

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

**Continuing Adequacy Evaluation Act of 2004**

**By**

**The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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:

- **Invest in our state's shared vision for public education.** We urge the Education Committee to continue using the recommendations of the *ForwARd Arkansas* vision as a blueprint to prioritize public investment towards the goal of educational excellence in Arkansas. We believe the successful implementation of the *ForwARd* vision will transform the state's public education system to be one of the best in the nation. As a result, Arkansas's economy would thrive as the state competes globally as a creative and industrial hub.
- **Invest early to ensure all students are prepared for early school success.** We believe that investment in high-quality summer and after school learning and pre-kindergarten programs are critical to helping aspiring Arkansas readers reach the critical milestone of third grade reading proficiency. We urge the Committee to provide continued leadership in directing additional NSLA resources to evidence-based programs and supports that move the needle on early literacy.
- **Address barriers that prevent opportunity for all students.** The Foundation believes that all Arkansans should have access to the resources they need to be successful in pursuing educational attainment, regardless of their age, level of ability, gender, race, or geographic location. To ensure our state is continuing to meet its commitment to an adequate public education, the Foundation believes we need further research and analysis of our state's school funding formula to ensure equity.

## TESTIMONY

Greetings. My name is Sherece West-Scantlebury and I am the president and CEO of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation.

### **Expecting More of Our Education System: WRF's Commitment**

In 1956, Governor Rockefeller made an unprecedented commitment of \$1.5 million to redevelop his local school district in Morrilton to become a model for modern rural education. With investments in teacher quality, curriculum and instruction, and state of the art school facilities, Governor Rockefeller became a leader for innovation in education. As governor, he sought to improve our systems in the state to ensure that all Arkansans thrived

Building on the legacy of Governor Rockefeller, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation (WRF) is a champion for a public education system that supports all Arkansas children. For nearly 45 years, WRF has invested in the development of models, research, and policies that seek to improve educational outcomes for our students. Since its establishment, the Foundation has provided more than \$150 million in grants to move the needle in our state.

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 support Arkansas in becoming one of the nation's highest ranking states in measures of child and family well-being.

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 invest in **a shared vision** for public education.
- The state needs to **invest early** to ensure all students are prepared for early school success.
- We must address barriers that prevent **opportunity for all students**.

### **A Shared Vision for Public Education: *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 now a statewide movement of parents, educators, policymakers, business leaders, and engaged residents.

*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 report [ForwARd Arkansas: A New Vision for Arkansas Education](#). We have included the entire *ForwARd* vision document as a part of the official record of the Committee.

Over the last several years, the Education Committee has provided valuable leadership to begin to address the *ForwARd* recommendations. In particular, the Foundation commends new public investment in proven education strategies such as high-quality pre-K and out of school learning opportunities that move the needle for our state's future workforce and leaders.

### **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 are prepared for school success. That is why the Foundation invested significant resources in the *Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (AR-GLR)* with the goal that every Arkansas student read proficiently by the end of third grade. The report [Full Speed Ahead: 2017 Progress Report on Grade-Level Reading In Arkansas](#) shares the state's progress in reaching the *AR-GLR* goal and outlines the call to action for families, educators, business leaders and policymakers.

The report makes some several recommendations for improving third grade reading proficiency in Arkansas:

- Strengthen parent and community engagement: Provide caregivers with the support and resources needed to be their child's first teachers and most important advocates
- Improve school readiness: Expand access to high-quality early childhood education and evidence-based home visiting programs
- Reduce summer learning loss: Invest in high-quality summer and youth development programs
- Decrease chronic absence: Ensure our children are in the classroom every day and able to learn

The entire *Full Speed Ahead* document is included as a part of the official record of the Committee.

The Foundation commends Governor Hutchinson and the Committee for your leadership to ensure reading proficiency is a priority in every Arkansas community through new policies that support interventions to aspiring readers, hold our educators and schools accountable for

demonstrating competency in the science of reading instruction, and ensure parents have access to critical data on their child's progress in reading.

### **Opportunity for all students: Educational Equity**

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

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.

### **Recommendations**

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:

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