

Making Arkansas' Early Learning System More Equitable:

Recommendations from Teach Plus Arkansas Policy Fellows

Importance of Early Childhood Education

Arkansas has been a leader in Early Childhood Education (ECE) since the 1990s, when it created the Arkansas Better Chances (ABC) program. Recognizing the need to strengthen early services, the state earmarked millions of dollars and created a process to reform the existing birth-to-five programs.

Research has shown that the most crucial period in a child's brain development is in the first five years of life. In fact, by the age of [six](#), a child's brain is 90 percent of its adult size.¹ Participation in pre-K programs leads to lasting academic success for students in Arkansas.² Students who attend an [ABC pre-K program](#) experience higher math and reading state test scores than their peers in the 3rd grade who have not attended such programs.³ The social and emotional gains for children also develop at a higher level when enrolled in a quality ECE program before entering elementary school.

We are a group of Teach Plus Arkansas Policy Fellows and early childhood educators who work in diverse classrooms across the state and are focused on leveraging authentic teacher leadership to transform student outcomes. In this memo, we provide a series of recommendations to build an equitable ECE system for every child in Arkansas.

State of ECE in Arkansas

In Arkansas, recent changes affecting birth-to-five programs have created more barriers for children and their families. Because of these changes, children's access to a high quality education has been limited. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's [2025 Kids Count report](#), 57 percent of three and four-year-olds in the state of Arkansas did not attend a school or daycare program.⁴ This number has increased since 2018, when 51 percent of three- and four-year-olds were not enrolled in a school or daycare.

Funding constraints further limit access. Since 2008, [Arkansas's](#) public funding for the Arkansas Better Chance pre-K program has remained flat at \$106 million a year.⁵ With no adjustments for inflation, the amount of funding has stagnated, serving fewer children.

Workforce-related barriers continue to affect the stability and quality of early childhood education. In 2022, the median hourly pay for an ECE professional in [Arkansas](#) was \$11.04.⁶ By comparison, elementary and middle school teachers earned a median of \$27.44 an hour. Despite the essential role early educators play in supporting school readiness, child development, and long-term academic success, this wage disparity underscores the inequities within the education workforce. Strengthening compensation structures and expanding access to benefits are crucial to recruiting, retaining, and sustaining qualified ECE educators.

Recommendations

1. Phase in expanded access to universal pre-K.

Arkansas should adopt a universal pre-K program that provides access to all four-year-olds and gradually expands eligibility to three-year-olds, as funding and system capacity allow. The long-term goal should be that every three- and four-year-old in the state has optional access to a high quality early childhood education program, positioning children for stronger school readiness and improved long-term academic outcomes. We recommend a phased rollout to ensure sustainability and quality.

Other states have successfully implemented this approach. [Georgia](#) expanded its pre-K program, increasing access from 8 percent of four-year-olds in 1993 to universal coverage by 1995.⁷ [Florida's](#) early childhood education program flourished because of the development of its voluntary universal pre-K program, which consolidated the Florida Partnership for School Readiness and pre-K programs, making them available to families across the state.⁸ Arkansas could have a similar phased-in and evidence-based initiative to help families obtain the resources needed to expand eligibility, access, and availability.

2. Secure dedicated funding for ECE.

Arkansas's current structure treats pre-K as a stand-alone program rather than as a part of the broader public education system. As a result, funding is vulnerable to stagnation and does not automatically adjust with enrollment, and access remains limited due to insufficient slot availability. It is imperative that Arkansas create a sustainable and stable funding program for early childhood education. Other states provide viable models:

- + In [Georgia](#)⁹, funding is awarded to public or private non-profit high quality pre-K providers and private for-profit providers on a competitive basis through its state lottery.
- + In [Oklahoma](#)¹⁰, funding for pre-K was integrated into the K-12 funding formula.

Arkansas could amend its school funding formula to include pre-K students, ensuring districts receive predictable, formula-based allocations. Federal early childhood grants should be strategically used for startup and expansion costs, while long-term sustainability should rely on state funding.

3. Provide incentives to retain ECE staff and expand career pathways.

Arkansas must improve compensation, benefits, and career pathways to stabilize the early childhood workforce. Early childhood educators in [the state](#) face a 23 percent gap between their median pay and a living wage.¹¹ Without expanded benefits and long-term financial support, retention of the ECE workforce will remain a challenge. We also recommend the following:

- + Expand scholarship programs, such as [T.E.A.C.H.](#)¹², to support credential and degree attainment.
- + Provide tuition assistance so financial limitations are not the reason talented educators walk away from advancement opportunities.
- + Continue to expand the Early Teacher Retirement Plan to strengthen financial security for educators.
- + Establish structured mentorship programs to support new educators.
- + Invest in credential and degree pathways that help educators earn associate's and bachelor's degrees in ECE and build sustainable careers.

Conclusion

Arkansas families expect and deserve a high quality education, and it starts with our early childhood education students. To ensure all Arkansas children have access to high quality education, our recommendations prioritize dedicated ECE funding, universal pre-K, and competitive benefits that foster both teacher retention and student consistency. These recommendations provide the blueprint for building academic proficiency across the state.

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About Teach Plus

Teach Plus is dedicated to the mission of empowering excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning for students.

Endnotes

- 1 Thompson, R.A. (2024). Early Brain Development and Public Health. National Library of Medicine. Retrieved from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39493243/>
- 2 McKenzie, S. C., & Jordan, E. (2021). Early Access: Elementary School Outcomes for Arkansas Better Chance Public Pre-Kindergarten Participants. Arkansas Education Reports. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/oepreport/75>
- 3 McKenzie, S., McGee, J. B., Jordan, E., & Reid, C. A. (2021). Early Access: Elementary School Outcomes for Arkansas Better Chance Pre-Kindergarten Participants. Policy Briefs. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/oepbrief/155>
- 4 The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2025). 2025 Kids Count Data Profile Arkansas. Retrieved from <https://assets.aecf.org/m/databook/2025-KCDB-profile-AR.pdf>
- 5 Denker, H. (2025). Funding Arkansas's Youngest Learners: Where We Are and What's Next. University of Arkansas Office for Education Policy. Retrieved from <https://oep.uark.edu/funding-arkansas-youngest-learners-where-we-are-and-whats-next/>
- 6 Center for the Study of Childcare Employment (2024). State Profiles Arkansas. Retrieved from <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2024/states/arkansas/>
- 7 National Institute for Early Education Research. The State of Preschool 2010: State Preschool Yearbook Georgia Profile. <https://nieer.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/Georgia20YB20201020profile.pdf>
- 8 CDC Violence Prevention. Spotlight: Florida. <https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/main/assets/pdf/prevention/pia/PIA-CAN-case-studies-Florida-508.pdf>
- 9 U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (2026). Georgia's Universal Pre-K Program: Lottery Funded Pre-K for All 4-Year-Olds. Retrieved from <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/solutions-bank/georgias-universal-pre-k-program-lottery-funded-pre-k-for-all-4-year-olds>
- 10 National Institute for Early Education Research (2023) Oklahoma: State of Preschool Yearbook 2023: State Profiles. Retrieved from <https://nieer.org/yearbook/2023/state-profiles/oklahoma>
- 11 Denker, H. (2025). Funding Arkansas's Youngest Learners: Where We Are and What's Next. University of Arkansas Office for Education Policy. Retrieved from <https://oep.uark.edu/funding-arkansas-youngest-learners-where-we-are-and-whats-next/>
- 12 Arkansas Early Childhood Association. (n.d.). TEACH Early Childhood® Arkansas Teacher Education and Compensation Helps. Retrieved from <https://arkansasearlychildhood.org/teach/>