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# THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN ARKANSAS 2023 REPORT

Growing Together for a Stronger Future



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# **An Urgent Need and Opportunity**

# An Urgent Need and Opportunity

**The current state of education in Arkansas is a picture of considerable challenge.** Data on student performance and feedback from communities across the state reveal severe and persistent issues that were illuminated and exacerbated by the COVID pandemic – **fewer than half of students in the state are demonstrating proficiency in reading or math.** Too many students experience serious learning gaps, and these gaps are even wider for students of color and economically disadvantaged students. In the third school year since the COVID-19 pandemic began, students are still struggling to recover from earlier learning disruptions. Further, the mental and emotional issues that existed pre-pandemic worsened during the pandemic.

The economic conditions in the state further exacerbate the challenges in education. **Statewide, 16.3 percent of Arkansans are in poverty.<sup>1</sup> More than one in three families with children live in asset limited, income constrained but employed (ALICE) households. Meaning, they live above the Federal Poverty Level but lack the earnings to cover basic budgetary needs.<sup>2</sup>** Between 2010 and 2020, Arkansas added 95,606 new residents for a total of 3,011,524 Arkansans, but growth was confined to a few existing population centers. Meanwhile, populations in the majority of rural Arkansas communities are declining, as is enrollment in their public schools. Finally, a 2021 survey of Arkansas businesses rated the “availability of workers with appropriate skills” as the top issue facing the business community.<sup>3</sup>

**Despite the challenges, the foundation exists for dramatic improvement in Arkansas education.** Overall, Arkansans view schools as centers of their communities and say they have seen clear progress in the state’s education system over the past few years despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Arkansas educators are resilient and committed to students, which was never more clear than during the height of the pandemic in the face of unprecedented adversity. In recent years, the state has put foundational initiatives and policies in place to address key issues and on which we can build to accelerate progress. Arkansas is also home to a robust and engaged corporate sector that invests heavily in education and understands its importance to effectively meet growing workforce needs.

**Perhaps most importantly, Arkansans largely agree on what is most important to prepare young people for today’s world and are eager to find ways to improve the educational, career and life outcomes for their children, students, and future employees.**



## As we spoke to Arkansans across the state, it became clear that:



**Students** want to feel supported by the adults in their schools and yearn for learning experiences that are engaging and relevant to their lives now and in the future.



**Parents** want their children to be safe and healthy, to be strong readers, good communicators, and critical thinkers and have opportunities to get good jobs. They also want them to have great, caring teachers.



**Educators** want support to develop solutions that will work better for students. They want to feel valued and respected, and have more voice and agency in their schools and the broader system.



**Employers** are looking for highly qualified employees across all sectors that have strong communication, analytical, and collaboration skills, as well as persistence and resilience.

**The conditions exist in Arkansas to dramatically accelerate progress in education, and it is essential we act with urgency to do so for all Arkansas kids, as well as for the strength, health, and future of the state.**

We must start with a clear understanding of where we are, the strengths on which we can build, and where we need to go. No individual, entity, or stakeholder group can do it single handedly. We are all responsible, and it will require collective, relentless efforts, energy, and focus on what matters most for kids.

# About This Project

## Why We Launched It, What We Did, and What We Hope to Accomplish

In 2015, the Walton Family Foundation, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, and the State Board of Education launched the first State of Education in Arkansas initiative to engage a broad set of stakeholders across the state to develop a strategic plan, with students at the center, to dramatically improve education. Through a process of engaging thousands of Arkansans by survey and focus groups, seven priorities were identified: Pre-K, Teaching and Learning, Teacher Pipeline, Effective Leadership, Support Beyond the Classroom, Academically Distressed Schools, and Systems and Policies.

In the eight years since the release of the initial State of Education in Arkansas report in 2015, the landscape of education has changed. We have a better, data-informed understanding of both student needs as well as promising strategies to address key challenges from within Arkansas and from other states. With the federal adoption of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, state policy and accountability systems were enhanced to align with federal legislation. In the last eight years, the economy, industry needs, and thus career opportunities for Arkansas students have changed as well. Finally, amidst an already changing education landscape, COVID occurred. The COVID pandemic, which was unprecedented in scale and impact, disrupted nearly every facet of education in Arkansas. Students, families, and educators all felt and continue to feel the effects of the disruptions. COVID also shed light on what we already knew, the system wasn't working for many students pre-pandemic, and returning to "normal" is insufficient.

As we emerge from the height of the COVID pandemic, we believe it is both a critical and opportune time to reassess the state of Arkansas education and establish a shared understanding of where we are now - and how we move forward from here. In the summer of 2022, with the support of many partners, Forward Arkansas launched a new iteration of the State of Education in Arkansas to:

- **Assess education progress since 2015, the impacts of the COVID pandemic, and where we are today.**
- **Identify the greatest opportunities to accelerate progress for all students in the next five years.**
- **Put forth recommendations to support alignment, collaboration, and collective action around a bold vision and towards ambitious goals.**

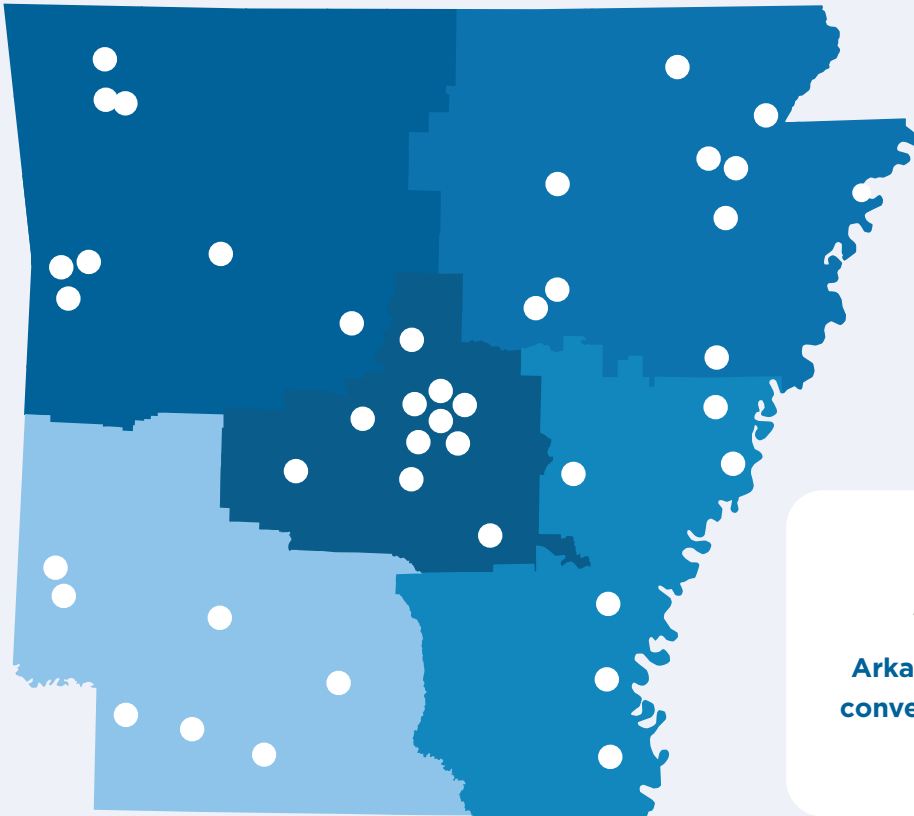
From June until December 2022, along with many partners throughout the state, we:

- **Analyzed current education and economic data.**
- **Reviewed national research, case studies from other states, and exemplars in Arkansas schools and communities.**
- **Engaged over 3,500 Arkansans, including students, parents, educators, state leaders, and business leaders for input and feedback through surveys, focus groups, and community meetings.**

As we will show throughout this iteration of the State of Education in Arkansas, we have not made dramatic progress in improving student outcomes as a state. However, essential, foundational progress has been made in many of the priority areas identified in 2015. While some priorities recommended in this report are new, many of the 2015 priorities remain. Given the changes in the educational landscape, some of the priorities have shifted and evolved. It is from this place that we gather and consider current research, data, and community voice to chart a direction and vision forward for the next five years.



## Community Meeting Locations



**3,500+**

Arkansans engaged through individual conversations, focus groups, community meetings, and surveys

## What Follows in This Report

This report is meant to help inform our state's efforts to dramatically improve education for the next five years. We will be the first to say that it does not have all of the answers. Our hope, rather, is that it will create a shared understanding of where we are as a state, elevate the urgency to act, and provide initial direction for consideration in how we do so.

We have structured the report in three main sections.

The first is **The Current State of Arkansas Education**, which consists of three primary findings informed by academic and economic data alongside the perspectives and insights of Arkansans, on the progress made since the 2015 State of Education report, and where we are currently.

In the second section, we identify **Eight Priorities to Dramatically Improve Arkansas Education**. Emerging from the findings, these are the most important elements within education to focus on for the next five years to achieve better outcomes for every Arkansas student and community.

In the final section, we propose **How We Can Collectively Move Forward** as a state. Identifying the most important priorities is the first step, but doing this alone will not lead to improvement in Arkansas education. It will be how effectively we collaborate to develop strategies and approaches for implementation, and integrate these priorities at the state, district, school, and community level that will determine the impact on students.





# **The Current State of Arkansas Education**

# The Current State of Arkansas Education

Education is critically important to Arkansans. Beyond its primary function of educating Arkansas kids, the education system is a core part of community identity. Education is also critical to enhancing economic prosperity for students and communities. Survey feedback revealed almost unanimous (90%+ of respondents) agreement that education is integral to a positive quality of life, development of good citizens, and economic strength.

However, as a state, we remain far from our goal of every Arkansas student achieving transformational academic, career, and life outcomes. At the same time, ongoing statewide initiatives and reinvigorated communities are demonstrating that foundational pieces have been put in place on which we can build to accelerate progress and improvement.

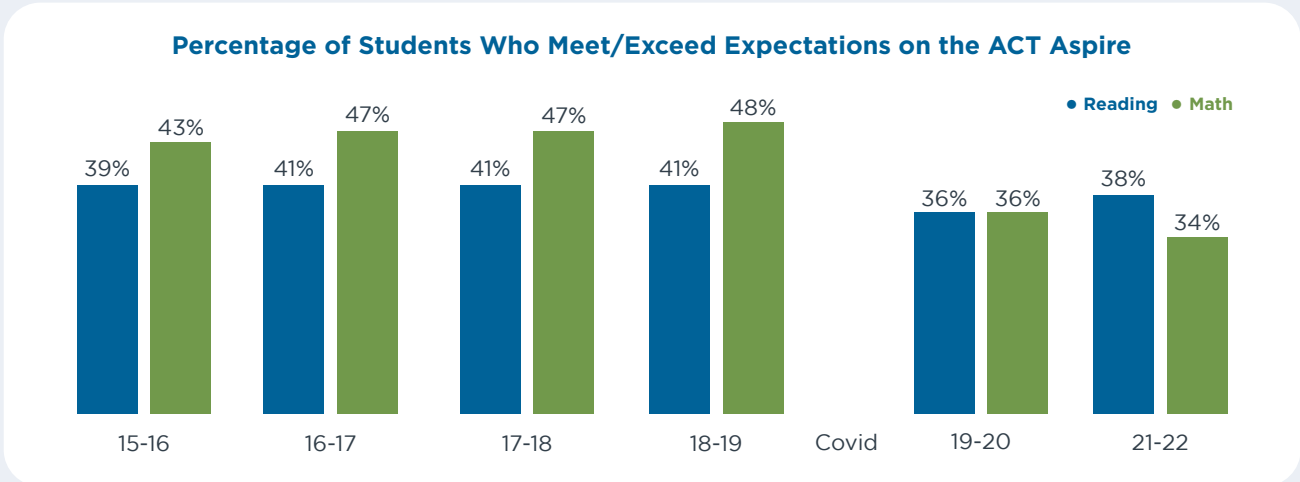
## Three primary findings emerged, through data analysis and stakeholder input, that highlight the challenges and opportunities facing education in the state today:

1. Despite slight improvements leading up to the pandemic, overall student academic outcomes were severely lagging before COVID-19 and worsened during pandemic disruptions.
2. Arkansas students are leaving K-12 unprepared for college and career opportunities.
3. Since 2015, promising initiatives have been launched to address critical and foundational issues that the state can build on to accelerate progress moving forward.



**Finding #1:** Despite slight improvements leading up to the pandemic, overall student academic outcomes in Arkansas were severely lagging before COVID-19 and worsened during pandemic disruptions.

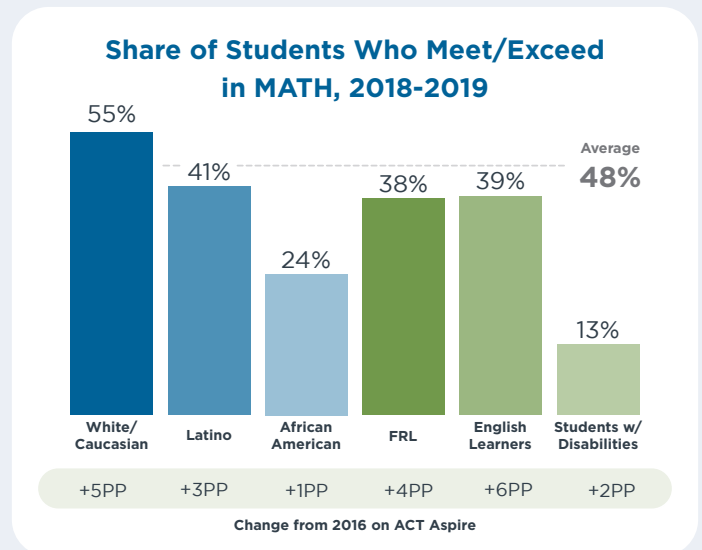
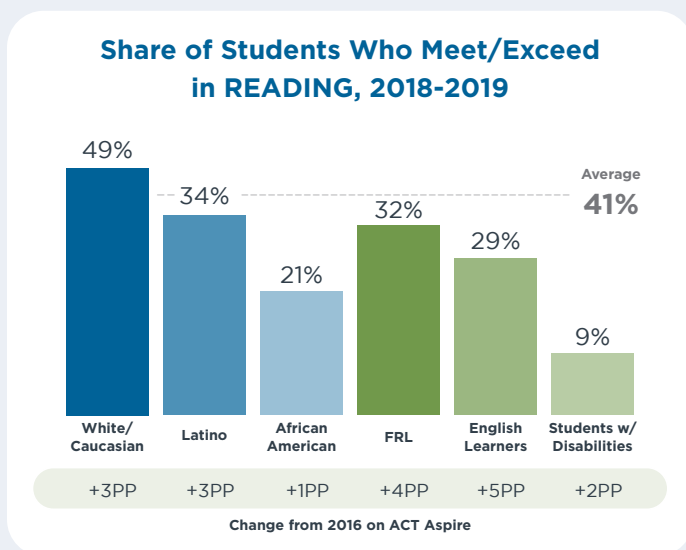
**From 2015 to 2018, Arkansas did begin to show slight improvements in achievement in reading and math as a state. However, the COVID pandemic disruptions halted and erased that progress**



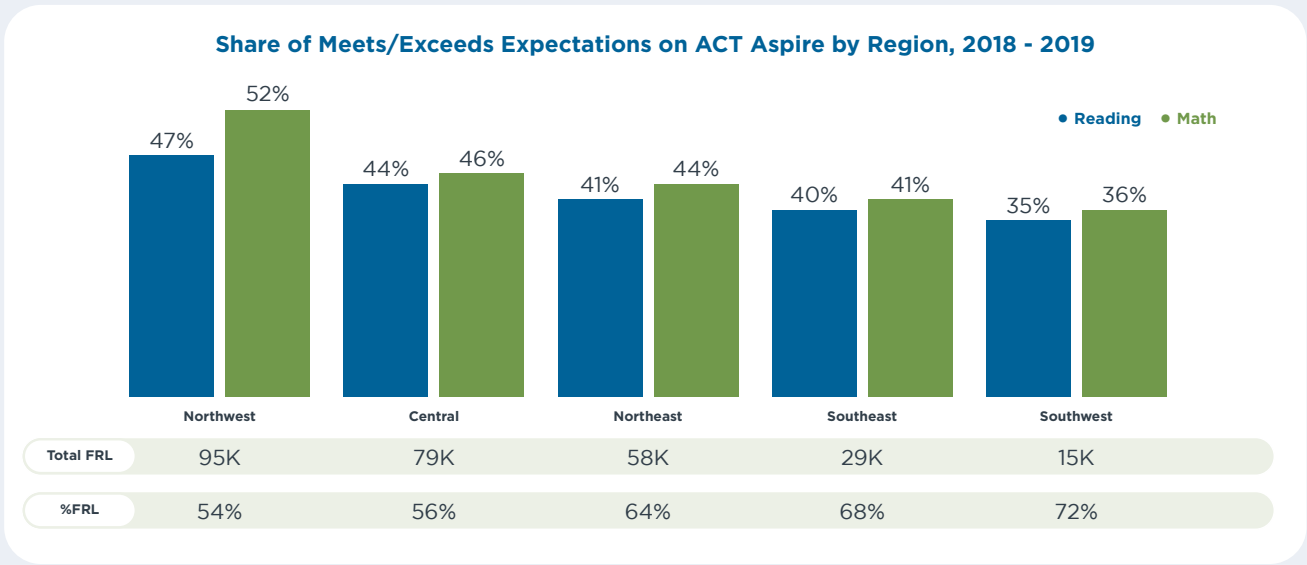
“I feel defeated. Especially when I see some of the statistics around vulnerable populations such as African American and Students with Disabilities.”

**Overall, before COVID, student academic outcomes were severely lagging, with persistent achievement gaps for certain student groups and certain regions of the state**

Before COVID, across the state on average, only 41% of students demonstrated proficiency in reading and only 48% of students demonstrated proficiency in math.<sup>4</sup> There were significantly lower rates of proficiency on the state’s assessments for students of color, English Learner students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities.

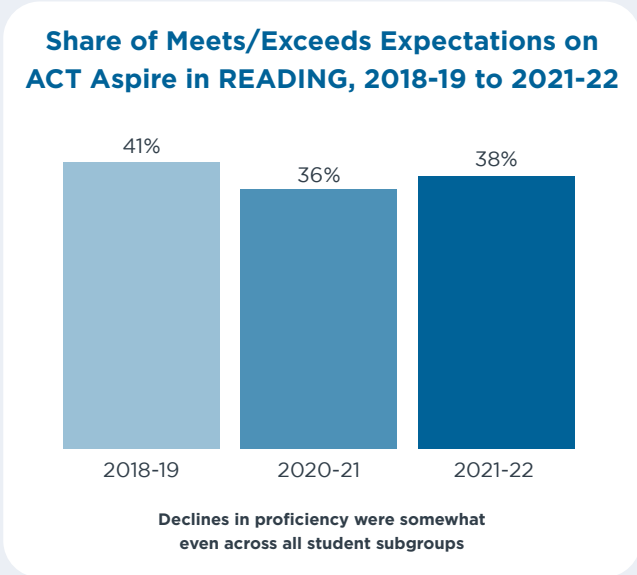



Differences in student proficiency also exist along geographic lines, with about half of students in Northwest Arkansas demonstrating reading and math proficiency compared to about one-third in the Southwest



**Student academic outcomes worsened amid COVID disruptions**

From 2018-19 to 2020-21, the state saw uniform declines in student proficiency rates of 4 to 5 percentage points (pp) in reading and 11 to 12 percentage points in math across all student groups.<sup>5</sup>





“I feel disappointed by the reading levels of our students. Reading is power, I believe that if a student can read and understand, they’ll be motivated and encouraged to continue to learn and do better.”

## Student performance rebounded in 2021-22, but has not fully recovered

ACT Aspire data for the 2021-22 school year shows that student academic achievement rebounded slightly after pandemic disruptions.<sup>6</sup> Proficiency gains in the 2021-22 school year of 2 to 3 percentage points in reading are an improvement from the prior school year, but have not yet reached pre-pandemic performance and remains far lower than what we hope for in the state.

### Arkansas's response to COVID

Stakeholders responded positively regarding the state's swift response to the pandemic, including initially moving to remote instruction, quickly returning to in-person options for students, and the tremendous commitment and perseverance of educators. During pandemic disruptions, research showed that students who participated in in-person instruction across the state fared better on student achievement metrics than their peers who remained remote or hybrid.<sup>7</sup> Arkansas had the second-highest incidence of in-person learning in the country during the 2020-21 school year, following closely behind Wyoming.<sup>8</sup>

Upon the return to in-person learning during the 2020-21 school year, the state did experience a significant 1.4% (nearly 6,500 students) decline in student enrollment due to factors related to the pandemic. Many of those students transferred out of the state or transferred to homeschool. However, the most recent data indicates that enrollment numbers have rebounded and are approaching pre-pandemic numbers.



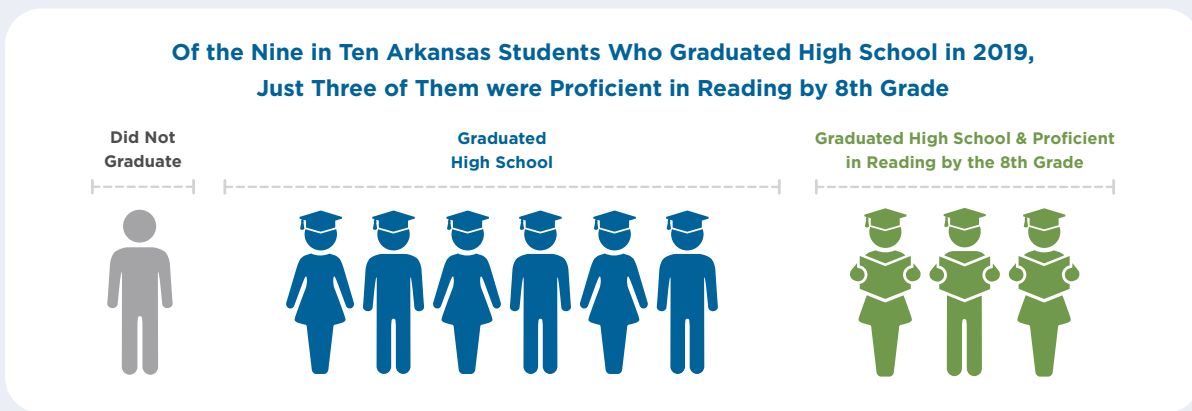
## Finding #2: Students are leaving K-12 unprepared for college and career opportunities.

Throughout this process, Arkansans vocalized common thoughts and feelings about education in their state – that students are not being adequately prepared for the high-demand jobs of today or of the future. If the state’s academic trends persist, this will have implications for Arkansas’s economic prospects. Research shows that job growth in Arkansas lags behind the neighboring states of Texas and Tennessee,<sup>9</sup> as does workforce participation. As more workers are unprepared for today’s economy, it is possible we could see higher rates of individuals opting out of the workforce, less economic development in the state, and greater demands on public systems.

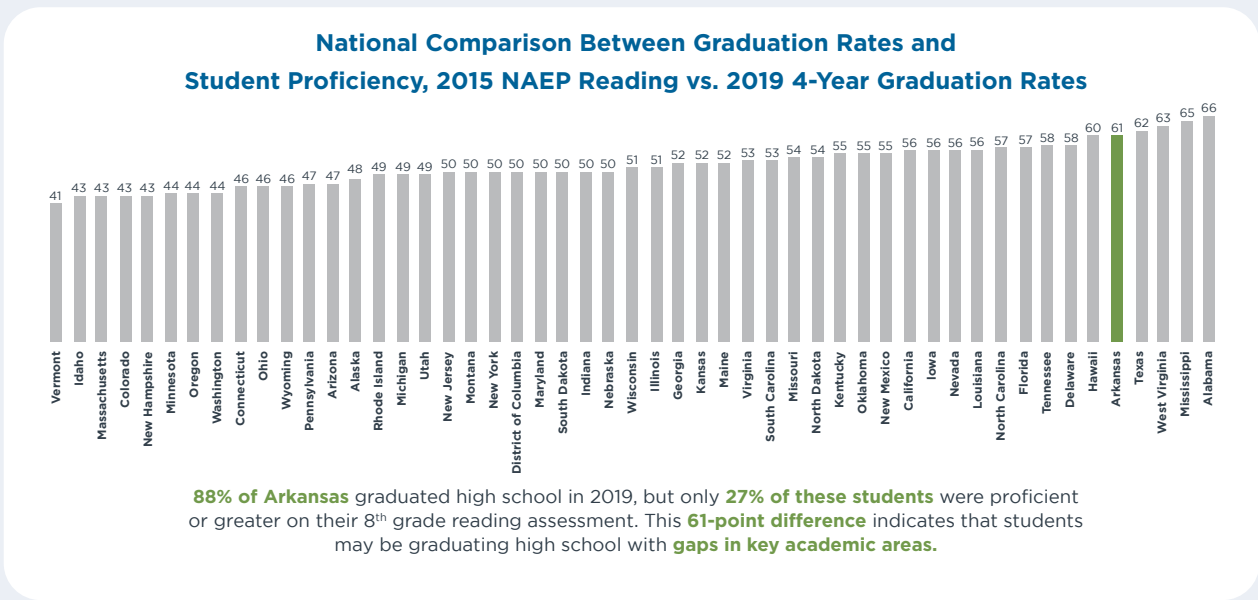
### Students are graduating high school without the skills they need

While the state has made strides in supporting students to graduation, these high graduation rates may mask persistent gaps in student academic proficiency. Students in Arkansas graduate from high school at relatively high rates: overall in 2018-19, 88% of Arkansas students graduated from high school,<sup>10</sup> as compared to the national average of 86%<sup>11</sup> (although graduation outcomes for students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners lag the state average).

**However, of the nine in ten Arkansas students who graduated high school, just three of them were proficient in reading by 8th grade, suggesting that students are graduating with significant gaps in key academic areas.**



An analysis of high school graduation rates for the class of 2019 compared to their reading proficiency rates in the 8th grade (2014-15)<sup>12</sup> reveals the 5th biggest gap in the country between graduation and academic proficiency. This gap is similar regarding graduation and math proficiency.





In community focus groups across the state, parents and other community members repeatedly expressed that their kids are not developing essential life or durable skills, such as critical thinking and communication, that are necessary to become independent and productive members of today's economy and society. Research clearly indicates the importance of these durable skills to later life outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

These sentiments were reinforced in conversations with leaders in the Arkansas business community. In an Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce report "Arkansas Advantage 2030," the business community emphasizes significant gaps in both the core (e.g., reading and writing) and durable skills of emerging employees. Availability of employees with these skills is also one of the most important factors for businesses in determining whether or not to locate in Arkansas and where to locate within the state.

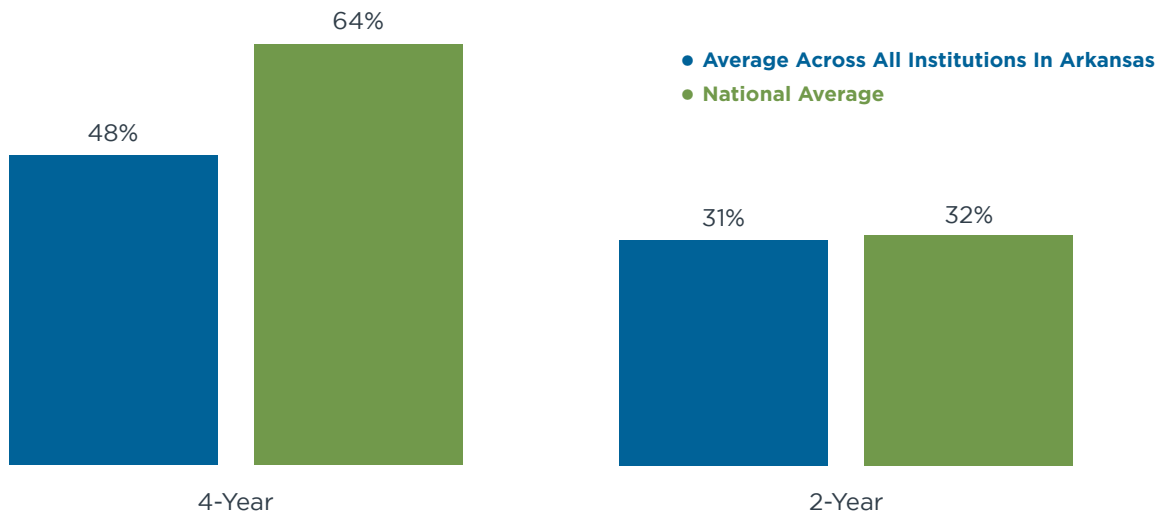


"We need to make sure that our kids graduate high school with a diploma and have future options."

### Over 50% of Arkansas high school graduates go to 2 or 4-year colleges, but only half of those complete their program and receive a degree or credential

More than half of the students who enroll in college do not continue past their second year, and graduation rates at colleges across the state are below national averages.<sup>14</sup> This is also reflected in feedback from students, families, and community members: roughly 40% of those surveyed believe that the Arkansas education system in the state today does not prepare students to succeed in their college or career pursuits.

Graduation Rate of Higher Education Institutions in Arkansas, 2020-21



**Finding #3:** Since 2015, promising initiatives have been launched to address critical and foundational issues that the state can build on to accelerate progress moving forward.

Foundational progress has been made in many key areas identified in the 2015 State of Education report, both statewide and in specific districts and communities. One example is in 2019, the state enacted the Transformation and Efficiencies Act, a significant initial step to consolidate and create efficiencies among agencies that support public education. As well, key initiatives have been launched to accelerate progress in high need, foundational areas for students. Below, we have highlighted three of the most promising areas of progress that were identified consistently by stakeholders at all levels and that are showing promising early evidence of improvement.

### **The Science of Reading and Reading Initiative for Student Excellence (R.I.S.E.)**

In 2017, the Right to Read Act (Act 1063) was introduced by the Arkansas Department of Education and key legislators based on acknowledgment of poor reading proficiency and a desire to inspire stronger readers across the state, utilizing the research-backed approach - the science of reading.

R.I.S.E. Arkansas was launched soon after. R.I.S.E. is an initiative anchored in instruction using the science of reading, and it began with a commitment to raise the share of students in grades 3-8 who are deemed “ready” on the ACT Aspire benchmark in literacy by 10% within three years.

R.I.S.E. is supported by three key goals to improve literacy proficiency:

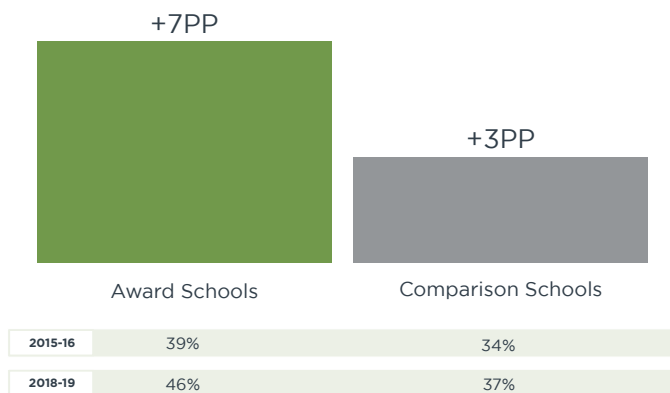
- **Instruction.** Sharpen the focus and strengthen instruction by providing robust professional learning to educators in the science of reading (e.g., R.I.S.E. Academy)
- **Community Involvement.** Create community collaboration through post-secondary programs, businesses, and community partnerships (e.g., AR Kids Read, Read Across Arkansas)
- **Inspiring a Love for Reading Across Arkansas.** Build a culture of reading by promoting reading campaigns and other activities to encourage a culture of reading and provide access to books (R.I.S.E. Schools, R.I.S.E. Community Awards)



Stakeholders across Arkansas shared positive feedback related to R.I.S.E. and its role in creating shared urgency around the need to improve literacy in the state. All schools are at some stage of implementation of R.I.S.E. as required by state law. The state also designates a select number of schools as recipients of “R.I.S.E. School Awards” based on their implementation and efforts to build and grow strong reading programs.<sup>15</sup> Pre-pandemic (2015-16 to 2018-19), students in schools that received a R.I.S.E. School Award saw improvements in third-grade reading proficiency rates that were more than twice those of students in non-award schools.<sup>16</sup>

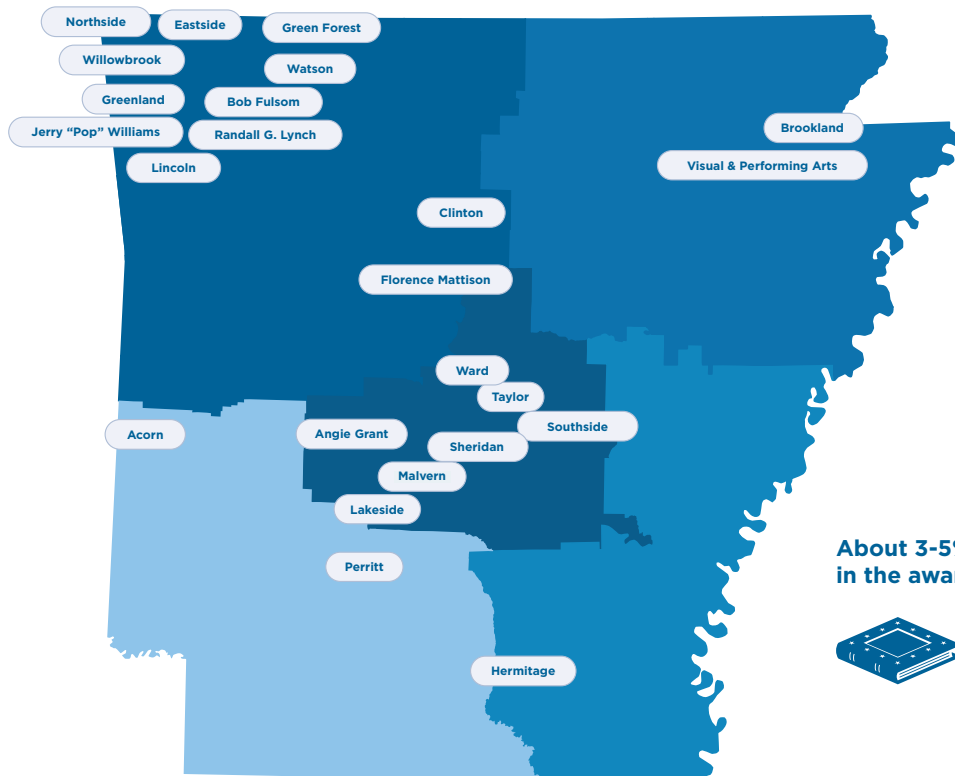
Students in the award recipient schools represent approximately 3 to 5 percent of Arkansas students, and the majority of R.I.S.E. award schools are in Northwest and Central Arkansas.

### Percentage Point Change in Share of Students Meeting Readiness Benchmark in Grade 3 Reading (2015-16 to 2018-19)



### R.I.S.E. Award School Locations

The R.I.S.E. school recognition is given to schools that incorporate the science of reading into student instruction, and build a culture of literacy in the school and community through partnerships with business leaders.



About 3-5% of AR students are enrolled in the award schools identified here.




## Career and Technical Education (CTE)

Arkansas has made significant efforts to expand the perception of and access to high-quality, industry-aligned CTE programs across the state. The state is actively engaging in work to make CTE, early college, work-based learning, and other programs that prepare students for their next step outside of high school more “the norm” rather than an alternative in the student learning experience.

Arkansas CTE offers five occupational areas: Agricultural Science and Technology, Business and Marketing Technology, Family and Consumer Sciences, STEM, and Trade and Industry. 175,131 students participated in Arkansas CTE programs at some level in 2021.<sup>17</sup>

Also, individual communities are investing in CTE programs, and some are developing state-of-the-art technical centers (e.g., Saline County Career and Technical Center, Peak Innovation Center) to provide students with more robust career exposure and experience.

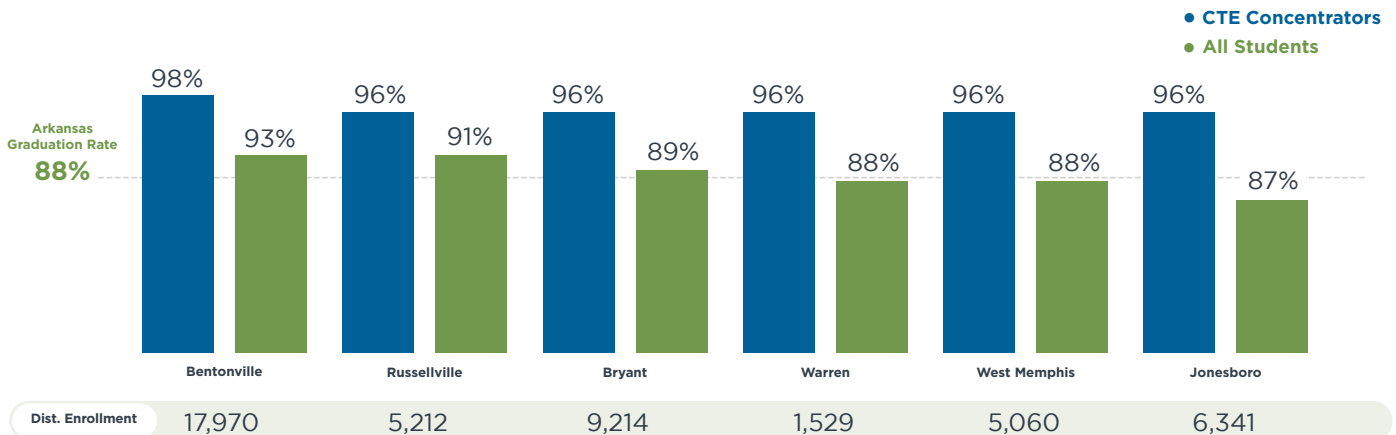


“I am excited and hopeful about the Career Technical Education programs, especially as a former CTE teacher.”

Performance data is clear regarding the benefits of CTE to students in Arkansas. For the class of 2021, on average, 95% or more of CTE concentrator students graduated from high school, ~7 percentage points higher than state averages for non-CTE concentrators.<sup>18</sup> Programs such as CTE and work-based learning also provide students with intangible benefits that likely impact their success both within and outside the classroom, including a greater connection to their school community, a plan for and connection to the world outside of K-12, and external motivation to participate and succeed in school.

### Graduation Rates for CTE Concentrators in 6 Selected Districts, 2020-21

6 districts selected as notable examples of high-performing CTE programs through conversations with CTE department

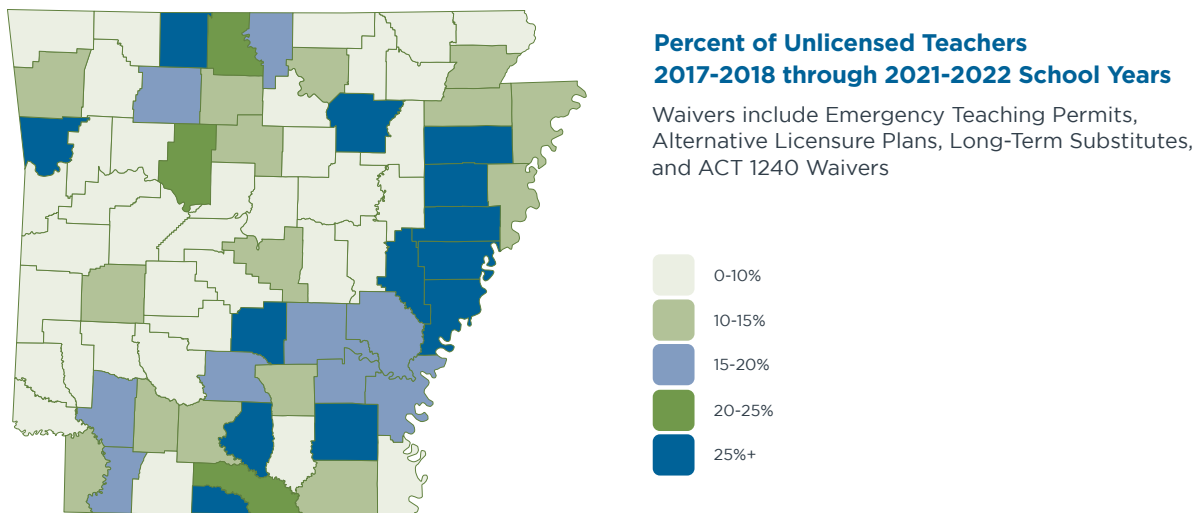


Arkansas Standards for Accreditation of Public Schools require that school districts must offer at least nine units of CTE to high school students. This offering requirement doesn't mean students are required to enroll or participate in the programs, and the number of total offerings overall may vary by district.

Arkansas has made important inroads to strengthen the bridge between K-12 education and workforce, but there is still more work to be done to expand access to learning opportunities for all Arkansas students that are aligned with high-wage, high-skill, and high-demand occupations and industries. Feedback from Arkansans suggest that the quality, availability, and awareness of CTE opportunities across the state vary widely. In meetings throughout Arkansas, community members expressed excitement about the potential of these opportunities for their kids but also said that they weren't available in their area.

### Teacher Workforce

Arkansas faces tremendous educator workforce challenges. We continue to have acute teacher shortages in specific parts of the state marked by the high number of unlicensed teachers and continued use of teaching waivers, especially in Southern and Eastern Arkansas. Attrition from the profession also continues to be a core challenge for the state, since roughly 25% of teachers leave within five years of entering.<sup>19</sup>



Developing an effective and diverse teacher workforce requires a robust, integrated system, from identifying and recruiting new candidates, to high-quality preparation, to professional growth opportunities and retention. Since 2015, Arkansas has made foundational progress in many of the following key areas.

### *Identifying and recruiting more high-quality, diverse teachers*

The state accelerated efforts around “grow your own” strategies to create more accessible, affordable, and high-quality pathways, as well as financial incentives for individuals across the state, especially in high-need regions, to enter the teaching profession.

- **Educators Rising** cultivates interest among high school students to become teachers and provides opportunities for them to explore and pursue options while still in high school.
- The **Arkansas Teacher Residency** model provides a framework for K-12 districts, community colleges, and 4-year universities to co-design pathways for high school students and paraprofessionals to attain licensure while also gaining classroom experience.
- **REACH University** is a high-quality, affordable online program for adults employed in schools to earn a bachelor’s degree and licensure while continuing to work in schools.
- The **Arkansas Teacher Apprenticeship**, a licensed U.S. Department of Labor apprenticeship starting in the Fall of 2023, will allow participants to serve as apprentices in K-12 schools and leave the program with a four-year degree, a teaching license, and a nationally-recognized apprenticeship certification.
- **Teach Arkansas**, a state-wide digital and media campaign, was launched in the summer of 2022 to promote the benefits of a teaching career and clearly communicate the pathways and incentives available. In six months, the campaign identified more than 2,500 potential candidates who took initial steps towards becoming a teacher.

### *Professional growth opportunities and retention*

In 2017, Arkansas began implementing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), a research-backed approach to provide teachers and school leaders opportunities to collaborate and leverage student data to continuously improve instruction.

The PLC program initially launched in nine schools and one district across the state for the 2017-18 school year. Research highlights that after two years, PLCs had a positive impact on ACT Aspire score growth in math, and a smaller, though still positive, impact in ELA.<sup>20</sup> A significant majority of school-based personnel surveyed either somewhat or strongly agreed that PLCs are beneficial. Some indicated that PLCs helped keep them in the profession, particularly during the pandemic. The statewide scale of high-fidelity implementation of PLCs remains a priority.



**Eight Priorities  
to Dramatically  
Improve Arkansas  
Education**

# Eight Priorities to Dramatically Improve Arkansas Education

Arkansas is full of parents, community members, state leaders, educators, business leaders, and other stakeholders who want to see dramatically improved and more equitable educational outcomes for all students across the state, regardless of race, educational needs, socioeconomic status, or geography.

There is no set playbook for improving education across a state, but a first step must be for Arkansas to align on and focus the majority of our education investments, efforts, and energy on what matters most for kids.

Through objective research and stakeholder feedback, **Eight Priorities to Dramatically Improve Arkansas Education** emerged. These priorities focus on the goal of providing every Arkansas student with the most important skills, dispositions, and experiences to compete for high-demand jobs of today and the future and live healthy, productive lives. While some are new, others have been a focus in Arkansas education since 2015 but have evolved based on the current context and landscape. The following eight priorities are separated into two distinct but related areas:

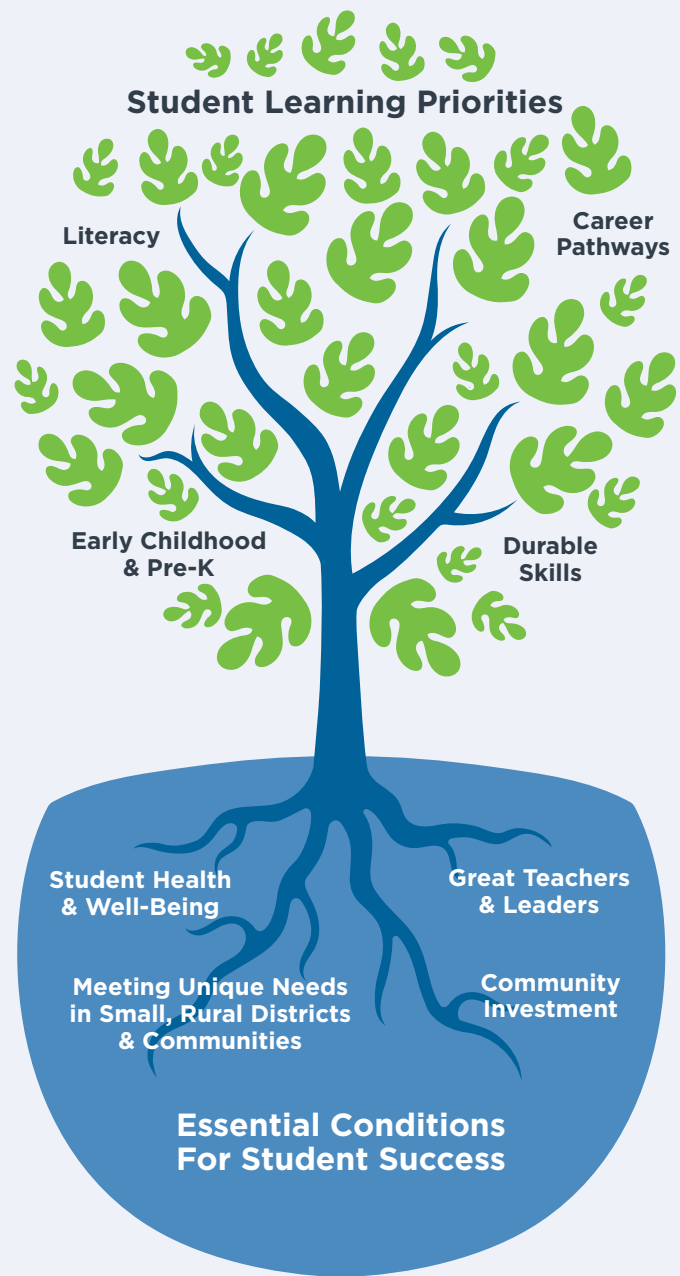
## Student Learning Priorities

These four priorities focus on the most critical and highest-impact learning needs for every student to be prepared for, and have access to, opportunities in today's world.

## Essential Conditions for Student Success

These four priorities focus on the “strong roots” that must exist in schools and communities to set every student up for success in their educational experience.

The following sections detail both the priorities and opportunities for Arkansas to consider in how to move the state forward, leveraging highly effective and research-backed approaches for improving educational outcomes. We put forward examples from within Arkansas as well as case studies from other states.





# Student Learning Priorities

As students progress in their educational journey, they first need early access to high-quality educational experiences to be ready for kindergarten. As they then enter K-12 schools, they need high-quality literacy instruction as they learn to read and then read to learn. Throughout that journey, they must also begin to build the durable skills crucial to short-term and long-term success, like problem solving, communication, and collaboration. Finally, as they transition to adulthood, students benefit substantially from exposure to and experience in well-charted pathways from middle and high school to college and career.

## Early Childhood and Pre-K

**Recommendation:** Expand access to high-quality, early childhood education across the state.

**Context and Arkansas Progress:** Pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) was a recommended priority in the 2015 report and remains a priority today. Participation in pre-K is regarded as one of the most effective early supports a state can provide to children. Multiple studies find positive long-term impacts of pre-K on student emotional and academic well-being.<sup>21</sup>



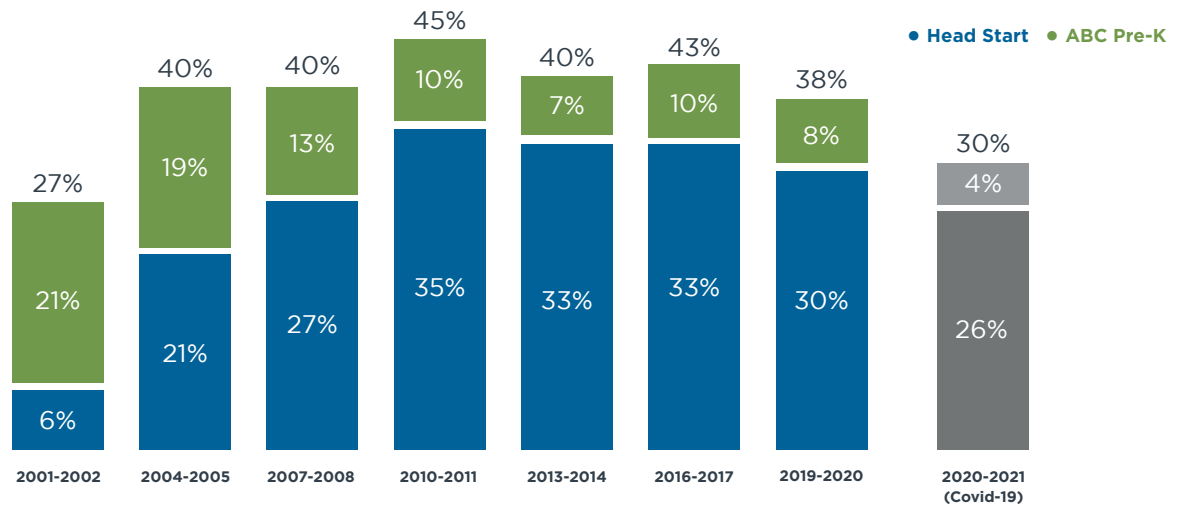
“We need more preschool programs, especially in rural areas.”

Since 1991, Arkansas has supplemented federally-funded Head Start Programs with public pre-K available through Arkansas Better Chance (ABC), which subsidizes pre-K programs based on family income.<sup>22</sup> With the exception of a significant drop during the first year of the pandemic, **enrollment in pre-K in the state has hovered around 40% of the eligible population** since 2005-2006.<sup>23</sup> Public pre-K programming in Arkansas is widely recognized as high-quality, meeting 80% of quality standards published by the National Institute for Early Education Research and outperforming the national average. ABC students also perform better on state assessments relative to students who did not attend pre-K.<sup>24 25</sup>

One key challenge for pre-K in Arkansas is expanding access so more students can benefit from existing high-quality programs. Overall, the demand for pre-K in the state is high, but eligibility and logistical barriers to access prevent many from enrolling. This results in a **gap between the capacity of existing centers and the number of children who can access them**. In 2021, the Office for Education Policy at the University of Arkansas estimated that the current capacity of existing public and private centers could serve up to 66% of Arkansas’s pre-K population, despite only serving 30-40% today.<sup>26</sup>

A challenge to growing early childhood programming, both within Arkansas and nationally, is the availability of highly qualified teacher talent. Research from the University of California, Berkeley found that early childhood educators are paid approximately 30% less than their colleagues in the K-12 system and are nearly eight times more likely to be living in poverty. The salary discrepancy, coupled with a steep decline (10%) in childcare employment nationally, increases the difficulty pre-K programs in Arkansas face in attracting and retaining talent. Anecdotally, leaders from Arkansas pre-K centers mark staffing as the biggest challenge they currently face.<sup>27</sup>

## Percentage of Arkansas Children Enrolled in Pre-Kindergarten, 2001-2021



Total 3-4 Year Old Population

74K

74K

78K

80K

78K

76K

78K

76K

## Case Study: Oklahoma

The state of Oklahoma has significantly expanded access to high quality pre-K. Since 1998, the state has offered fully funded pre-K to all 4-year-olds, regardless of family income. 76% of the state's pre-K eligible children are currently enrolled, and 100% of the school districts participate. Teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree with an Early Childhood certificate and receive the same wages as K-12 teachers across the state. To support the program, the state uses a per-student funding formula which results in robust, stable funding from year to year.

Researchers at Georgetown University's Center for Research on Children in the United States found **positive impacts on participating children from Oklahoma's program**, including:

- Increased kindergarten readiness (i.e., nine months ahead on pre-reading skills)
- Decreased likelihood of repeating a grade in high school (-6 pp), or failing a high school course (-6 pp)
- Increased high school graduation rates (+3pp)
- Increased college enrollment (+12pp)<sup>28</sup>

### Learnings from Oklahoma's Pre-K Program:

- ✓ Funding for universal, but not mandatory, school-based pre-K through the state-based aid formula has created a **very embedded system** for 4-year-olds in the state
- ✓ Funding allows pre-K teachers to be compensated on the **same salary schedule** as K-12 teachers
- ✓ **School-based centers facilitate attendance** as they are more likely to be geographically proximate to the family home and create a central hub for parents with other children in the K-12 system

## Opportunities for Arkansas

As a first step before expanding capacity, the state could consider opportunities to increase student access to existing pre-K centers. Some of the challenges that inhibit student access to pre-K include:

- **Eligibility:** Only the lowest-income students have access to the program, which leaves many who may not be able to afford private pre-K, but don't qualify for ABC, without an early childhood education option<sup>29</sup>
- **Cost:** Enhanced subsidies for families have historically proven to increase enrollment in Arkansas ABC programs
- **Transportation:** Less than 30% of pre-K centers statewide provide transportation<sup>30</sup>
- **Hours:** 30% of centers close during the summer, limiting access for many families<sup>31</sup>

In order to expand capacity, **Arkansas will have to take significant steps to increase and sustain a high-quality pre-K teacher workforce**, especially in regions of the state that currently lack sufficient early childhood and pre-K options for families.

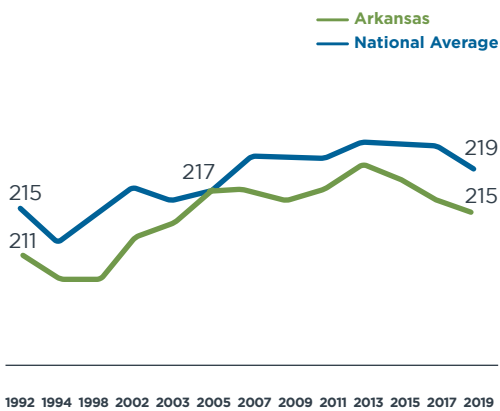


# Literacy

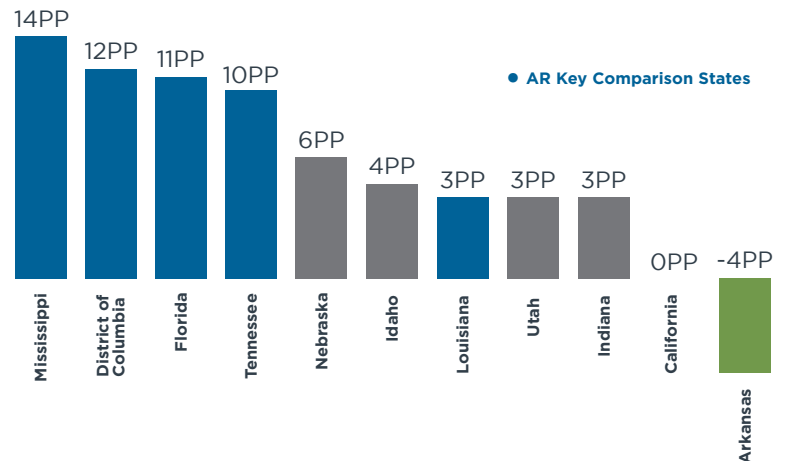
**Recommendation:** Maintain the state’s focus on the science of reading and enhance strategies to support school-level buy-in at a greater scale and effective implementation at an accelerated pace. Explore, assess, and consider additional policies utilized by neighboring states to accelerate reading proficiency.

**Context and Arkansas Progress:** Student proficiency in reading, particularly by third grade, is predictive of later life outcomes, including attendance, self-esteem, student achievement, and high school graduation.<sup>32</sup> The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) provides a common benchmark to compare outcomes across states, even as official state assessments vary. Over the last two decades, Arkansas has made little progress on this metric, remaining below the national average for NAEP proficiency. **While the share of Arkansas 4th graders proficient in literacy, per the NAEP assessment, has declined, neighboring states like Mississippi and Tennessee have made substantial gains, representing two of the top five most improved states nationwide.** These states provide fruitful examples for a potential path forward in Arkansas.

**Average 4th Grade NAEP Reading Scores, 1992-2019**



**Percentage-Point Change in 4th Grade NAEP Reading Scores, 2011-2019**



There are four common strategic initiatives across neighboring states that have made literacy proficiency improvements on NAEP, and Arkansas has begun initial efforts in all – **early literacy, quality curriculum, leadership, and teacher professional development.**

## Early Literacy

Arkansas has started to make improvements through the science of reading and associated Reading Initiative for Student Excellence (R.I.S.E.) which starts in pre-K.

## Quality Curriculum

Through EdReports, Arkansas provides K-12 teachers, schools and districts guidance on selecting High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) at the local level.

## Leadership

Through Arkansas Thrive, leaders received training on how to integrate their various academic, behavioral, and mental initiatives into one cohesive strategy.

## Teacher Professional Development

Teacher learning and collaboration around the science of reading and student data has been enhanced by the Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and other initiatives such as high-quality professional learning year-round. Arkansas's PLC program is aligned to the emphasis on active teacher professional development.

# Case Study: Mississippi and Tennessee

**Mississippi** saw a 14-percentage point increase in 4th grade literacy scores from 2011-2019 through a focus on **active teacher professional development and frequent coaching** aligned to principles of the science of reading (e.g., LETRS). During this time, Mississippi also began an intensive identification of K-3 students who have reading deficiencies, provided them with an individualized reading plan, and retained third graders who did not reach set reading goals. Similarly, **Tennessee's** 10-percentage-point gain during the same period is due in part to its **teacher and school leadership professional development program**, Leading Innovation for Tennessee Education (LIFT), which allowed for resource and best practice sharing. LIFT districts dramatically outpaced their peers in student achievement, measures of standards-based classroom instruction, and grade-level rigor of instructional materials.

## Learnings from Mississippi and Tennessee:

- ✔ Alignment of statewide goals facilitated by **dedicated early literacy department** supported by **regional literacy coordinators**
- ✔ Development of a **robust, active professional development program** aligned to the core tenets of the science of reading, supported by school-based literacy coaches
- ✔ Intensive identification of students in need of **reading support as well as retention** if not proficient by the end of third grade
- ✔ Statewide **collaboration and resource sharing** for school leaders and staff broke down barriers traditionally in place across schools

## Opportunities for Arkansas

Arkansas's neighboring states highlight key opportunities to further the state's focus on the science of reading and improvements, which include:

- Clear, broad communication to reiterate the state's commitment to, and the longevity of, the science of reading and its potential impact of implementation on student outcomes
- Explore additional policies such as proficiency-based promotion, as seen in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Florida, which requires third graders to demonstrate reading proficiency before advancing to the fourth grade<sup>33</sup>
- **Enhance approaches to build buy-in and support implementation at greater scale which may include:**
  - Providing design support and technical assistance for districts and schools to modify structures like school schedules and staffing models to support the integration of the science of reading
  - Devote resources to and integrate effective, targeted interventions for struggling readers as part of a cohesive strategy
  - Increasing the quality and consistency of mentorship and coaching around implementation of the science of reading for both teachers and school leaders
  - Investment in rigorous curricula aligned to the science of reading that build upon current initiatives, like the Arkansas Initiative for Instructional Materials (AIIM), and increase adoption of high-quality materials through ranking systems and subsidies for preferred materials

## Durable Skills

**Recommendation:** Prioritize the integration of durable skills (e.g., communication, creativity, collaboration, critical thinking) in instruction so all students develop the habits and mindsets to succeed in career and life.

**Context and Arkansas Progress:** Students at all stages of the pre-K to 12 journey can benefit from intentional instruction and support to develop key skills for success in school, the workplace, and life beyond high school. The desire for all students to develop skills for career and life readiness was a common theme that emerged from focus groups statewide. Building durable skills like problem solving, communication, and digital literacy, as well as collaboration, persistence, and a growth mindset prepares students for lifelong success in and outside the classroom. In 2020, **48% of Arkansas job postings required one or more of these skills**, making development of durable skills a top strategic action to align student learning with business needs and one that the business community has identified as a challenge across the state.<sup>34</sup>

Arkansas has initiated the process of developing systems and supports to promote durable skills development through the G.U.I.D.E. for Life curriculum, which is backed by national research.<sup>35</sup>



“I want kids to become productive citizens with great work ethics and communication skills to share with others in the world.”

## Case Study: Indiana

In 2018, the state of Indiana enacted legislation to coordinate state-level education and workforce agencies, statewide employers, and other stakeholders to identify the skills students need to be competitive in Indiana’s workforce. Through their efforts, Indiana **aligned around a common definition of “employability skills”** and developed Indiana’s Employability Skills Benchmark, and now schools are implementing the standards into their curriculum. Practically, the standards are integrated throughout the K-12 experience in multiple subjects but are categorized in four key areas: mindsets, work ethic, learning strategies, and social and emotional skills.<sup>36</sup>

### Learnings from the State of Indiana’s Implementation of “Employability Skills”:

- ✔ Alignment state-wide and across sectors on a **shared definition of the needed skills**
- ✔ Development of a benchmark to guide progression of students through the K-12 experience
- ✔ Importance of **embedding employability skills within academic content** to reduce the time burden on teachers

## Opportunities for Arkansas

Grade-appropriate learning experiences to cultivate students' durable skills need to be woven into the current academic curriculum. **To support this shift in districts, Arkansas will likely first need to engage community, education, and business stakeholders to align on a shared “portrait of a graduate”- which defines durable skills that are prioritized in every student’s learning experience.** Once this is done, the state could consider:

- Extensive communication to educators and communities around the need for, and value of, durable skills
- Focus on knowledge and skill building in teacher and school leader preparation programs and ongoing professional development that grounds educators in the research base behind durable skills and how to integrate them into core content areas
- Work with districts to support a balanced approach to measuring these critical durable skills through the development of local assessments aligned with the state’s “portrait of a graduate”

As the needs of Arkansas’s business community evolve, durable skills curriculum, resources, and educator professional development should be continually updated to align with high-demand jobs in Arkansas.



## Career Pathways

**Recommendation:** Establish a clear vision for workforce education for *all* students that expands access to high-quality career pathway programs (e.g., CTE, early college, work-based learning) and provides exposure and access to diverse career opportunities aligned to industry needs.

**Context and Arkansas Progress:** All students need additional exposure, experience, and guidance to identify career options they can pursue and what it takes to get there. Career pathways programs like CTE and early college opportunities engage students while in high school and provide an additional network of support and “real-world” exposure to potential careers. This engagement often leads to increased high school graduation, and in the case of early college, increased likelihood to enroll and graduate from a postsecondary institution.<sup>37</sup> **Students who participate in career pathways programs are better prepared for their next step after high school**, whether entering the workforce or enrolling in postsecondary programs.



“All kids need exposure to opportunities outside of a college degree.”

One significant step the state has taken is that every Arkansas student, beginning in 2017, must now develop a “Student Success Plan” by the end of eighth grade. The plan is developed in collaboration with parents and school personnel, and is to be reviewed and updated annually. The plans are dynamic and include individualized steps necessary for each student to be ready for college and career.

Progress has also been made across the state in deepening the understanding and perception of CTE programs. The state department of education has invested significant time and resources into **rebuilding trust** with schools, embedding the **Division of CTE within the Arkansas Department of Education**, and contributing funding to support districts.

Locally, many districts are leading the charge to develop industry partnerships that facilitate career pathway opportunities. The industry appetite for these partnerships is enormous.

## Case Study: Danville Public Schools

**At Danville Public Schools**, workforce education is truly for every student. The district intentionally offers learning experiences to bridge the gap between skills needed to earn a diploma and those needed to succeed post-graduation. All students move through a sequence of career-related course offerings that begin with career exploration in eighth grade and culminate in a senior-year capstone that involves applications to a minimum of two colleges, participation in community service hours, and development of a vision for life outside of high school. While it takes significant effort, investment, and partnerships to provide these learning experiences to all students - it is not without significant reward. Danville students graduate with key intangible assets like a 5-year plan, exposure to the world outside of high school, and access to industry and post-secondary connections. In the 2018-19 school year, Danville reported graduating seniors received an average of \$44,000 in scholarships.



# Case Study: Peak Innovation Center and Saline County Career and Technical Center

Arkansas has also made significant investments in career centers across the state, with the **Saline County Career and Technical Center** (SCCTC) in 2021 and the **Peak Innovation Center** in 2022. Both of these centers offer students from nearby school districts access to high-quality, credentialed CTE programs for a portion of the school day.

Both SCCTC and the Peak Innovation Center underwent a rigorous stakeholder engagement process at the onset to ensure their offerings were most aligned to local industry needs. At SCCTC, industry partnerships and relationships are key to the program's approach, both to provide funding for program operations and student employment opportunities during their program or after graduation. At Peak, advisory groups were developed for each of the potential program areas to make sure the programs are responsive to industry needs, aligned to the skills and standards students need to be successful, and are connected to employers and leaders within the sector.

## Learnings from Arkansas Workforce Education Programs:

- ✔ Clear and connected career sequence from 8th to 12th grade for every student
- ✔ Strong relationships with industry partners
- ✔ Rigorous stakeholder engagement process to align with both community and local industry needs

## Opportunities for Arkansas

Despite growing momentum, there is a need to address challenges in scaling high-quality career pathway programs aligned with industry needs:

- **Conduct a biennial “Return on Investment” analysis** to better understand the alignment of K-12 and postsecondary programs (including funding allocations) with professional certifications and high-growth, high-demand, and high-wage employment opportunities.
- **Analyze longer-term student outcome data related to job placement and wages.**
- **Integrate pathways programs into existing course and graduation requirements** so that students can access CTE or early college without detracting from other pursuits.
- **Promote pathway programs, graduation requirements, and certificate opportunities**, such as ACT WorkKeys, to industry.
- **Expand outcomes-based, weighted funding** for CTE to incentivize schools and districts to offer programs of study in high-wage, high-demand occupations.

# Essential Conditions for Student Success

Certain conditions must be in place to position every student to be successful in the learning priorities highlighted in the prior section. Students must feel safe within their school and be physically and mentally healthy. Every student must have access to supportive and effective teachers and school leaders. While the goals and expectations for every student should be consistent, Arkansas students and their respective communities have different strengths and challenges based on size, location, and current context. As such, approaches must be adapted to address the unique needs of students and communities. Finally, Arkansas schools cannot produce excellent outcomes for every student on their own. Doing so will require the engagement and investment of the entire local community.

## Student Health and Well-Being

**Recommendation:** Develop coordinated state-level strategies to more efficiently connect schools with agencies, partners, and resources to create supportive educational environments and provide services that meet the health and wellness needs of all students.

**Context and Arkansas Progress:** Many students come to school with significant needs associated with factors outside the education system, including health, trauma, economic, and safety concerns. High levels of families living in poverty and rising crime rates impact learning and students' ability to make progress toward key milestones.<sup>38</sup>

**Student mental health needs were increasing pre-pandemic and have been exacerbated by COVID-related trauma.**<sup>39</sup>





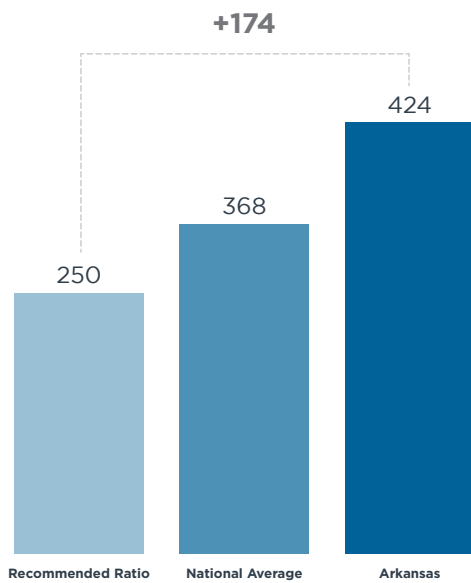
“There is a lack of Trauma Informed Care knowledge in schools.”

Physical and mental health needs in students often manifest as behavioral issues in schools that then impact the well-being and learning of all students. Teachers, who are largely not trained to address the deeper needs underpinning behavioral issues, are often the first to respond to these needs. Of Arkansans surveyed, only 45% believe schools currently meet student mental health needs. On average, a school counselor or psychologist in Arkansas supports significantly more students than is recommended or than in other states.<sup>40</sup>

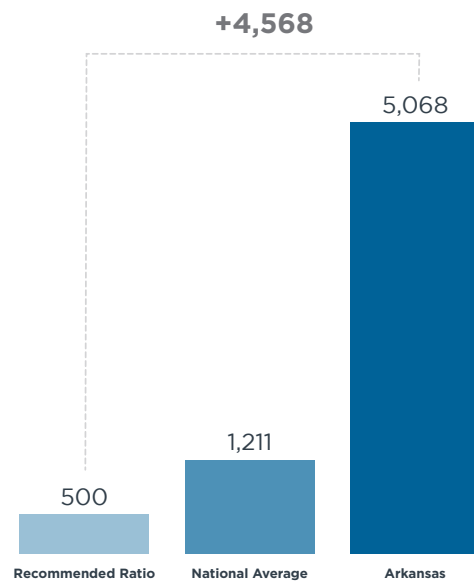


“Student [health and wellness] needs are not met, so they aren’t ready to learn.”

**Number of Students Served Per One School Counselor, 2019-20**



**Number of Students Served Per One School Psychologist, 2019-20**



**While schools and school staff must be better equipped and trained to identify and respond to issues of student well-being and create environments that foster safety and belonging for all students, they cannot be solely responsible for addressing student health and well-being on top of their core role of delivering learning.** Other agencies and partners must work with schools to provide comprehensive, physical and mental health services to students, especially those in greatest need.

## Opportunities for Arkansas

After parents, school staff often spend the most time with kids. The time spent together provides educators with multiple opportunities to identify students' well-being needs and be the first to respond. However, to do so, educators will need additional support and resources. **To the degree possible, the focus of schools and educators should remain on effectively teaching every student. Other agencies, service providers, and community partners who have the necessary expertise and capacity should own the coordination with schools to help identify, access, and direct students in need of support.**

### In Schools:

- Prioritize increased access to counselors, psychologists, and social workers to decrease the number of students served by each health professional.
- Increase trauma-informed training for educators, similar to the work of The Arkansas Trauma Resource Initiative for Schools (TRIS).
- Conduct needs assessments for the health and wellness of students and educators to identify areas of focus.
- Engage parents and families more intentionally to understand student needs and increase awareness of existing services.

### Statewide:

- Conduct a scan of current policies and funding that impact student mental health services to increase integration and reduce fragmentation across statewide systems.
- Create clear structures within local and state agencies and service providers to engage with districts and identify students in need to coordinate and deliver “wrap-around” services.
- Leverage technology, such as telemedicine, to expand the network of support for students and increase accessibility in regions where services are limited.
- Increase communication and engagement with families in high-need communities to address barriers to access such as awareness, stigma, cost, and transportation.
- Prioritize strategies for addressing student health and well-being, creating safe and healthy school environments in educator preparation and ongoing professional development.

The state and districts could also implement more community-embedded supports, such as School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs) to provide critical wellness services to students at school. **The Center for Rural Health Innovation (CRHI)** in North Carolina expanded SBHCs in rural communities leveraging telehealth to serve 11 counties and over 100 schools with 12 staff members.<sup>41</sup> Arkansas is already off to a strong start here, having expanded access by almost 19 SBHCs over the last decade, and there may be opportunities to leverage a hybrid model and serve additional students and schools.

# Great Teachers and Leaders

**Recommendation:** Develop an enhanced, comprehensive talent strategy to support the entire career continuum of teachers and school leaders that supports their ongoing professional growth and ultimately, their retention.

**Context and Arkansas Progress:** Research is clear that **teachers are the single biggest school-related determinant of student achievement.**<sup>42</sup> In conversations with community members throughout the state, one of the most emphasized challenges was recruiting and retaining high-quality educators.

Improving the teacher workforce in Arkansas remains an urgent priority. While the most recent data does not reflect a mass exodus from teaching due to COVID as many feared, teacher turnover rates in Arkansas were high prior to the pandemic and remain high, creating unstable environments in many schools across the state. In 2022, nearly 23% of all Arkansas teachers either left the profession, moved schools or shifted to non-teaching roles. This rate is higher for African American teachers, teachers in high-poverty schools, and those within their first five years of teaching.<sup>43</sup> Since 2015, there has also been a decline in new teachers graduating from traditional teacher preparation programs.<sup>44</sup>



“[School] culture is the number one priority.”

To build and sustain a healthy and high-quality teacher workforce, we must focus on school leaders. **In fact, cultivating great school leaders and ensuring they have the strategies and support to succeed is one of the most powerful levers for impacting schools, teachers, and ultimately students.** Research suggests that the most effective principals lead to increases in student learning in reading and math equivalent to about three months of additional instruction.<sup>45 46</sup> High-quality school leaders make school-wide impacts through hiring, training, and mentoring teachers and staff and by setting school culture and working conditions.<sup>47</sup>

## Opportunities for Arkansas

Significant groundwork has been laid in the state in recent years, especially to attract more teachers into the profession. Arkansas should continue to enhance, expand, and clearly communicate “grow your own” teacher pipeline efforts. Still, we are far from where we need to be. Dramatically improving the educator workforce will require a comprehensive and coordinated approach across all parts of the career continuum for teachers and school leaders. Doing so will be a complex effort due to the number of factors and components involved and the number of stakeholders who play a role in implementation. Collaboration among key stakeholders on the front end – including state leaders, current educators, district leaders, higher education leaders, partners, and funders – will be crucial to ensuring buy-in and that implementation efforts are efficient and coordinated. Conditions and needs will change, and ongoing, data-driven assessment of the strategy and continuous improvement will be critical.



“Every child has a dream. We need people to nurture that dream.”

## Opportunities for Arkansas (continued)

Below are potential starting points on a path to develop a comprehensive educator talent strategy for the next five years:

- Explore a statewide K-12 talent data system. Currently all data, such as available teaching positions, are captured and managed at the district level. In order to identify and address gaps, Arkansas needs a more robust and continuously updated view of talent needs statewide.
- Develop a robust strategy to cultivate, hire, support, and retain great school leaders. Ensure school leaders have what they need to create a strong culture for all students and educators.
- Increase the focus and investment across the state on **sourcing and recruiting, preparing, and retaining** highly effective educators.

### Source and Recruit

- Pilot economic incentives (e.g., free or subsidized housing and training programs), to attract teachers and school leaders to specific regions of the state.
- Expand “aspiring leader” programs to identify and cultivate high-potential future teacher leaders and school leaders among existing school staff.

### Prepare

For every teacher or school leader candidate:

- Provide longer, practice-based experiences in schools with high quality-mentorship.
- Enhance preparation program content based on the needs of the schools and districts served.
- Ensure continuous improvement of preparation programs through strong partnerships with districts and the capture of critical data on emerging teachers and leaders during their first five years in the profession.

### Develop, Support, and Retain

While teacher compensation has been a major recent focus of policy conversations in the state, especially in light of the demands placed on teachers during COVID, research shows that quality of preparation, principal leadership, and school culture are as important to improving teacher retention as compensation. The state should examine teacher compensation as well as these other key factors in a comprehensive talent strategy:

- As both starting and average salaries in Arkansas are some of the lowest in the region, compensation will need to be addressed. However, it is important to note that doing so will likely require action by both state leaders as well as local district leaders. The state determines how much funding districts receive for teachers salaries, but district leaders actually decide how much to pay teachers locally.
- Pilot innovative models, such as “team teaching,” that improve the job and workload of teachers, position teachers to be more effective, and provide additional leadership opportunities.
- Expand leadership roles for teachers, beyond becoming administrators, that offer opportunities for greater impact and more compensation for additional responsibility and high performance.



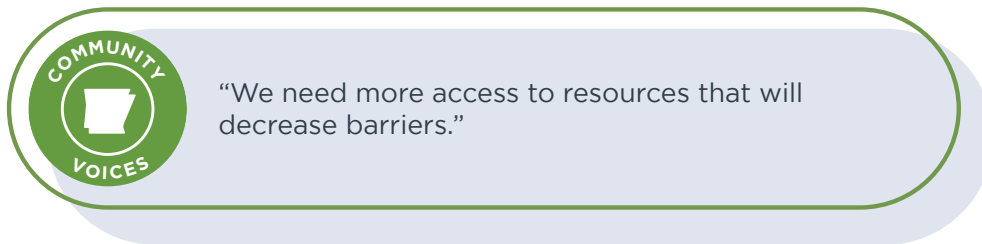
# Meeting Unique Needs in Small, Rural Districts and Communities

**Recommendation:** Explore and support creative strategies to more effectively utilize local resources and school staff that recognize both the unique assets and constraints in districts based on their size and location.

**Context and Arkansas Progress:** Nearly half of all Arkansas residents live in small and rural communities.<sup>48</sup> This makes it critically important to understand the unique challenges and opportunities that impact the ability of these communities to realize opportunities and priorities presented in this report.

There are a particular set of considerations that further exacerbate challenges associated with improving educational outcomes in small and rural communities. These challenges include:

**Broadband:** Approximately 60% of Arkansans living in rural counties have high-quality internet access compared to 80% of people in rural counties nationally.<sup>49</sup>



## Funding and Spending:

- **Economies of Scale:** Education funding in Arkansas is tied to prior-year student enrollment. Smaller districts have, by definition, a smaller student base, and thus a smaller revenue pool. These districts must still cover a similar set of “fixed” costs (e.g., utilities, maintenance, school leadership) as larger districts. It can also be difficult to achieve efficiency in staffing allocations (e.g., full classrooms) with fewer students, exacerbating the economies of scale issue.
- **Spending Effectiveness:** While the state determines funding levels for districts and schools, spending decisions are ultimately made locally by district leadership and school boards. The state must gain a better understanding of how and why funding decisions are being made and offer creative strategies that help communities prioritize what will have the greatest impact on student outcomes.

**Access:** Infrastructure, funding and spending challenges further manifest themselves in rural communities in students’ access to educational experiences. This plays out in students’ ability to access early learning and continued learning experiences.

- **Pre-K:** From 2009-10 to 2019-20, pre-K enrollment increased 10% in urban regions and decreased 7% in rural regions.<sup>50</sup>
- **Continued learning experiences:** Residents in rural regions have lower educational attainment, with 16% of adults in rural regions lacking a high school diploma as compared to 12% in urban counties. This discrepancy widens as you look at higher education attainment. 23% of adults in rural counties have at least an associates degree as compared to 35% in urban counties.<sup>51</sup>

These concerns related to small and rural districts are of importance across the state. Since 2015-16, enrollment has declined in more than half of Arkansas school districts. **By 2020-21, more than one in five Arkansas school districts had fewer than 500 students**, which means these issues are affecting more and more districts.<sup>52</sup>

At the same time, small communities have a unique set of strengths that present future opportunities for education. Stakeholders express a **strong sense of community** in many of these areas and highlight the small size as a strength:

- **Importance:** Interviews and focus groups revealed the critical importance of the school as the center of community, hub of activity, and key employer in many of these communities, which drives a desire to come together and support the community.
- **Coordination:** These communities also tend to have fewer stakeholders to co-design and co-develop ownership of change efforts, which may simplify this work in the community.
- **Impact:** The smaller size and scale also drives the opportunity for a more outsized impact on K-12 education in the community, the need for fewer resources to do so, and the potential to see results faster, in some cases.



“All schools should have access to the same things that other schools have.”

## Opportunities for Arkansas

Beyond increasing availability of services (e.g., transportation and broadband access, for which there are significant federal funds now available) in rural communities, the state could also consider how to tailor priorities described in previous sections to account for some of the unique challenges present in rural communities and explore innovative approaches to address them, including:

- Creative staffing and scheduling approaches that enable schools to better utilize and prioritize current teachers in sustainable ways while reducing the need to attract, hire, and retain more teachers.
- Community partnerships to leverage local organizations and businesses to offer enrichment opportunities for students.
- **Expanded resource sharing, including staff.** Montana is working to increase access to post-secondary opportunities in rural areas through course and program sharing across institutions alongside remote delivery.<sup>53</sup>

### **Technology-based solutions to provide students with remote access to high-quality courses and teachers**

in both academic and non-academic areas. Innovative virtual CTE programs that match small groups of students to employers within or outside Arkansas, like CareerWise Colorado, could provide students with access to learning opportunities, regardless of whether the employer or program was located in their home district.

Some neighboring states have also **adjusted funding formulas** to account for the unique context of small, rural districts. While Arkansas provides a small amount of isolation funding to rural districts, neighboring states have transformed their funding mechanisms to directly support students in rural school districts.

- **Tennessee’s** newly enacted, weighted student funding formula includes “sparse or small” communities as a student weight.<sup>54</sup>
- **Ohio’s** fair student funding plan includes an income-based calculation to ensure lower-wealth districts receive more aid.



# Community Investment

**Recommendation:** Galvanize the strength of Arkansas communities to invest in their students, schools, and districts as drivers for economic growth.

**Context and Arkansas Progress:** Communities are a point of pride across the state. Generally, survey feedback indicates that people feel safe in their communities, know each other well, and engage with local schools. Many communities see their schools as the cultural center of the community, places they attended as children, places that hold fond memories, and places that are the home of award-winning sports teams. For others, schools represent the future – the opportunity to build the next generation of highly-skilled workers that will further economic prospects in the state.



“We need educational leadership willing to look at the bigger picture and work together. A community is only as good as its schools”

**Independence County** provides an example of how a community can leverage its collective strength to drive change and improve opportunities for all residents. In 2015, Independence County launched a **community-based effort to develop a strategic plan for economic development**, IMPACT Independence County. IMPACT was developed through a significant community engagement effort, with diversity, transparency, and inclusion at the forefront. In order to ensure that all community members had opportunities to participate, intentional efforts were made to make the process accessible, such as delivering surveys at school car pick up lines, youth sporting events, and retailers throughout the county. The IMPACT effort engaged 3,200+ residents over nearly 450 hours.

The engagement process resulted in a strategic plan for the county that included four areas of focus:<sup>55</sup>

- **Economic prosperity:** Intentionally grow the community, allowing it to maintain a small town feel, but improve quality of place by expanding opportunities and offerings for residents and visitors
- **Educational excellence:** Prepare students for optimal success
- **Healthy living and well-being:** Become the healthiest county in Arkansas, keeping residents physically and emotionally well
- **Placemaking:** Increase the quality of life of residents by developing and connecting community amenities

To date, IMPACT Independence County has resulted in a number of positive outcomes, including:

- Revitalization of **Main Street in Batesville** and the opening of **West Splash Park**
- New systems to collect data on both the academic and non-academic needs of students to inform future initiatives
- Development of the **Independence Promise**<sup>56</sup> scholarship to provide all students access to concurrent classes and career exposure opportunities while in high school
- Attraction of new businesses, including Independent Stave Mill, Planet Smoothie, and Aldi Grocery
- Hiring of full-time staff in many Independence County schools to assess student and family needs and coordinate relationships with community partners to address them
- Passage of a tourism tax, one of the first new taxes in decades

## Opportunities for Arkansas

Despite numerous anecdotes of community support, almost half of Arkansans surveyed identified a need for communities to support education more than they are today. Similarly, in community focus groups, participants acknowledged that the health of their schools and the health of their communities are linked and expressed a desire and need for more meaningful partnerships between the two. As such, Arkansas has the opportunity to harness the energy of its communities to drive further change, support for, and improvements in the school systems. Below are opportunities and initial recommendations for communities and those supporting them.

- A single entity or agency is needed to spearhead the process in each community and lead collaboration and coordination with schools.
- A successful change initiative will require support from government, business and industry, faith-based and other community groups as each group has its own strengths, areas of expertise, and assets it brings to the table.
- Community buy-in is critical, both at the beginning of an initiative and throughout the process to help develop, vet, and carry forward ideas.
- Engaging stakeholders will take a lot of work and may not always be in the form of a town hall meeting or broad survey. A comprehensive assessment of community needs, assets, and gaps is an effective starting point.
- Early successes are important to generate momentum and help show signs of progress that change is possible.



“We need more organized community efforts that are sustainable.”





**How We  
Collectively  
Move Forward:  
The Next Five Years**

# How We Collectively Move Forward:

## The Next Five Years

Improving education is essential to doing better for Arkansas kids. It is also essential for our society – to ensure that Arkansas’s economy grows and that Arkansas residents and communities thrive.

We face a critical challenge, one of stagnating low performance and persistent achievement gaps by race, level of student need, socioeconomic status, and region. Failure to change the state’s current trajectory has implications in the near and long term for our students, families, communities, businesses, and the state as whole.

In this report we focus primarily on the question: **What must we do as a state to change the current educational reality and provide all students with the experiences they need to be thriving adults?**

When we posed that question to over 3,500 Arkansans, eight priorities emerged clearly and consistently. These priorities are also supported by data and research. Within each priority, we offered potential directions for Arkansas to consider based on context and lessons learned in our state and others.

In many ways though, identifying **what** is most important for students is the easier task. As we have shown, our state has focused on many of these areas for some time and made foundational progress. Still, significant progress on student outcomes remains elusive.

So then, as we move forward, we believe the most important question for our state is: **How can we approach change in education differently to dramatically accelerate progress in producing better outcomes for every Arkansas student?**

Unfortunately, there is no simple answer. **We ask every Arkansan to consider this question, determine their role in helping to address it, and take action to do so.**

Improving outcomes for every Arkansas student is absolutely possible, but it will take significant work, investment, commitment to data-driven, continuous improvement, and true engagement and collaboration from us all.

To provide a starting point for the next five years, we outline a set of **five guiding next steps** that we hope will galvanize Arkansans around the goal of doing better for our kids and inform our collective efforts as a state.

## Five Guiding Next Steps

**Set focused, ambitious, and measurable statewide goals.** A limited number of overarching statewide goals should drive all the work that we do and the decisions we make in education as a state. The goals should also be the foundation for the state's next strategic plan, which we hope this report can help inform. Finally, we must align around key metrics to track, measure, and frequently communicate progress against the identified goals, ensuring that we reach communities across the state

**Continue to enhance our data and the systems to capture and share it.** Arkansas is a data-rich state, and we have made great strides in capturing data to deepen our understanding of students' experiences and outcomes throughout their education journey. However, significant gaps still exist in key areas, such as the link between K-12 and career, and educator workforce. We should seek to address those gaps. Then we must create structures, that include various stakeholders and education partners, to use this data continuously to identify needs, coordinate and evaluate the impact of our efforts, and to improve.

**Focus on integration at all levels.** While we present the eight priorities in this report independently, they are in fact highly interconnected and interdependent. For a student to learn to read, they must be physically and mentally healthy. If schools focus more time and resources on reading to ensure students acquire this basic skill, they must make trade-offs in other areas. Districts, schools, and communities will need guidance and support to prioritize resources and create an integrated vision and approach, rather than implement independent initiatives. Finally, state-level strategies to address student learning, health and well-being, and the transition to career must span multiple state agencies and partners. Strategies will need to be integrated and aligned around a shared vision for an Arkansas graduate that can serve as a north star for all efforts.

**Use existing resources more effectively and creatively.** As a state, we may determine that we need to invest more resources to accelerate progress for students, especially those with the greatest need. However we should first develop a deeper understanding of how existing education funding is being used and why certain funding decisions are being made, especially at the local level. Guidance and support can be offered to district leaders and others to develop creative approaches to focus more of their time, funding, and staff on the most important needs of their students and communities. Identified challenges and barriers can be addressed through policy where necessary.

**Facilitate community-led change within state-determined priorities.** As a state, we must set priorities, goals, and policies that guide our change efforts in education overall. Within these guidelines, we must also create the conditions and support that both enable and guide local leaders, educators, and families - setting a local vision for their students and schools and identifying the solutions to reach their vision. Only in doing so will there be buy-in and ownership locally that then leads to effective implementation and ultimately better student outcomes.





# Acknowledgments

# Acknowledgments

The Forward Arkansas team is deeply grateful to the **thousands of students, educators, parents, business leaders, education partners, state leaders, and others** who contributed to this project by sharing their genuine thoughts, feelings, and experiences on the current state of Arkansas education, and what they hope for the future.

This project would not have been possible without the support of many key partners who actively helped us reach and engage stakeholders and gather and analyze data. **We want to specifically acknowledge and thank the partners below for their collaboration and support throughout this project.**



***Business matters.***



**DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION**







**About  
Forward Arkansas**

# About Forward Arkansas

Forward Arkansas is a non-profit organization established in 2015 by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation and Walton Family Foundation to improve outcomes for all students.

Every student should graduate prepared for success in college and the workplace, but that isn't the reality for many Arkansas students. Our team helps bridge the gap by advancing public policy, accelerating progress, and providing innovative solutions that can potentially be replicated statewide. Thank you to the parents, educators, non-profits, government officials, business leaders, and community residents who partner with us to move education forward in Arkansas.

## Our Mission

**The mission of Forward Arkansas is to accelerate the innovative and equitable transformation of Arkansas's Pre-K to 12 education system to deliver excellent outcomes.**

## Our Vision

**Our vision is that Arkansas becomes a national leader in educational equity and every student graduates high school prepared for success in college and the workplace.**





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# References, Resources, and Notes

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**Student Learning Priorities**

Literacy

Career Pathways

Early Childhood  
& Pre-K

Durable Skills

Student Health  
& Well-Being

Great Teachers  
& Leaders

Meeting Unique Needs  
in Small, Rural Districts  
& Communities

Community  
Investment

**Essential Conditions  
For Student Success**

