

**Written Testimony Submitted to
Arkansas State General Assembly
House and Senate Interim
Education Committee (the Committee)**

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 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.

Problem

As a state, we must acknowledge our current reality:

- **We have built a system to create inequitable outcomes.** Our education system is operating exactly as it was designed. The performance of our students is not due to their own deficiency or that of their parents or neighborhood. If we want our children to receive an excellent education, we need to build a system that supports that vision.
- **We are attempting to address the needs of children without acknowledging the families and communities in which they live.** The health and stability of children's homes and communities is as much a driver of student outcomes as factors like classroom instruction, and our public systems must focus on supporting students and their families at the same time in order to effectively improve student outcomes.
- **We are not investing early enough.** We know that the physical architecture of the brain that defines what and how a person can learn in the future is built in the first few years of life. We also know that investments in early childhood have a high return and that remediation later in life is more difficult and costly. Yet, our public education system begins after that foundation is laid.

Solutions

Given these problems, we can and we should:

- **Seek excellence instead of adequacy.** Adequacy is not adequate. A commitment to excellence is necessary to achieve equitable outcomes for students in Arkansas. This Committee needs to commission a deep and comprehensive study to define excellence for Arkansas schools and the funding necessary to get there and commit itself to a complete dismantling and rebuilding of our education system rather than minor tweaks.
- **Invest in a shared vision for public education.** We engaged thousands of Arkansans through ForwARd Arkansas and urge the Committee to listen to them and continue using [ForwARd Arkansas's recommendations](#) as a blueprint for public investment.
- **Invest early to ensure all students are prepared for early school success.** This Committee needs to acknowledge and support a prenatal-to-age-eight strategy to ensure all children have the foundations they need to succeed in school and life.
- **Use a formal equity analysis to strengthen policymaking.** Arkansas policymakers should use an equity analysis as a formal part of the policymaking process to ensure Arkansas students attain the skills and education needed to support their families and communities.

We Exist to Relentlessly Pursue Equity in Arkansas

Earlier this year, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation changed its mission for the first time in decades. Why? Because our old one wasn't getting us where we wanted to go fast enough. Governor Winthrop Rockefeller envisioned a thriving and prosperous Arkansas that benefits all Arkansans. Although the Foundation has moved the needle over its 45 year history, we have not reached his vision for Arkansas.

The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation now exists to relentlessly pursue economic, educational, social, ethnic, and racial equity for all Arkansans. By all Arkansans we mean everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, immigration status, language, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, education, or income. **We know that we cannot reach Governor Rockefeller's vision without an explicit and intentional focus on equity and neither can the state of Arkansas.**

What Our Grantmaking and Research Tells Us

During the era of *Lake View*, WRF provided important data and leadership around what the state needed to do to remedy the constitutional deficiencies in the state's education system. WRF funded [Tax Options for Arkansas: Funding Education After the Lake View Case](#) in 2003 that outlined the consequences of tax options and/or education spending cuts to the state's education system and the importance of maintaining an adequate system of schools, as the state is constitutionally mandated to provide.

The Foundation invested in creating a shared vision for public education in Arkansas through *ForwARd Arkansas (ForwARd)*. In 2014, the Foundation launched *ForwARd* in partnership with the Walton Family Foundation and the Arkansas State Board of Education. *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 improve outcomes in public education in Arkansas. *ForwARd* released bold research in the report [ForwARd Arkansas: A New Vision for Arkansas Education](#) that found Arkansas's schools are not sufficiently resourced to perform at the aspired level of educational excellence.

The Foundation has invested early to ensure all students are prepared for early school success. For the past 8 years, the Foundation has supported 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 Foundation commends Governor Asa Hutchinson and the Committee for its previous leadership to ensure reading proficiency is a priority in every Arkansas community through 1) new policies that support interventions to aspiring readers, 2) holding our educators and schools accountable for demonstrating competency in the science of reading instruction, and 3) ensuring parents have access to critical data on their child's progress in reading. We believe these evidence-based policies and practices are critical to advance the urgent issue of reading proficiency for every Arkansas student.

The Foundation has invested in grassroots organizations and coalitions so that parents, students, teachers, and families have a say in how our education system is defined in Arkansas. For nearly a decade, advocacy organizations and coalitions in the state have advocated for increased accountability for how schools spend National School Lunch (NSL) funding. Most recently, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families released [research and recommendations](#) to ensure targeted funding like NSL produces equitable outcomes. We believe NSL funds should be used exclusively for evidence-based programs with proven track records for improving achievement of low-income students, such as pre-K and high-quality after-school and summer programs.

Our Recommendations

Educational equity will exist when all Arkansans can attain the skills and education needed to support their families and communities, especially those striving to move out of poverty. The recommendations below emerge from the Foundation's grantmaking, and we believe are necessary to achieving our founder's vision of a prosperous and equitable Arkansas. *We should note that this testimony does not reflect a position on any pending legislation.*

- **Seek excellence instead of adequacy.** Adequacy is not adequate. A commitment to excellence is necessary to achieve equitable outcomes for students in Arkansas. This Committee needs to commission a deep and comprehensive study to define excellence for Arkansas schools and the funding necessary to get there, and commit itself to completely dismantling and rebuilding our education system rather than minor tweaks.
- **Invest in our state's shared vision for public education.** We urge the Committee to continue using [ForwARd Arkansas's recommendations](#) as a blueprint to prioritize public investment. 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.
- **Invest early to ensure all students are prepared for early school success.** We know that that the architecture of children's brains are built in the first few years of life, and investments in education, health, communities, and families in these early years are critical to reaching important milestones like third-grade reading proficiency and long-term student success. All families need to be plugged into a reliable grid of resources to thrive in school and life, and this Committee needs to acknowledge and support a prenatal-to-age-eight strategy to ensure all children have the foundations they need to succeed in school and life.
- **Use a formal equity analysis to strengthen policymaking.** Without an equity analysis, policies that may be universally positive may not adequately address the challenges of communities and populations that have traditionally been left behind. We believe Arkansas policymakers should use an equity analysis as a formal part of the policymaking process to ensure Arkansas students attain the skills and education needed to support

their families and communities. Specifically, policymakers should use an equity analysis as part of a comprehensive adequacy study.

Where Do We Go From Here

In Governor Rockefeller's first inaugural address he stated:

*I ask you to join me in pledging to work as no men have so that Arkansas may enter into a new era of excellence. To launch a far-reaching quest for quality in which we shall no longer be content merely to exalt in our potential or measure our progress in comparison with our past. This era of excellence can come only if we recognize education as one of the vital foundation blocks. **Until we can provide quality education for all, whatever else we build cannot be fully meaningful.***

Arkansans deserve fair access and opportunities to gain a quality education and a secure financial future. **We hope you will join us in our imperative to dismantle and reconfigure our educational system to create a thriving and prosperous Arkansas.** Thank you again to the Committee for providing this opportunity.