



Bringing High-Quality Early Childhood Education to Arkansas' Students

Recommendations from Teach Plus
Arkansas Policy Fellows

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INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that the most crucial period in a child’s brain development is in the first five years. In fact, by the age of six, a child’s brain is 90% its adult size. In 2022, Teach Plus Arkansas Policy Fellows facilitated a series of roundtables with Early Childhood Education (ECE) professionals from across the state. In this memo from the Teach Plus Arkansas ECE working group, we share findings from our research and recommendations for policymakers.

FINDINGS

Finding 1: Teachers believe that every child should have access to high-quality early childhood education.

“Early childhood is a vital time of growth and development. Children, especially those lacking resources at home, rely on schools to fill the gap. More needs to be spent on reaching the youngest when they are the most vulnerable.” **Focus group participant**

Teachers in our focus groups saw observable differences in students who have attended a high quality Pre-K program and those who haven’t. Several studies¹ have shown that the benefits gained from a high quality preschool education continue throughout life and there are significant economic gains for states from investing in high quality ECE programs. Children who attend these programs are less likely to retain a grade, less likely to be identified as having special needs, more prepared academically for higher grades, more likely to graduate from high school, less likely to be arrested, and more likely to be high earners in the workforce.

Finding 2: Early childhood educators in Arkansas are paid less than other education professionals, making it challenging to recruit and retain them in the state.

“Teachers need time to take off for a day or a week for training needs as well as compensation for their absent work day and their travel and fees. Many early childhood educators are working at an extremely low income.” **Focus group participant**

Low salaries continue to be the norm for the teacher workforce in Arkansas. Compared to kindergarten and elementary school teachers, early childhood educators earn poverty-level wages, making \$13.12 per hour on average in our state. Moreover, ECE professionals often lack access to basic benefits like paid sick days or health care. Many early childhood educators experience food insecurity. Half of ECE teachers reported² risk in their ability to meet their basic needs. Poor living conditions not only impact their quality of life, but also put in peril their ability to provide high-quality care and early learning experiences to our children. Additional ECE training and professional development is also a considerable factor. Early childhood educators working in high quality programs are required to complete a minimum of 25 hours each year of additional professional development, without compensation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Provide access to universal early childhood education to ensure that all 3 - 5 year-old children can enroll in a Better Beginnings Level 3 program.

Given that only 35% of Arkansas 3rd graders read at grade level³ and that Governor Sanders' LEARN plan states that students must be able to read at a 3rd grade level before they can advance to the 4th grade, we believe all districts—not just those who are in academic distress or on the school improvement list—should be required to establish a high quality Arkansas Better Chance (ABC)/Better Beginnings Level 3 program.

Recommendation 2: Invest in Step Up to Wages or create a similar program so that all Pre-K teachers in Arkansas have access to pay and benefits similar to those of their K-12 counterparts.

The ABC requirements in Arkansas require the lead teacher to hold a standard Arkansas teacher license with P-4 certification. Non-public school-based or non-educational cooperative-based ABC programs may hire a non-certified teacher with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or child development. In order to recruit and retain high quality early childhood educators, it is essential to invest in a program that provides incentives for our ECE workforce where educators who meet the same credentialing standards (private run or public) are rewarded with similar benefits and pay to those of their K-12 colleagues.

CONCLUSION

Quality early childhood learning experiences are a proven indicator of future success in both school and the workforce to which all Arkansans should have access. We must establish high quality universal early childhood education programs and ensure that every district fulfills Governor Sanders' LEARN goal of all third graders reading on grade level. To accomplish this, we need quality early childhood educators ready to teach our children. The time is now to invest in early childhood educators' salary, benefits, and professional development.

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ENDNOTES

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