Overview

In 2019, ForwARd Arkansas implemented a series of impactful initiatives to advance equity, innovation and opportunity for students and their families. These included:

• As informed by our 2018 Policy Collaboratives, efforts to advance legislation to support the needs of Arkansas students - including championing Act 456, the Arkansas Concurrent Challenge Scholarship, that uses excess Arkansas Lottery proceeds to fund scholarships that encourage high school students to obtain college credits and career training credentials.

• Our second annual Data & Policy Symposium to discuss the importance of quality, integrated, longitudinal data in tracking state and local educational outcomes.

• Work to advance community schools as a solution in our rural communities and in the Little Rock School District. This included presenting testimony to the Senate and House Interim Education Committees.

• Ongoing support for a coordinated effort in our initial cohort of five diverse ForwARd Communities - as well as other targeted initiatives in communities throughout the state - to develop, implement and replicate innovative programs, practices and partnerships necessary to provide new opportunities to advance education for students.

• ForwARd’s communications efforts also expanded in 2019 - as did the organization’s Board of Directors, which grew by five members.
Legislation and Policy

Working closely with partners from across the state, ForwARd is proud to support and advance legislation that will make a difference for Arkansas students, schools and families.

In partnership with our communities, we worked to move and pass Act 456 in 2019 – which will use excess Arkansas Lottery proceeds to fund scholarships that encourage high school students to obtain college credits and career training credentials.

To more fully recognize community schools as a potential model to address educational inequities throughout the state, ForwARd drafted and connected a bipartisan Senate Resolution that was adopted in support of community schools. ForwARd leadership also presented on the need for community schools to address low-income student equity to the Senate and House Interim Education Committees.

THERE IS STILL MORE WORK TO BE DONE:

- We’ll continue to support the expansion of early childhood tax credits to include credits for early childhood educators to earn a family-supporting wage and improve outcomes for children. Senate Bill 618, introduced in the 2019 General Assembly, aimed to accomplish this goal. The bill passed the Senate unanimously, but was not granted a hearing in the House prior to adjournment.
We have also worked with partners in the Invest Early Coalition to coalesce an effective legislative caucus around early childhood policy. The inaugural meeting of the Arkansas Early Childhood Caucus is slated for January 2020.

ForwARd will continue to advocate for policy and legislative solutions that support the community schools model as a smart and efficient way to advance equity and excellence for all high-poverty students in any school.

We know that access to quality, integrated data that extends from Pre-K through postsecondary education/training and workforce participation still does not exist in Arkansas at a granular level as it does in other states. ForwARd continues to call for a statewide cradle-to-career longitudinal data system and push for the development of a consortium of researchers to review, analyze and provide recommendations based on the data we collect. It is vitally important and has great potential to power consistent and credible research that can form the basis of sound policy and allow us to assess progress towards desired goals.

Community Schools

In addition to championing policy to encourage and implement the community school model across the state, the ForwARd team managed the initial distribution of a survey for the Rural School and Community Research Initiative, as well as a thorough literature review of best practices, challenges and equity policy for rural schools in Arkansas. We anticipate sharing our findings in mid-summer of 2020.

In collaboration with ForwARd with support from the Rural Community Alliance, the Arkansas Policy Project at Hendrix College issued a report entitled “Learning from Earle” that explored the challenges facing rural schools and highlights potential strategies for success in turning around low-achieving schools.
ForwARd was also proud to host the national director of the Coalition for Community Schools in a meeting with the Arkansas Coalition, the Little Rock School District, the Little Rock Mayor’s Office, three Pulaski County legislators and a liaison from the Arkansas Department of Education to discuss how community schools could be utilized in Arkansas. We are proud to support these ongoing efforts and will continue to work with our partners in Little Rock and across the state to push for equity and opportunity for all Arkansas students.

Data and Policy Symposium

On September 26, ForwARd gathered a diverse group of more than 100 leaders from higher education, the business community, policy-makers, government agencies, local school districts and more at our second annual Data and Policy Symposium.

This group tackled a number of issues related to how data can be used to inform both the development of and investment in policies and programs to address inequities and improve educational outcomes, as well as how to leverage data in a way that ensures all Arkansas youth are set up to succeed in school and beyond.

This included discussion on a series of Pre-K studies developed by the ForwARd team. It is imperative that Arkansas creates systems to value the efficient collection and utilization of data at both the state and local levels to allow us to track the long-term impact of quality early childhood education. As part of the symposium, the Pea Ridge School District and iDatafy – a technology provider – presented to share information on their partnership for blockchain-certified “Smart Resumes” for students.
Communities

Over the course of the last year, ForwARd has continued to provide support for our initial cohort of five diverse communities as they develop, implement and replicate innovative programs, practices and partnerships necessary to provide new opportunities to advance education for students and communities across the state. In addition, our team worked closely with a few additional communities – Earle, Little Rock and Pine Bluff – to do the same.

FOR EXAMPLE:

• Working closely with the Arkansas Department of Education, we developed a toolkit for school districts to use with parents in explaining ESSA and their school letter grades that was distributed across the state.

• We hosted a ForwARd Thinking Dialogue that paired local educators, business and civic leaders from Independence and Crossett Counties to discuss student employability and how communities can support schools in preparing students for success in college or career.

• ForwARd was the catalyst and connector to bring Communities Unlimited, a nonprofit serving seven states including Arkansas that provides infrastructure service with economic entrepreneurial growth strategies, to Crossett in the wake of a major job loss event in that community.

• ForwARd was the catalyst and connector for a partnership between the Lee County School District, the University of Arkansas Extension Service and the Division of Career Education focused on high-tech agri-science that also introduced related drone technology and youth programming in schools.
• ForwARd also provided the impetus for Independence County’s participation in the Excel by Eight (E8) program of the Arkansas Grade Level Reading Campaign.

• ForwARd coordinated and led a joint presentation with Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Springdale School District and the University of Arkansas School of Art at the 2019 Innovation Summit hosted by the The Office of Innovation for Education and Arkansas Department of Education.

Communications

In 2019, we launched the Looking ForwARd e-newsletter, which is sent to more than 1,260 individuals on our listserv and other partners, as well as featured on our social media channels. This newsletter – distributed in April and September with two special editions in October – includes organizational updates, relevant news articles and links to ForwARd blog posts.

ForwARd’s website (www.forwardarkansas.org) continues to elevate stories of impact. Pageviews from January 1 through November 30, 2019 totaled 15,204. This year’s most-read blog posts were:

• Dr. Jay Bath’s guest blog highlighting the unique challenges facing rural schools
• Superintendent Rick Neal’s blog focused on Pea Ridge’s approach to personalized learning
• The announcement of four new Board members in March
ForwARd has established thought leadership on a number of important issues in mainstream media:

- An *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* op-ed coauthored by Sen. Jane English, Rep. Bruce Cozart and ForwARd Associate Director Cory Biggs calling on the state to look at school funding and address the inadequacies that have led to the current achievement gap.

- The ribbon-cutting and announcement of Act 456, the Arkansas Concurrent Challenge Scholarship in Batesville, which was covered by KAIT, KATV, KFFP, White River Now and *Arkansas Money & Politics*, as well as featured in a front-page story in *The Batesville Daily Guard*.

- A contributed opinion piece in Arkansas Business from Board member Jerry Jones referenced the *ForwARd Data & Policy Symposium* and focused on the importance of data in evaluating the investments we’re making in education across the state.

- Letter-to-the editor in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* from Susan Harriman reflected on ForwARd’s Adequacy Testimony and the need to invest in community schools.

As we look to 2020, ForwARd’s focus will turn to identifying a new executive director to replace Susan Harriman who announced her early retirement in November. However, above all, the new year will bring continued focus for the ForwARd team in the organization’s push for equity, innovation and opportunity for all students across Arkansas.
THE FORWARD TEAM

Susan Bonesteel Harriman  
*Executive Director*

Cory Biggs  
*Associate Director*

Jerri Derlikowski  
*Director of Research and Innovation*

Thurman Green III  
*Policy and Community Engagement Associate*

Courtney Lincoln  
*Chief of Staff*

Malachi Nichols  
*Director of Evaluation and Data Quality*

Celia Swanson  
*Senior Consultant of Board and Partner Relations*
Phillip N. Baldwin  
*Chief Executive Officer*  
Citizens Bank, Batesville, Arkansas

Tamika Edwards, J.D.  
*Executive Director*  
Philander Smith College Social Justice Institute

Jerry Jones  
*Chief Legal & Ethics Officer and Executive Vice President*  
LiveRamp

Vicki Saviers  
*Former Arkansas State Board of Education Member*

Kathy Smith  
*Senior Education Advisor*  
Walton Personal Philanthropy Group

Shereece West-Scantlebury  
*President & CEO*  
Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation

Darrin L. Williams  
*CEO*  
Southern Bancorp, Inc.