

Vision For Pre-K

Investment in Pre-K is critical to moving the needle on the vision and mission of ForwARd, endorsed by the Arkansas Department of Education, Walton Family Foundation, Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, and dozens of leading education and workforce development organizations across the state, to improve student achievement at a historically ambitious yet achievable rate and close the achievement gap within a generation.

ForwARd Arkansas heard from nearly 10,000 Arkansans via town hall meetings, focus groups and surveys, who told us they hope to see their legislators focus on improving capacity in our Pre-K programs and raising their quality. High quality Pre-K is the first critical component on a continuum of 7 Key Focus Areas in ForwARd's 2015 report, A New Vision for Arkansas Education.



Why Pre-K?

By investing in high-quality Pre-K we make sure our students start their academic career ahead and stay ahead from the beginning. We know that students who have a strong start, become educated, productive members of our workforce. An investment in Pre-K is critical to moving the needle on the vision and strategic goal of ForwARd. That means ForwARd is investing its voice and resources in improving capacity and raising quality standards.

ForwARd Arkansas is advocating for incremental increases in permanent funding for high-quality, voluntary pre-K over a five to 10 year period beginning with a \$20 million increase in 2017.



The Issues

EARLY LITERACY AND SCHOOL READINESS

Arkansas' goal is for all school children to read on grade level by the end of third grade. The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading identified pre-K preparation as one of three key factors affecting third-grade success. It is at this time that children transition from learning to read into reading to learn. However, current reading assessments show that **only 31 percent of Arkansas third graders read on grade level**. Closing this literacy gap will help move Arkansas children forward.

POVERTY HINDERS SUCCESS

Twenty-nine percent of Arkansas children, from birth to age 5, live in poverty. Research has found that **children in poverty hear roughly 30 million fewer words**, compared to their more affluent peers, by the time they enter Kindergarten. In fact, the average vocabulary for an impoverished child entering Kindergarten is less than 500 words.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND WORKFORCE PREPAREDNESS

Many soft skills children learn - like character, communication and social skills - make them more successful in school, higher ed and in their future employment. These are skills that employers demand, so **investing in Pre-K meets these critical workforce needs**.

HEALTHY MINDS AND BODIES

Access to high-quality, voluntary pre-K is a smart investment from a public health standpoint. Economically disadvantaged children are more likely to be vaccinated and have access to healthy meals. **Early childhood programs benefit school achievement, encourage grade retention, and reduce preventable special education placement**. Children also develop better social skills and heightened self-esteem.

INCARCERATION AND RE-ENTRY

When our kids have these early learning opportunities, they are more likely to build the critical skills that lay the foundation for future academic success and make it less likely that they will eventually drop out. That is important — **seven out of 10 inmates in state prisons do not have a high school diploma**.