

THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN ARKANSAS 2023

Growing Together for a Stronger Future

Report Summary

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 low-income 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.

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.

About This Project: Why We Launched It, What We Did and What We Hope to Accomplish

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.

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:

Finding 1: Despite slight improvements leading up to the pandemic, overall student academic outcomes were severely lagging before COVID-19 and worsened during pandemic disruptions. Before COVID, across the state on average, only 41% of students demonstrated proficiency in reading and only 48% of students demonstrated proficiency in math. There were significantly lower rates of proficiency on the state's assessments for students of color, English Learner students, low-income students, and students with disabilities. 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. Recent state assessments for the 2021-22 school year show that student performance has rebounded slightly after pandemic disruptions, but has not yet reached pre-pandemic performance and remains far lower than what we hope for in the state.

Finding 2: Arkansas students are leaving K-12 unprepared for college and career opportunities.

Approximately nine in ten Arkansas students graduate high school each year, but just three of them were proficient in reading by 8th grade, suggesting that students are graduating with significant gaps in key academic areas. 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.

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. Stakeholders across Arkansas shared positive feedback related to the state's science of reading initiative R.I.S.E. and its role in creating shared urgency around the need to improve literacy in the state. Arkansas has also made significant efforts to expand the perception of and access to high-quality, industry-aligned CTE programs across the state and develop strategies to address teacher workforce challenges including the creation of multiple flexible and affordable pathways into the teaching profession.

Eight Priorities to Dramatically Improve Arkansas Education

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

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

Literacy: 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.

Durable Skills: 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.

Career Pathways: 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.

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: 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.

Great Teachers and Leaders: 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.

Meet Unique Needs in Small, Rural Districts and Communities: 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.

Community Investment: Galvanize the strength of Arkansas communities to invest in their schools and districts as drivers for economic growth for the state.

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.

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

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?**

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.

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.

To read the full report, please visit forwardarkansas.org/state-of-education-report