

Education Connection

Focus on ForwARd Arkansas, an Educational Alliance

Date: June 11, 2016

On Friday, June 10, 2016, the State Board of Education voted to continue the support of the Forward Arkansas initiative that began in 2014. The original intent of the ForwARd Arkansas initiative was to seek ways in which to strengthen public education in Arkansas. The current multipartner agreement furthers the commitment of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation to continue working with the Arkansas Department of Education and the State Board of Education over the next three years, with the goal of “helping every Arkansas student graduate prepared for success in college and the workplace.”

A summary of the focus of this initiative will be provided briefly in this article. To best understand and get a sense of the details of the work, a visit to the website is recommended. Their website address is: <http://forwardarkansas.poweredbyrev.com>.

After extensive research with input from over 8,500 Arkansans through interviews, focus groups and the work of a 28 member volunteer committee, an ambitious goal was established to “make Arkansas a leading state in education and close the achievement gap within a generation.”

A report of all the findings for the research is located on the website. In summary, there were positive findings in the research, such as: -

- Access in Arkansas to Pre-K education is ranked in the top 20 nationally
- The graduation rate is above the national average
- The college going rate is ranked in the top 20 nationally

Other areas of positive note include the work Arkansas has done in the area of teacher licensure and teacher training and the increase in per-pupil expenditures, which is near the national average.

However, the research indicated several areas in need of improvement, a few of which are cited below:

- College graduation rates are only at 39% ranking 48th in the nation
- Achievement gaps are significant among minority and low income children
- Achievement in math and literacy rank 4th and 8th graders in the bottom 20%

(Note achievement data is based on 2013 NAEP assessments)

According to the report, changing the outcomes in the next few years will require a focus on the following seven (7) areas:

1. Pre-K: Provide all students high-quality early childhood opportunities by setting clear standards of what high quality means.
2. Teaching and Learning: Support each student in developing the full range of knowledge and skills he/she needs to be successful in college and career.
3. Teacher Pipeline: Ensure all students have access to talented educators by expanding pathways, attracting top talent through incentives and build homegrown teaching talent
4. Outside the Classroom: Ensure that all children have access to the health and nutritional resources they need so they can come to school ready to learning.
5. Leadership: Ensure that education leaders put students at the center of their decisions, implement a rigorous evaluation system, expand rigorous preparation programs and mentorships; and focus on school board training.
6. Academic Distress: Provide support and interventions in distressed schools that enable them to change their school culture leading to improved student achievement.
7. Systems and Policies: Ensure that all districts have sufficient funding and resources that effectively and efficiently support student success and ensure that policies support the implementation of recommendations needed for Arkansas to become a leading state in education

In Summary: In our role as advocates for the children of Arkansas, members of each PTA unit will want to stay connected to the work of the ForwARd Arkansas leadership team. A review of the report titled “A New Vision for Arkansas Education” is a resource available at the website listed above that will be of assistance to understanding in greater detail the work of Arkansas ForwARd.