Dear Arkansan:

ForwARd Arkansas, a strategic partnership of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, Walton Family Foundation and Arkansas Board of Education, has been established to develop a strategic plan to dramatically improve public education in Arkansas.

ForwARd has brought us together, a diverse group of Arkansas leaders with a wide range of experiences, to form its steering committee. We are reaching out to educators, parents, students, community leaders and policy makers across our state for input on how to advance education and move Arkansas forward. Following careful review of input from the community and based upon our understanding of where we stand today (which we share with you in this report), we plan to complete and release a holistic plan for P-16 education.

We start this process from a position of strength. Arkansas has been successful in improving access to education across all ages from pre-K to college. We have also established policies and standards that should support improved student outcomes. However, student outcomes are still far below our aspirations. Too few students are graduating from our schools prepared for college and the workforce. Additionally, the achievement gap is still significant despite recent gains.

ForwARd’s work will not stop with the release of a plan. ForwARd is committed to working with the rest of Arkansas to change these outcomes in the coming years. And the opportunity is great. Just to give one example: if we are able to bring Arkansas’s 6-year college graduation rates up from 39% (among the lowest in the nation) just to the national average of 57%, 11,000 more Arkansas students would graduate from college in the next five years in 4-year public universities alone.¹

Education is important to all of us. Let’s move ForwARd together.

Sincerely,

ForwARd Arkansas Steering Committee

Working Together to Advance Education
ForwARd Arkansas is a partnership of education, business, government and civil society professionals committed to improving public education in the state. The group is currently conducting extensive research, encouraging statewide discussion and developing a holistic plan to strengthen public education.

ForwARd is organized by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, Walton Family Foundation and Arkansas Board of Education, and advised by The Boston Consulting Group (research and strategic planning), Eric Rob & Isaac (web and report development), and The Peacock Group (communications).

**VISION:** Every Arkansas student will graduate prepared for success in college and the workplace

**MISSION:** To help Arkansas create one of the finest public education systems in the nation

**GOAL:** To create a holistic strategic plan for P-16 education in Arkansas, with specific recommendations for academically distressed schools and school districts, that will provide actionable recommendations to shape and guide the state’s time and resources to realize this vision and mission

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Steering Committee

**Shane Broadway,** Director, Arkansas Department of Higher Education  
**Toby Daughtery,** Lead Recruiter and Outreach Coordinator, The STAND Foundation  
**Kim Davis,** Board Member, Arkansas State Board of Education  
**Bill Dillard III,** Vice President, Dillard’s Inc.  
**Marcy Doderer,** President and CEO, Arkansas Children’s Hospital in Little Rock  
**Matt Dozier,** President and CEO, Environmental and Spatial Technology (EAST) Initiative  
**Bob East,** Co-Founder, East-Harding Inc.  
**Joyce Elliot,** Arkansas State Senator  
**Melanie Fox,** Co-Founder, J&M Foods  
**Diana Gonzales Worthen,** Director, Project RISE at University of Arkansas at Fayetteville  
**Lavina Grandon,** Founder and President, Rural Community Alliance  
**Johnny Key,** Associate Vice President of University Relations, University of Arkansas  
**Tom Kimbrell,** Superintendent, Bryant Public Schools  
**Ginny Kurrus,** Former State President, Arkansas PTA  
**Michele Linch,** Executive Director, Arkansas State Teachers Association  
**Hugh McDonald,** President and CEO, Entergy Arkansas Inc.  
**Justin Minkel,** Elementary School Teacher, Jones Elementary School in Springdale  
**David Rainey,** Assistant State Director, JBHM Education Group  
**John Riggs IV,** President, J.A. Riggs Tractor Company  
**Scott Shirey,** Founder and Executive Director, KIPP Delta Public Schools  
**Ray Simon,** Former Deputy Secretary, U.S. Department of Education  
**Kathy Smith,** Senior Program Officer, Walton Family Foundation  
**LaDonna Spain,** School Improvement Specialist, Arkansas Department of Education  
**Bob Watson,** Former Superintendent, El Dorado Public Schools  
**Sheree West-Scantlebury,** President and CEO, Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation  
**Darrin Williams,** CEO, Southern Bancorp Inc.  
**Kenya Williams,** Co-Chair, Strong-Community Leadership Alliance

For more information on the Steering Committee, please visit ForwardArkansas.org.
1. **Access**

Arkansas has been successful in improving access to education and in increasing participation in higher-level educational activities.

- **Pre-K Access:** Top 20 nationally
- **High School Graduation Rate:** Above national average
- **AP Exams & ACT:** Very large increase in participating students
- **College-Going Rate:** Top 20 nationally

2. **Standards**

Arkansas has established policies and standards that should support improved student outcomes.

- **Common Core:** Arkansas is now 4 years into the implementation of this rigorous college-ready standards program
- **Principal & Teacher Licensure & Training:** Arkansas has been recognized as a leader in developing standards in these areas
- **Per-Pupil Expenditure:** Arkansas’s per-pupil expenditure has increased in recent years and is near national average

3. **Outcomes**

Student outcomes are still far below aspirations across the state; opportunity exists to improve.

- **Pre-K:** For low-income children who attended pre-K, only 18% were considered ‘developed’ in all six QELI categories: 31% in at least 5 categories, 43% in at least 4 categories and 57% in 3 or less categories
- **4th- and 8th-Grade:** Bottom 20 nationally in math and literacy test scores – and that rank has dropped since 2005
- **College Graduation Rate:** 39% (48th in the nation)

4. **Achievement Gap**

Despite recent gains, the achievement gap is still significant, and this is reflected in economic, racial and regional disparities.

- **Low-Income & Minority Students:** Perform below other students on national tests, although the gap has narrowed since 2005
- **Regional Achievement:** Southeast has lowest average but largest gains; Central has largest disparity and concentration of academically distressed schools
- **Pockets of Performance:** Across Arkansas, there are pockets of high and low performance suggesting opportunity to spread what already works well statewide
## ARKANSAS EDUCATION AT A GLANCE³

Trends in student populations highlight the changing landscape of Arkansas education.

### Pre-K
- 3- & 4-year-olds enrolled: 39,000
- $ per pupil: $5,514

### K-12
- Number of school districts: 258
- Avg students/district: 1,841
- Number of schools: 1,082
- Number of teachers: 33,000
- Number of students: 475,000
- % of students minority: 37%
- % of students qualifying for FRL: 61%
- $ per pupil: $9,411

### Higher Ed
- Number of students in 2- or 4-year: 181,000
- % of students in 4-year schools: 65%
- % of students minority: 32%

### Increase in number of students in 2- or 4-year colleges

### Increase in percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch

### Increase in percentage of minority students
ACCESS
Arkansas has been successful in improving access to education and in increasing participation in higher-level educational activities.

Ranked in the top 20 nationally for pre-K access
49% of 3- and 4-year-olds (vs. 48% nationally)³

High school graduation rate above national average
84% graduation rate (vs. 80% nationally)¹⁰

Very large recent increase in the number of students taking AP exams and the ACT
Ranked 6th in the nation for students taking AP exams¹¹

Top 20 nationally for college-going rate
65% of high school grads go on to college (vs. 63% nationally)¹²
Arkansas’s per-pupil expenditure has increased in recent years and is near national average.13

Quality Education Act of 1983 set minimum standards for public school accreditation that have been continuously refined; Arkansas is now four years into implementation of rigorous college-ready standards (Common Core).14

Arkansas has been recognized as a leader in developing standards for principal and teacher licensure and training by Education Week’s Quality Counts report.15

Digital Education Act of 2013 established criteria for selecting quality digital providers and required that schools offer digital learning courses; however, broadband access is very limited.16

There are two innovative learning models in Arkansas — charter schools and schools of innovation. Charter schools currently serve 3% of Arkansas’s students, and schools of innovation account for less than 2%.17

POLICIES & STANDARDS
Arkansas has established policies and standards that should support improved student outcomes.
OUTCOMES
Student outcomes are still far below aspirations across the state; opportunity exists to improve.

Pre-K helps children. especially low income, build skills for kindergarten and beyond; however further evaluation and adjustments may be needed. For low-income children who attended pre-K, only 18% were considered ‘developed’ in all six QELI categories: 31% in at least 5 categories, 43% in at least 4 categories, and 57% in 3 or less categories.18

Arkansas ranks in the bottom 20 states on 4th- and 8th-grade national tests in math and literacy.19

26 schools and two school districts have been placed in Academic Distress.20

Only 20% of students taking the ACT met college-ready benchmarks in all four subjects.21

Almost half of all students enrolling in 2- and 4-year public universities in Arkansas require remedial coursework.22

Arkansas’s college graduation rate and degree attainment rate are among the lowest in the nation.23
Despite recent gains, the achievement gap is still significant, and this is reflected in economic, racial and regional disparities.

Minority and FRL-eligible population has grown statewide; Southeast has the highest concentration.  

Minority and FRL-eligible students perform below other students on national tests, although the gap has narrowed since 2005.  

Arkansas has high- and low-performing schools in every region, but access to high-performing schools varies significantly by region.

Regional Challenges

Top and bottom 10% based on Augmented Benchmark Exams proficiency for schools serving grades 3-8

Students in NW have the highest math and literacy proficiency; students in SE have the lowest (Average, grades 3-8)

Most students in NW attend schools in top 50% of performance; most in SE attend schools in bottom 50%

Source: Office of Education Policy Benchmark Exam database 2013-14
Conclusion

There’s no doubt that Arkansas has made progress in improving the education of our students. We have seen many inspiring examples of great teaching by educators across the state. Yet there is still a long way to go to be sure that every student is provided the best education to serve them in the future.

This report is designed to help you better understand the state of education in Arkansas and how we compare nationally. The facts and figures found in this report set the foundation for creating a holistic plan to improve public education in our state.

This is our home and these are our children. We owe them, the future of our state, the best education possible. We owe the employers who have committed to building businesses here the most educated workforce. We are committed to making that happen, and we hope you’ll join us in the journey.

Call to Action

We need all Arkansans to do their part in helping move the state forward. Here are a few steps you can take today!

1. Visit www.ForwardArkansas.org and use our online survey to share your thoughts on public education in Arkansas.

2. Share this report with your friends, families, teachers and community leaders. We make it easy through our social portals on Facebook and Twitter.

3. Encourage conversations in your community and email us at info@ForwardArkansas.org to tell us about your progress.

4. Sign up for our e-newsletter (on the home page of the website) to stay informed about ForwARd Arkansas’s progress and how you can help.
Footnotes


2. **Sources:** Source citations for the summary page can be found in the source citations for each report section.

3. **Sources:** Pre-K spending data from NIEER 2013 Yearbook, pre-K volume from Ed Week Quality Counts and US Census data. All K-12 data from Arkansas Department of Education SIS State Profiles, unless otherwise noted. Higher Ed data from IPEDS and SREB. Teacher data a special pull by ADE. Per pupil expenditures from US Census, NCES.

4. **Note:** Data is for 2014-15 because reporting issue for 2013-14 prohibits comparisons.

5. **Note:** FRL stands for Free or Reduced Lunch. A student is eligible for free lunch at school if his or her family income is below 130 percent of the poverty line; the student is eligible for a reduced-price lunch if the family income is below 185 percent of the poverty line.

6. **Note:** Data is for FY 2012; constant FY 2012 values are shown (calculated using CPI inflator).

7. **Note:** This is for 2011-12, data not available for 2012-13.

8. **Note:** Minority includes all races except white.

9. **Source:** Ed Week Quality Counts database accessed 10/21/2014.

10. **Note:** Using adjusted cohort graduation rate, which is considered the most accurate measure available for reporting on-time graduation rates (Seastrom et al. 2006b). A 4-year ACGR is defined as the number of students who graduate in 4 years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for that graduating class. The term “adjusted cohort” means the students who enter grade 9 plus any students who transfer into the cohort in grades 9-12 minus any students who are removed from the cohort because they transferred out, moved out of the country, or were deceased (34 C.F.R. § 200.19). The Office of Education Policy’s graduation rate database also reports 2011-12 adjusted graduation rate as 84%.

**Source:** NCES Public HS Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates: School years 2010-11 and 2011-12.

11. **Note:** Number of exams taken by the current year’s 11th and 12th grade AP students (number of exams not given) divided by the state’s “11th and 12th Grade Enrollment” x 1000. 11th and 12th grade enrollment represent enrollment for public schools only, from Applied Educational Research Inc. of Princeton, NJ.

**Sources:** College Board National AP Report. See also ACT Condition of College and Career Readiness Report 2012.

12. **Note:** College-going rate is defined as the number of first-time freshmen who graduated from high school in the past year from state X enrolled anywhere in the U.S./Public and private high school graduates. 2010 is the last year for which this was calculated. Note that the Arkansas Dept of Higher Ed’s 2013 Comprehensive Report calculates the 2012 college-going rate as 52%; this difference is potentially due to the fact that only public high school students are considered.

**Source:** NCHEMS Information Center, which relies on information from Tom Mortenson—Postsecondary Education Opportunity http://www.postsecondary.org.

13. **Note A:** Statewide data on current expenditures collected and aggregated from states by Census Bureau, statewide enrollment from National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

**Note B:** Growth rate calculated on real 2012 dollars i.e. adjusted for inflation using the CPI inflator


14. **Sources:** Interviews with ADE; University of Arkansas Office of Education Policy “Quality Education Act of 2003.”

15. **Source:** Education Week Quality Counts Database 2012. (2012 was most recent year data was available for a state by state comparison in the database.)


18. **Note A:** Child development assessed using Qualls Early Learning Inventory (QELI), an observational tool for use in the primary grades to identify student development in six areas related to school learning.

**Note B:** Low-income defined in study as being free- or reduced-lunch eligible. For example, according to the Arkansas Research Center study “ABC Shrinks Gap in Kindergarten Readiness for Economically Disadvantaged Students”, for a family of four an income of $43,568 or less is classified as free- or reduced-lunch eligible.

**Sources:** Arkansas Research Center, ADE expert interview.


20. **Sources:** ADE Rules Governing the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment and Accountability Program (ACTAAP) and the Academic Distress Program, September 2014: http://www.arkansased.org/divisions/legal/rules/current. ADE interview.

21. **Note:** The four subjects tested in the ACT are: English, Mathematics, Reading and Science.

**Source:** ACT Profile Report for Arkansas, Graduating Class of 2013.

22. **Note:** Using “anytime” remediation rate, which is defined to be % of first-time degree-seeking students enrolled in a remedial class.


23. **Source:** http://collegecompletion.chronicle.com/state/no.state=AR&sector=public_four; data is based on IPEDS, which tracks completions of first-time, full-time degree-seeking undergrad students.

24. **Source:** Office for Education Policy demographic databases, 2005-06 and 2013-14


26. **Source:** ADE. Office of Education Policy (University of Arkansas) benchmark exam database, 2013-14.
Academic Distress: This term is used to describe a school or district that has, for a sustained period of time, demonstrated a lack of student achievement. Specifically, this is a classification assigned to (a) any public school or school district in which 49.5 percent or less of its students achieve proficient or advanced on a composite of math and literacy tests for the most recent three-year period; or (b) a Needs Improvement school (Priority) or a school district with a Needs Improvement (Priority) school that has not made the progress required under the school’s Priority Improvement Plan (PIP). A Needs Improvement school is a school that has not met its annual targets in performance growth and high school graduation rates. See the Arkansas Accountability Addendum to Elementary Secondary Education Act Flexibility Request for more information.


ACT: The ACT is a national college admissions examination that consists of subject area tests in English, mathematics, reading and science.

http://www.actstudent.org/faq/what.html

Advanced Placement Exams (AP): AP Exams are rigorous, multiple-component tests that are administered at high schools each May. High school students can earn college credit, placement or both for qualifying AP Exam scores. Each AP Exam has a corresponding AP course and provides a standardized measure of what students have learned in the AP classroom.

http://professionals.collegeboard.com/testing/ap

Augmented Benchmark Exams: The Augmented Benchmark Exam is an assessment that is given in the spring to students in grades 3-8. The first part of the test, commonly called the Benchmark, is based on specific student learning expectations (SLEs) found in the state frameworks. The Benchmark test covers SLEs in math and literacy. Science SLEs are included in grades 5 and 7. Scores from the Benchmark are reported as below basic, basic, proficient and advanced. An Academic Improvement Plan will be developed to identify skills where a student needs extra support to be successful in school if the student scored basic or below basic. Students scoring proficient or advanced combine to form our percentage reported as AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress). This percentage – or AYP – is reported to the public. The second part – augmented – of this assessment, called ITBS, is not based on Arkansas learning objectives, but instead measures an individual student’s performance to a nationwide group of students. Scores from this part of the Augmented Benchmark are not part of the AYP calculations.

http://www.cabotschools.org/curriculum/assessment-testing/benchmark-exams-grades-3-8

Charter school: Charter schools are public schools that operate under a “charter,” or “charter contract,” which frees them from many regulations created for traditional public schools while holding them accountable for academic and financial results. The charter contract is between the charter school’s sponsoring entity and the Arkansas State Board of Education or the Commissioner of Education.

http://www.arkansased.org/faqs/105/what-is-a-charter-school
**Common Core State Standards:** The Common Core State Standards is a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy. These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. The standards were created to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career and life.


**Degree Attainment Rate:** Percentage of the state’s working-age population (25-64) with at least an associate’s degree.

**Education Week Quality Counts:** Quality Counts is Education Week’s annual report on state-level efforts to improve public education. It is published in January.


**Free or Reduced Lunch (FRL):** The National School Lunch Program is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day. A student is eligible for free lunch at school if his or her family income is below 130 percent of the poverty line; the student is eligible for a reduced-price lunch if the family income is below 185 percent of the poverty line.


**National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP):** NAEP is the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what students in the United States know and can do in various subject areas. Assessments are conducted periodically in mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, U.S. history, and beginning in 2014, in technology and engineering literacy.

http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/

**P-16:** Refers to the full spectrum of education from pre-K through the first four years of post-secondary education.

**Remediation Rate:** Since 1988, all entering first-year students seeking an associate degree or higher from an Arkansas public college or university must meet Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board assessment and placement standards in the disciplines of English, math and reading. A cut-off score of 19 on the ACT exam (or the equivalent on the ASSET, SAT or COMPASS tests) is used for each of the three subject areas.

Comprehensive Arkansas Higher Education Report, Dec 2013, Remediation Rates.