

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

Executive Summary of Adequacy Testimony Submitted on January 26, 2018

Poverty is one of the biggest challenges Arkansas schools face. Sixty-one percent of Arkansas public school students live at an income level low enough to qualify for free and reduced-price school lunches. The state has done a great deal to help mitigate these problems since the *Lake View* Supreme Court case was decided; however, it is clear that much work remains to be done. Only 37 percent of all third-graders are reading on grade level, and achievement gaps remain far from closed: While 42 percent of white third graders could read proficiently in 2017, only 29 percent of Hispanic third graders and 22 percent of African-American third graders could do so.

There are also significant disparities within and between districts in terms of teacher quality, recruitment, and retention; school facilities; and other critical elements of adequacy and equity. We are also at risk of backtracking on some of the progress made since *Lake View*. Standards are being eroded, and now 35 percent of districts and schools have been granted a total of nearly 3,000 exemptions and waivers from many of the most important standards of school quality, driven in part by tight school budgets.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families recommends that our state address the following priorities to ensure that all children reach their full potential and to move Arkansas from adequacy to excellence:

1. Provide a full cost-of-living increase for all teachers annually, and ensure equity by increasing teacher pay in areas with the greatest need.
2. Provide adequate, equitable funding to ensure that all public school facilities exceed the minimum definition of “warm, safe, and dry.”
3. Narrow the allowable uses of National School Lunch (NSL) funding to evidence-based programs that improve the achievement and well-being of low-income students.
4. Expand funding for quality afterschool and summer programs.
5. Increase funding for special education teachers in the matrix, and fully fund catastrophic special education services based on schools’ needs.
6. Provide annual cost-of-living increases to the Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) early childhood education program.



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For decades, policymakers have emphasized the importance of improving Arkansas's workforce, average income, and educational attainment in order to become more competitive with other states for jobs and resources. However, it is now 2018, and we remain a poor state with one of the highest child poverty rates in the country. More than one in four Arkansas children lives below the federal poverty level. Sixty-one percent of Arkansas public school students live at an income level low enough to qualify for free and reduced-price school lunches.

Although poverty is more severe in some places than others, it affects children and families in every county in Arkansas. Poverty also disproportionately impacts children and families of color, due to a long history of policies and attitudes that have limited their economic and educational progress and their ability to pass down wealth from one generation to the next.

Because our state has prioritized massive tax cuts and other counterproductive policies and programs over increased investments in public education and quality of life, Arkansas remains near the bottom of states in academic achievement and higher education completion. We have a long way to go in ensuring that all children can read on grade-level by the end of the third grade—a benchmark that only 37 percent of our third-graders were able to meet on the 2017 ACT Aspire. Research shows that being able to read at grade level by the end of the third grade is critical to future success in the rest of K-12 schooling and beyond. This challenge is the reason that we continue

to work with the Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and other partners to ensure that all children develop strong reading and non-cognitive skills through quality early childhood education, afterschool and summer programs to reduce summer learning loss, and policies and programs to reduce chronic absence and keep kids healthy and in the classroom, ready to learn.

Poverty is one of the biggest challenges Arkansas schools face, and schools cannot overcome this challenge alone. Students who live in poverty need more resources and support than their higher-income peers. These children often come to school hungry, tired, and without appropriate clothing. They miss more school due to health problems. They lose ground due to lack of affordable, high-quality early childhood education and afterschool and summer programs.

The state has done a great deal to help mitigate these problems since the *Lake View* Supreme Court case was decided; however, it is clear that much work remains to be done.

Achievement gaps remain far from closed. While 42 percent of white third graders could read proficiently in 2017, only 29 percent of Hispanic third graders and 22 percent of African-American third graders could do so.

Based on a strong body of research that has been done over the years, we know what works to improve educational outcomes, and our public investment should reflect that. While the

state has made progress in the years following Lake View, we are at risk of backtracking on some of that progress. Standards are being eroded, and now 35 percent of districts and schools have been granted a total of nearly 3,000 exemptions and waivers from many of the most important standards of school quality, driven in part by tight school budgets.

For over 40 years, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families has conducted nonpartisan research and analysis to identify solutions and spread the word about best practices to improve achievement for all our students. AACF recommends that our state address the following priorities to ensure that all children reach their full potential and to move Arkansas from adequacy to excellence.

1. Provide a full cost-of-living increase for all teachers annually, and ensure equity by increasing teacher pay in areas with the greatest need.

Research shows that poverty is the biggest out-of-school factor affecting achievement, and teacher quality is the biggest in-school factor. Unfortunately, we're not paying our teachers fair and competitive salaries to do one of the most important jobs in our economy. During the last adequacy process, the Bureau of Legislative Research projected that schools would need a 2.5 percent COLA just to maintain the status quo. Instead, the legislature appropriated less than half of that amount, a level inadequate to attract and retain the best employees to take on the most challenging jobs, especially in hard-to-staff areas and subjects. Perhaps it should not be surprising that there has also been a sharp decline in the number of teaching candidates in Arkansas over the past several years.

The state must also address the significant disparities in teacher quality, recruitment, and retention between poorer and wealthier districts, as mandated by the Supreme Court. The wealthiest school districts typically pay

far higher salaries than poorer districts, making it extremely difficult for lower wealth areas to attract and retain the best teachers and staff. The average teacher salary ranged from \$35,132 to \$59,732 in 2015—a difference of \$24,600.

In addition, the state has barely increased the minimum salary schedule since 2007. In 2010, there was a \$13,763 disparity in minimum teacher salaries between the lowest- and highest-paying districts; by 2015, the disparity had grown to \$17,256. All teachers, regardless of where they teach, must be paid a competitive salary in order to ensure that all students receive an adequate, equitable education, at a bare minimum.

2. Provide adequate, equitable funding to ensure that all public school facilities exceed the minimum definition of “warm, safe, and dry.”

The Special Masters who reported to the state Supreme Court in 2005 noted 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.” A drive through the Delta would quickly prove to any observer that this is not the current reality across Arkansas schools.

AACF provided video documentation of the disparity in school facilities to the Education Committees in 2013, and little has changed since then. Many districts have buildings that should have been renovated or replaced years ago. Instead, they have patched facilities to meet the lowest possible standard of “warm, safe, and dry,” a stark contrast to districts that have the tax base to provide modern facilities through major renovations or new construction. 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. And diverting funding from other educational needs, such as teacher health insurance, has not been a sensible or sustainable solution.

The biennial educational adequacy study should conduct a comprehensive reassessment of facility needs, particularly in poor property wealth school districts in rural areas. The state should also adopt new facilities standards, which have not been updated in the past 10 years, to incorporate new research on technology, collaborative learning, integrated career and technical education programs, and school climate and culture. Facilities *do* have an impact on academic achievement, and we should be preparing our students for the future in facilities that are built for the demands of the 21st century, not the previous one.

3. Narrow the allowable uses of National School Lunch (NSL) funding to evidence-based programs that improve the achievement and well-being of low-income students.

Act 1467 of 2013 said that NSL funding should be limited to the most strongly-researched strategies in reducing the achievement gap. In 2014, the Bureau of Legislative Research researched which educational programs show the best outcomes and identified quality afterschool and summer programs, quality early childhood education, and tutoring. However, many districts are still spending NSL funding on a wide array of other programs that do not show similar results.

The list of allowable NSL uses has expanded dramatically since NSL was created in response to the *Lake View* decision. We must ensure that the majority of NSL dollars are used for programs that effectively support the students they were intended to help, by narrowing the range of over 30 allowable uses to programs with proven results for children in poverty. AACF has studied this issue for over a decade and can provide a wealth of research and

recommendations for the most cost-effective interventions.

4. Expand funding for quality afterschool and summer programs.

Middle-class kids participate in many out-of-school activities that enrich and reinforce what they have learned during the regular school day. Without afterschool and summer programs, lower-income students not only do not receive this enrichment but also lose much of what they gain in school. Research shows that students attending afterschool programs improve their school attendance, are less likely to drop out of school, and are more likely to pursue higher education. Two-thirds of the achievement gap between lower and higher-income youth results from unequal access to summer learning opportunities. Youth not attending quality afterschool and summer programs are more likely to be involved in criminal activity, drink alcohol, smoke, and engage in sexual activity.

In 2011, the legislature passed the Positive Youth Development Act (PYD) to create a quality framework for afterschool and summer programs. However, this important Act has yet to be funded, leaving thousands of students without a safe place to learn and thrive while their families are at work. In 2017, the legislature added \$3 million in categorical funding to allow districts to apply to use extra funds for preschool, afterschool and summer programs, or tutoring. This was an especially promising move and one that should be expanded to serve more students in need.

5. Increase funding for special education teachers in the matrix, and fully fund catastrophic special education services based on schools' needs.

As the state's Special Education Task Force documented in 2016, schools need significantly more funding to adequately serve students with special needs. The state should consider following Picus and Odden's latest recommendation of increasing the current

funding matrix to 3.3 special education teachers and 3.3 special education aides per 500 special education students, instead of the current 2.9 teachers per 500 students.

The Task Force also found that districts needed an additional \$20 million in funding each year to cover the increasing costs of providing catastrophic special education services for students who need intensive support in the classroom. Funding for special education students is currently embedded in the funding matrix, which assumes all schools have the same special education demands. However, there is wide variation in the number and severity of special education needs being served across districts. As the University of Arkansas's Office for Education Policy has recommended, allocating funding based on the needs of the students actually enrolled in each school would ensure that special education funds are spent on the students for whom they were intended and decrease the need for reimbursement through catastrophic funding.

6. Provide annual cost-of-living increases to the Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) early childhood education program.

The foundation for success in K-12 education is laid in a child's earliest years. The General Assembly recognized this truth when it appropriated \$100 million for the Arkansas Better Chance pre-K program in 2001—above and beyond what it was required to do by the state Supreme Court as a part of the *Lake View* decision. Since that time, Arkansas has become a national leader in pre-K education standards.

But from 2009 to 2017, pre-K has essentially been flat funded. While the Governor did approve a \$3 million funding increase during the last legislative session, our ABC programs still have a lot of lost ground to make up in terms of teacher salaries, facilities funding, professional development, and other needs. Arkansas pre-K is also only serving a fraction of 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. Even middle-class families are struggling to find affordable, quality programs for their children.

Early childhood education is an even more effective investment of public funds than K-12, because brain science shows that the most rapid brain development is from birth to age five. A study by the National Institute for Early Education Research also shows that the state of Arkansas would save over \$26 million by 2030 by investing in quality pre-K for the 4-year-olds who qualify for and aren't currently served by our program. You have the power to decide that this crucial support for learning be incorporated into the state's definition of an "adequate" education.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families recognizes the hard work that the members and staffs of the House and Senate Education Committees, the Arkansas Department of Education, the State Board of Education, and the Governor's Office have done in improving educational opportunities for all students. We look forward to helping you move Arkansas from adequacy to excellence in the years to come.

