



Educator Panels

This brief provides a description of the panels and selection process, then a discussion of key themes by topic area: (1) college and career readiness, (2) the impacts of being economically disadvantaged on performance and resource needs, (3) the ability of schools and districts to attract and retain staff, (4) resources in the funding matrix, and (5) additional funding outside of the matrix for specific purposes.

Description of Panels and Selection Process

The study team convened over 20 educator panels in September, including: (1) 10 district and charter system administrator panels, two per region (Central, Northwest, Northeast, Southwest, Southeast), (2) two CFO/business manager panels, (3) four school administrator panels, and (4) six teacher panels. The study team asked all superintendents/charter system administrators and professional association leaders to nominate panelists, then sent an invitation to all nominees to participate. About 125 educators participated in the panels, of those 85 were district/charter system administrators and CFOs/Business Managers. Getting school level participation was difficult given the challenges of this fall for schools. Participants were from all regions in the state.

Key Themes from Educator Panels

College and Career Readiness: Educators discussed the need to emphasize career readiness, not just college readiness. Many educators felt that the current standards and requirements are geared towards college, and that the focus has been on every student going to college for the past two decades. One educator noted that even the phrase “college and career readiness” indicates the priority, since college comes first (even though career should alphabetically). Similarly, another educator said that it should be Career Readiness, since all students are working towards a career, the path that gets them there varies. Educators made a number of suggestions including: (1) incorporating a demonstration of skills, such as using ACT WorkKeys, (2) additional flexibility in current standards and graduation requirements to fit their path, and (3) more CTE, AP, concurrent enrollment courses, as well as internships and apprenticeships.

Educators also stressed that every student should leave high school with a next step and plan—regardless of whether that is college (2- or 4-year), a technical program, military service, or an entry level career position. Some districts reported having career coaches, advisors or counselors to help develop relationships, having one-on-one discussions to establish next steps and monitor concrete progress towards plan. Further, educators said that certificates or concurrent/AP credit should be a component of progress toward the plan, and that career exposure is important in younger grades to show them possible paths and ground discussions of next steps.

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When asked about components of a definition of college and career readiness, educators felt that requirements for academic content knowledge was well addressed, but that a strong focus on behaviors, capabilities and skills is also needed. This includes: showing up on time, time management, communication, critical thinking, perseverance to complete a task when things get hard, problem solving, self-advocacy, financial literacy, and reading and writing in a professional or technical setting (including resume writing). Some districts have worked with industries to identify necessary skills and have created “profiles of a graduate” which demonstrates what their students are able to do/know after graduation.

Staff Attraction and Retention: Educators reported that salaries were the key attraction and retention issue in many districts, and that large salary disparities exist across the state, particularly in small and rural districts. Educators added that districts often compete with districts in bordering states for teachers, so the salaries must be competitive not just within the state. There was also discussion of the minimum salary increase, districts who received the state funding had concerns about sustainability of increases over time and those who did not are no longer as competitive compared to other districts that received the funding. Other attraction and retention issues included: access to amenities, jobs for spouses, housing availability and teacher burnout/workload.

When asked about hard to fill positions, educators reported: special education teachers, CTE teachers, Secondary math and science teachers, bus drivers and custodians and nurses. Reasons included competitiveness of salaries, the number of teachers going into specialty fields, and the burden of licensure requirements. Educators offered suggested solutions to resolve teacher shortage in hard to fill position areas including: (1) “grow your own” efforts as teachers from the community are more likely to stay, (2) support for existing teachers or paraprofessionals to pursue additional education and licensure, (3) revisiting licensure requirements, such as the reciprocity of teaching licenses from other states, and (4) considering loan forgiveness programs to encourage more students, particularly minority students, to go into teaching and into specialized and hard to staff areas.

Addressing the Needs of Economically Disadvantaged Students: Educators discussed how schools have to meet students' physical and emotional needs before they can meet their educational needs and as such schools focus on developing positive relationships and providing necessities like clothing and food, as well as physical and mental health services. Academic needs can then be addressed through strong Tier 1 instruction, with additional RTI support for Tier 2 and Tier 3 students, including small group instruction, pull out interventions, and tutoring after school in some districts. Educators suggested providing universal preschool to help close readiness gaps and focusing on career exploration and career readiness to break the poverty cycle by getting students excited about their future through broadening their horizons.

Resources in the Funding Matrix: Educators stressed that the matrix is a revenue model and not an expenditure model, and expressed concern when districts are expected to resource schools exactly as provided in the matrix. Further, unfunded mandates are an issue that take general education funding from the funding matrix away from intended purposes, such as to fulfill dyslexia requirements, and that there is an unfunded mandate law in Arkansas that's not being met.

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Areas not currently addressed in funding matrix that educators believe should be: (1) school Resource Officers (SROs) and school safety, and (2) student mental health. Many educators also noted that the matrix does not align with accreditation requirements, including that an Assistant Principal is required at 0.5 FTE in a school of 500 and that a librarian is supposed to be full-time, but funded at 0.85. Other modifications to existing matrix resources suggested: (1) increasing FTE for school secretary to 2.0, (2) increasing technology funding, (3) revisiting the amount provided for substitutes, supervisory aides, and maintenance and operations in light of minimum wage increases, and (4) providing some flexibility, cushioning or rounding to teacher FTEs as classroom maximum sizes in some instances are too close to funding levels, particularly for kindergarten, and students do not come in equal packages. Educators also noted that principal and secretary salary levels in the matrix have not been increased for the past three years (FY19-21) and that the raise in insurance benefit costs has districts putting increases for funded salaries into insurance benefits.

Additional Funding Outside of the Matrix

Enhanced Student Achievement (ESA) funding: in many districts, a portion of ESA funds are used to support other student groups and fill in “missing” matrix resources, such as providing an SRO, mental health/counselor, or technology resources for all students, and providing resources specifically for special education, English Learners and ALE. Educators often discussed how the “cliffs” in tiered ESA funding are an issue and that funding should be smoother, as districts on the cusps face challenges, it creates inequities, and that the difference in needs for each student were not at the same scale as the differences in funding between the tiers.

High cost/catastrophic special education funding: educators indicated that funding for this categorical is a fixed dollar amount that is split by the number of applicants, not actual costs/student need. Educators reported that the funding is not predictable and does not cover the cost of serving students. Special education services are required by IEPs and federal maintenance of effort requirements, so unmet funding need means that dollars are pulled from other categories or the general fund.

Other funding areas addressed included:

- English Learners funding: educators reported that this funding was not sufficient to meet the needs of these students, so similar to above, districts end up using ESA funds to cover.
- Alternative Learning Environments: educators also felt that this was not fully funded, and the requirement for 20 days of continuous service is a difficulty.
- Capital: district level educators felt there was not enough available funding to address all of the capital needs in the state, and that shifting priorities of warm, safe and dry vs. new construction, and resulting prioritization of projects helps some districts and harms others. Further, educators reported that not all districts are in communities that will support millages to pay for capital projects.