids** start kindergarten on level with their peers.
- 5) It helps **all kids** because teachers can move the whole class forward faster if they don't have to help some catch-up.
- 6) Pre-K is a wise investment because brain science shows that the most rapid brain development is from birth to age 5.

National School Lunch Act State Categorical Funding (NSLA). To improve low-income students chances for success, Arkansas set-aside funding targeted to create better opportunities for these poor children. Now, the purpose of that program is being questioned.

The legislature created special poverty funding, known as "NSLAFunding". The nickname comes from an acronym for the federal National School Lunch Act. Though eligibility for the federal program helps determine how much extra funding a school should get, the money in question does not come from the federal government. It's state money.

The intention was always clear--that NSLA categorical funding was to provide additional support to low-income students. Just as funding for the categorical ELL programs was just for those students and funding for the ALE program was just for those students. The NSLA or poverty funding wasn't designed to be any different.

On one side, the superintendents' organization, Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators, suggests that this additional funding was intended as a resource for all students. Others, including the Arkansas Commissioner of Education, have stated in testimony in earlier Education Committee adequacy hearings that the funding should be used for programs that benefit low-income and struggling students.⁸

The evidence that the money was not intended for all students is written into the funding formula itself. It was set up with two different types of funding. One was basic "foundation" funding necessary to teach all students. It's for classroom teachers, library materials, technology, school district personnel, and the like. Currently, that amount is \$6,393 per student.

Because the Legislature acknowledged that some students had special needs above what the foundation amount would meet, they created additional funding streams. These "categorical" types were for

students learning English, for those in alternative learning environments, as well as the extra poverty funding. The latter currently ranges from \$517 to \$1,549 per low-income student, depending on the percentage of low-income students in a district. Again, the amount of poverty funding is not based on the total number of students in the district, but the total number of *low-income students*.

To determine how the funding should be spent, the Legislature can look to its own recent studies for the answer to that. Last year, Act 1467 required the Legislature to study (yet again) the best uses of this funding and for the Education committees to recommend a list of evidence-based programs that would make the best use of this funding. The report put together by the Bureau of Legislative Research lists quality after-school and summer programs, tutoring, and pre-Kindergarten as programs that research shows are proven to reduce the achievement gap between low-income students and their higher-income peers. The report also lists resources such as high-quality teachers that are already provided for in foundation funding for every student.

This isn't the first time legislators have heard this. The Bureau detailed problems with the effectiveness of some districts' spending of this money in 2012, and the University of Arkansas' Office of Education Policy as well as Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families have come to similar conclusions. The bottom line of all these organizations – which don't always agree on such things – is that spending this money in a piecemeal fashion won't lead to the improvements in student achievement that we seek.

Despite the research there are some who hope to maintain the current widespread list of eligible uses – policies that have resulted in little benefit to low-income students.

Those who urge that the funding become just another source of district revenue for all students suggest that a rising tide floats all boats. But one legislator shared in the January 2014 meeting on this topic, some of the boats have leaks. And without the additional resources low-income students need, their boats aren't going to rise.

The research applies to every school, however it would still result in a big improvement if NSLA use was at least restricted in schools that are not performing—Needs improvement, Focus and Priority Schools. Schools that are achieving or exemplary may be left alone.

Conclusions. Despite all these challenges traditional public education has been improving. Research presented by the Bureau of Legislative Research shows that scores have improved. One example of this improvement is that third grade benchmark scores for literacy have improved from 60% proficient or above in 2007 to 80% proficient or above in 2013. At the same time, the achievement gap between African American students and Caucasian student on the fourth grade literacy Benchmark exam has narrowed from 30 points in 2007 to 13 points in 2013.⁹

However, despite this good news, the remaining achievement gap cannot be ignored. New efforts present opportunities to reduce the achievement gap. The rules for the Schools of Innovation program

have finally been promulgated. They offer traditional public schools opportunities for creative strategies previously only available to charter schools. The Whole Child-Whole Community effort acknowledges the challenges that schools face with concentrations of low-income students and seeks to provide supports to those children through community efforts as well as school-based interventions.

In addition to new efforts like these, the education committees have heard much research about proven strategies to improve achievement of low-income students. Many of these strategies are adequately funded through the state's foundation funding and professional development categorical funding. However, the state has failed to insist that categorical funding for low-income students be used strictly for them and that it be used in research proven ways such as pre-K, after-school and summer programs, and individual or small group tutoring.

Arkansas can close the achievement gap between low-income and non-low-income students. To move forward, Arkansas must address the needs of low-income students and assure their academic success.

¹ Suitts, Steve. Southern Education Foundation. "A New Majority: Low Income Students in the South and Nation." October, 2013.

² Strauss, Valerie. "The real 21st-century problem in public education." The Washington Post. October 26, 2013.

³ School site visits and superintendent interviews conducted by Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families staff, Fall 2012 through 2013.

⁴ Bureau of Legislative Research, "Teacher Salary Report." March 11, 2014.

⁵ Act 1426 of 2005.

⁶ Arkansas Constitution, Article 14, Section 1.

⁷ Research and documentation for these statements is available by contacting Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. jderlikowski@aradvocates.org.

⁸ Testimony by Tom Kimbrell. Arkansas Commissioner of Education, January 7, 2014.

⁹ Whorton, Rebeca. Bureau of Legislative Research. "Student Achievement Statistics." December 17, 2013.