

Policy for the Public

WRF's Impact, Influence, and Leverage



Photo by Russell Carey (2017)



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Summary

Since its founding, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation (WRF) has recognized the need to **impact** public policy through relationships and partnership, **influence** policy decisions with accurate data for fact-driven decision making, and **leverage** the capacity of advocacy organizations and communities. WRF requires good policy to achieve its vision of a thriving and prosperous Arkansas that benefits all Arkansans.

WRF's programs and strategies for achieving better **policy for the public** have resulted in positive changes in the state and beyond. Traditionally, many grantmakers avoid engaging in the policy arena due to limited legal understanding, lack of capacity, or fear of reputational risk. As a transformational foundation, WRF boldly embraces philanthropy's role in shaping policy that moves Arkansans from poverty to prosperity.

The Foundation provides continued support for data-driven policy changes through grants, initiatives, partnerships, and direct service to improve the lives of all Arkansans in the areas of education; economic development; and economic, racial, and social justice.

A Brief History of WRF: Leadership for Public Policy

From the beginning, WRF has advocated for good public policy. Under the leadership of WRF's first president, Tom McRae, the Foundation published several policy reports such as *School Daze*, *Fulfilling the Promises of Reform*, *Responsible Choices in Taxation to Toward More Informed Decisions*, and *Obstacles and Opportunities*.

WRF's second president, Mahlon Martin, understood the culture and mechanics of the state and its government. Martin led WRF's investment in public private partnerships, such as regional community development corporations, advocates in community organizations, and strategies to address public policies related to incarceration and education.

The Foundation appointed Dr. Sybil Jordan Hampton as the third president, a leader with thirty years of public service and education experience. During her 10-year tenure, WRF launched studies on tax policy and entrepreneurial education, creating a catalyst for change in the state's educational funding priorities and commitments.

The current president, Dr. Sherece Y. West-Scantlebury, piloted the Moving the Needle (MTN) Strategic Plan, a successful strategy for expanding support of public-private partnerships, broadening research for education and immigration policy, and investing in advocacy and organizing groups for racial and social justice. Three initiatives launched during her tenure—the *Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (AR-GLR)*, *ForwARd Arkansas*, and *Expect More Arkansas*—combined programs, partnerships, and policy approaches to address needs in the continuum between early childhood education and workforce development.

Policy for the Public

WRF's Impact, Influence, and Leverage

WRF's Impact: Partnerships for Public Policy

WRF has a long history of leveraging public-private partnerships to improve and implement state and federal policy. From engaging directly with departments, bureaus, and government task forces, to partnering with other private organizations, WRF often takes a direct route to develop progressive public policy, enhance educational outcomes, and increase prosperity. Select examples are listed below:

- **Governor's Economic Development Study Commission.** In 1975, WRF granted \$100,000 to support Governor David Pryor's commission as it conducted a comprehensive analysis of factors affecting Arkansas's growth and development.
- **Arkansas Department of Education (ADE).** WRF first partnered with ADE in 1979 to support its Program for Effective Teaching, a program based on early studies conducted by the Rockwin Fund. The partnership warranted future ADE policies built on WRF-funded research.
- **Southern Bancorp.** WRF led the creation of Southern Bancorp in 1985. Southern has continued to be a community development bank committed to spurring growth in the Delta Region of Arkansas by exclusively using earnings for workforce development and community economic revitalization. In 1994, when the federal government established the Community Development Finance Institution (CDFI) with the *Riegle Community Development and Regulatory Improvement Act*, Southern Bancorp was well-positioned to implement new policies and leverage federal support.
- **School of the 21st Century (21C).** In 2001, WRF supported a project demonstration in Arkansas that transformed public schools into year-round, multi-service centers, with emphasis on early childhood education (ECE). The State leveraged resources and used a national model to implement 21C in one-fifth of public pre-K and elementary schools. Arkansas's ranking on ECE soared from near the bottom to near the top of the national list.
- **MTN.** WRF gathered data from government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community leaders to influence MTN's development in 2008. Each of the Foundation's bold goals to increase prosperity, increase educational attainment, strengthen communities, and build the nonprofit infrastructure called for supportive public policies at the state and local levels.
- **ForwARd Arkansas.** In 2014, the Arkansas State Board of Education established the *ForwARd Arkansas* initiative, a strategic partnership between WRF and the Walton Family Foundation. The partnership engaged more than 8,500 Arkansans to create a comprehensive plan for public education with actionable recommendations for academically distressed schools and districts. These data-informed recommendations built on community input will shape Arkansas education policy for decades to come.

Policy for the Public

WRF's Impact, Influence, and Leverage

WRF's Influence: Data for Informed Decision-Making

Without good information, policymakers cannot make informed decisions. WRF has a long history of providing research and evaluation to change policy. Select examples are listed below:

- **Program for Effective Teaching.** In 1979, WRF supported the Arkansas Department of Education's Program for Effective Teaching based on evidence from studies conducted by the Rockwin Fund. Early partnerships for effective public policy with ADE influenced extensive collaboration under MTN.
- **Accelerate Arkansas.** WRF's 1999 Connecting the Dots study facilitated the public private partnership of Accelerate Arkansas, which reiterated the need for sustainable development and supportive policies for entrepreneurship.
- **Tax Options for Arkansas.** In 2001, WRF supported a cohort of organizations to analyze funding alternatives and assure fair and adequate support for all public school students. The group's report, *Tax Options for Arkansas: Funding Education After the Lake View Case*, has continued to inform tax policy and education reform.
- **Poverty Task Force.** WRF provided financial support and participated directly in the Arkansas Legislative Taskforce on Reducing Poverty and Promoting Economic Opportunity. The task force developed a report with Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families to propose benchmark goals and policy recommendations to reduce poverty by 50 percent in 10 years.
- **A Profile of Immigrants in Arkansas.** Almost a decade following WRF's first major immigration study, the Foundation released *A Profile of Immigrants in Arkansas*, an expanded and updated impact report on Arkansas's newest residents and related policies. The three-volume report describes the demographics of the state's immigrant population, the economic and fiscal impact of immigrants in the state, and the unique challenges faced by the state's Marshallese community. This research has been nationally recognized and serves as a powerful tool for advocacy. WRF also used the report to testify on issues around immigration, including the DREAM Act.
- **College Count\$.** Grants to Arkansas Community Colleges in 2013 and 2015 resulted in scientifically rigorous longitudinal data on the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) that gained national recognition by *The Washington Post* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and recommendations to make changes to federal policy based on Arkansas's program. CPI uses Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding to provide people in poverty with education and training opportunities that lead to careers and increased wages.
- **Expect More Arkansas.** Based on findings revealed by 2015 report commissioned by the Foundation, *Where the Jobs Are*, WRF launched the *Expect More Arkansas* initiative. Using regional, statewide, and industry-specific data on jobs, education, and opportunity, *Expect More Arkansas* lays out a vision to improve skills and careers in the state so 70 percent of Arkansans can earn family-supporting wages. The initiative and the report have been used to convene agency leaders to identify and address barriers to postsecondary student success.

Policy for the Public

WRF's Impact, Influence, and Leverage

WRF's Leverage: Capacity for Policy & Advocacy

Often the most effective path to strong public policy runs through strong advocacy organizations. Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF), the Arkansas Public Policy Panel (APPP), and the Rural Community Alliance (RCA) have been deemed Mission Critical because of the crucial role that advocacy plays in advancing WRF's strategic plan. Select examples of capacity building are listed below:

- **AACF.** AACF was established in 1977 with core support from WRF. Through research, advocacy, and organizing, AACF has addressed some of the most challenging issues affecting families, from reducing dropout rates and improving grade-level reading to ending predatory payday lending in Arkansas.
- **Project Vote.** Governor Winthrop Rockefeller worked hard to clean up the election process and reduce voting barriers for average citizens. As tribute to the Governor's legacy, WRF funded Project Vote, an effort to increase civic participation in Pine Bluff.
- **Centers for Youth and Families (CYF).** In 1993, WRF funded CYF to develop strategies for improving public policies impacting incarcerated women and their children. Governor Winthrop Rockefeller's legacy and dedication to reforming the state prison system noticeably influenced this effort and WRF's steadfast support of marginalized groups in Arkansas.
- **APPP.** In 2009, WRF partnered with APPP to make the first of several investments designed to leverage federal funds through the historic American Reinvestment and Recovery Act. Ongoing partnerships with advocacy organizations like APPP help WRF respond quickly to policy changes.
- **RCA.** For nearly a decade, WRF has invested in maximizing RCA's (formerly Advocates for Community and Rural Education) capacity for community engagement and organization to address school closure, rural decline, community development, and public infrastructure.
- **AR-GLR.** In 2012, WRF founded AR-GLR, a local initiative that leverages the resources of a national network. AR-GLR engages community and government stakeholders to address school readiness, attendance, and summer learning. The organization's comprehensive goal is that by 2020, all Arkansas students will read at grade level by the end of third grade.
- **Arkansas United Community Coalition (AUCC).** In 2013 WRF invested in a three-year-old AUCC that was building the capacity of immigrant and multiethnic communities through grassroots organizing. Through additional grants and project support (including Delivering on the Dream), WRF helped AUCC expand to 150 organizers in 17 communities.
- **Center for Arkansas Legal Services (CALs).** In 2016, WRF used Capacity for Change funds to support CALs as it shifted from individual case law to social justice litigation. The success of CALs' 2015 challenge of Arkansas' criminal eviction statute sparked a revision of the organization, focused on systemic impact for Arkansas's vulnerable populations.

Policy for the Public

WRF's Impact, Influence, and Leverage

Where Do We Go From Here?

As we near the end of MTN 2.0, the current strategic plan, the WRF Board and staff reflect on outcomes, analyzing and interpreting lessons learned, and planning for the future through a three-year **Reflection, Analysis, and Planning (RAP)** process. RAP will culminate with the adoption of the Foundation's next strategic plan.

During the RAP process, we will dig deep into the role policy and advocacy played in achieving the MTN vision and goals. As we evaluate the impact of our policy and advocacy work, we will strive to answer the following questions:

- How has grantmaking and direct advocacy supported the change we seek through MTN, and where has it fallen short?
- What is the scope of our state, regional, and national network for policy change?
- Are we making progress as quickly as possible, and does quickly mean effectively?
- Could philanthropy's role in advocacy shift with the current political climate?

Throughout its history, WRF has valued the impact of public policy through partnerships, accurate data, and nonprofit and community capacity. These values coupled with our legacy guide us through each phase of RAP and influence our leadership in philanthropy and policy.