

Dr. Michele Ballentine-Linch Testimony  
Arkansas State Teachers Association (ASTA)  
House and Senate Interim Committee on Education  
April 18, 2014  
**Continuing Adequacy Evaluation Act of 2004**

Mr. Chairmen and members of the Committee, my name is Dr. Michele Ballentine-Linch. I am submitting this written testimony outlining members' concerns about the State's current system of funding for its public education system as the executive director of the Arkansas State Teachers Association (ASTA). ASTA members are composed of school employees. While a vast majority of our members are teachers serving in traditional public schools, members also include administrators, charter school educators and other education professionals.

ASTA is member-driven and has polled members on several issues related to the current funding system for public education. Results from a portion of the survey itself are attached to the end of this letter, see Figure 1. While our members tend to be aware of the court cases involving adequacy issues as well as the nature of the funding matrix, it does not appear to be a matter many have explored in depth. However, they have strong opinions about how they view spending in their individual districts. As several teachers expressed in a variety of ways, "The entire state and districts need to realize that we are the key professionals in this high stakes endeavor. Talk to teachers." The ASTA poll revealed several clear, concise themes and opinions regarding funding of public schools as well as discrepancies existing in terms of equity and adequacy:

- While 25% were unsure, 58% of ASTA members reported regularly observing areas where districts could align funds to better meet student learning needs and retain high quality teachers. From more adequately funding health insurance (an issue 96% of those polled felt was "critical" to recruiting and retaining quality school employees) to prioritizing academic needs, education professionals have significant insights into the issue of funding.
- When asked if they observed specific areas where their districts allocated excessive funds, 43% responded "yes" and 40% were unsure. Of those who responded "yes", 63% commented that too much money was spent on athletics and 21% commented excessive funds were allocated for administrative positions. Anecdotal comments included opinions of excessive spending on large flat screen TV's for cafeterias, prepackaged programs, unneeded buildings, extravagant buildings and ineffective high paid consultants.
- The overwhelming needs members listed, when asked what types of resources were necessary in order to improve instruction, related to technology needs (computers, internet speed, broadband, "working" technology) and additional paraprofessionals to assist in the classroom. Other needs mentioned several times were assistant principals, effective discipline support and training, CCSS resources and smaller class sizes.
- When asked what was working, 23% commented the remedial intervention efforts were resulting in little to no success. However 77% reported having effective intervention programs in their schools. Several ASTA members listed initiatives such as Response to Intervention (RTI), Reading Recovery, credit recovery efforts, after school & lunchtime tutoring efforts, Achieve 3,000, Renaissance Place and the use of Student Support Teams to collaborate and plan interventions as having a positive impact in their schools. Most of the effective initiatives listed were established through collaborative teacher and administrator efforts and designed to meet the unique needs of their students.
- As seen in Figure 1, experiences related to issues of professional development, TESS, CCSS, technology and alternative learning environments vary greatly. This could reflect either inadequate funding and/or ineffective allocation of 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 public school type. We look forward to working with the state in providing insight into the impact of funding issues and decision-making. Two things are clear from ASTA members' feedback, 1) Serious discrepancies related to issues that impact student learning still exist. 2) Teachers and other education professionals must have a stronger voice with regard to adequacy. Funding systems should be transparent and shared with the professionals on the frontlines.

Thank you for this opportunity. We look forward to working with policy makers in their efforts to improve education in Arkansas.

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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 state wide and nationally. ASTA is a state chapter of the Association of American Educators.*

Figure 1. Excerpt from the ASTA Spring 2014 Member Survey on TESS, CCSS, Health Insurance & Adequacy

	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Unsure	Somewhat Agree	Agree
I regularly observe areas where my district could align funds to better meet student learning needs and retain high quality teachers.	8%	8%	25%	38%	20%
My district has adequate resources to provide technology for teachers in the classroom.	23	14	7	37	19
Alternative Learning Environments (ALE's) are designed to help schools educate students with special needs. My district allocates adequate resources to ALE services and environments.	15	18	26	24	17
The professional development provided by my district or cooperative is relevant, beneficial and effective.	14	22	7	41	16
My district has adequate resources to implement the integration of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).	11	24	23	23	19
My district has adequate resources to implement the Teacher Excellence Support System (TESS).	12	13	26	29	19
The current adequacy model includes the minimum amount, currently \$150/month, the State contributes to health insurance premiums. I feel the minimum amount allocated for health insurance premiums is adequate.	53	19	20	4	3