

# THE STATE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

## A LOOK AT WHERE WE ARE AND WHERE WE NEED TO GO

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### 4 THINGS ARKANSAS NEEDS TO DO TO STRENGTHEN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

- Provide ongoing revenue to ensure that our ABC program maintains the high quality that kids need in order to start their schooling off on the right foot (and possibly fund additional slots)
- Take the best practices learned from the Good 2 Great grant and apply them broadly
- Provide state funding to meet the new standards for CCDBG, and
- Successfully implement our new pre-K standards and Kindergarten assessment.

### AN INCOMPLETE CANVAS

If the quality pre-K program in Arkansas is a paint-by-numbers canvas, a part of the picture was filled in over the last year and a half. One of the larger swaths was covered last December when Arkansas was awarded almost \$60 million from the federal government's preschool development grant program to expand high-quality preschool programs in high-need communities.



The funding will be spread over four years and is reaching 1,371 new children. It increases funding for 1,506 others. The table below shows where these students are. These new funds mean \$8,162 per child for the new slots. For comparison, the state per-child allocation is \$7,830.

Preschool Development Grant Recipients		
	Expansion (new slots)	Additional for Existing Slots
Dewitt School District	20	0
Magnolia School District	20	0
ASU ABC - Jonesboro	40	20
Jonesboro School District	100	80
ASU - West Memphis	20	20
Cabot School District	150	90
Texarkana School District	34	120
Pulaski County Special School District	100	220
North Little Rock School District	40	140
Little Rock School District	260	138
Fort Smith School District	140	218
Searcy County School District	20	11
Forrest City School District	60	120
Springdale School District	300	110
Kipp Delta Preschool	11	19
EOA Children's House (Head Start/Fayetteville)	56	40
Fayetteville School District	0	120
FACT, Inc. (Head Start/El Dorado)	0	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,371</b>	<b>1,506</b>

The big grant announcement occurred just before the start of a general legislative session that also saw a one-time \$3 million increase to Arkansas’s ABC program (a little additional color for the canvas). While most of the state budget took a hit to pay for over \$100 million in tax cuts, the one-time infusion is something to be proud of. The money will be divided evenly over the next two years with \$1.5 million in the 2016 budget year (FY2016) and \$1.5 million in FY2017. The \$1.5 million will then be divided evenly among slots in the program. It is the first increase in funding to the ABC program since FY2008 when \$40 million of ongoing revenue was added to increase quality and enrollment. While this \$3 million is a first step for enriching the quality of our program, it is just that, a first step. The program needs a significant amount of ongoing revenue to ensure that it maintains the high quality that kids need in order to start their schooling off on the right foot.

In addition to the funding for expansion and quality improvement, Arkansas received a \$1 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to redesign birth-to-five early learning standards, identify a new Kindergarten entry assessment tool, and create a framework to support family engagement in early learning settings. This grant is an important base layer for our canvas.

According to Tonya Williams, the Director of Early Childhood Education at the Department of Human Services, additions to the early learning standards will “include more focus on social and emotional skills needed for Kindergarten and higher grades, such as how to manage anger or work in groups.” The new Kindergarten assessment, which is an observational tool, will likewise look at social and emotional skills and fine motor skills as well as cognitive development. The early learning



standards will be final in January of 2016 and will be implemented in the following school year.

The state is about to request proposals to design the new Kindergarten assessment tool. This timing ensures that the new screening tool will align with the new learning standards.

We all know how important parents are in the success of their children. The family engagement guide and framework that accompany the early learning standards will help parents navigate their role as “first teacher” by using the guide’s suggested activities to support their child.

Building on the new Kindergarten readiness assessment being developed by the Kellogg grant, the Department of Education has a working group



looking at K-2 assessments more broadly. Their work is proceeding alongside the Kindergarten assessment tool work. The goal is to have assessments that are consistent and meet the needs of teachers and students.

The focus on quality early childhood education flows through to another grant award, too. The Kellogg Foundation also funded a Good 2 Great initiative with \$1 million, which has been working since the summer of 2014 to:

1. Establish Good 2 Great Community Advisory Committees in Marvell and Prescott. These committees are made up of community leaders and parents and provide ongoing guidance to improve the quality and availability of early childhood education in their communities.
2. Build staff capacity at early care facilities in Marvell and Prescott. Arkansas State University-Childhood Services is training early care staff with technical assistance, one-on-one coaching, professional development, and other resources to improve quality and achieve better ratings in Arkansas's Quality Rating Improvement System (Better Beginnings). They are also working to align early care with the local K-3 education system.
3. Increase parents' voices for high-quality early care. The Arkansas Public Policy Panel is engaging parents in the communities to partner with providers, educators, and policymakers to ensure local children have access to high-quality early care. Local grassroots leaders are also educating parents about Better Beginnings and providing leadership development to close opportunity gaps in education.
4. Promote relevant research and best practices. The Clinton School of Public Service Center

on Community Philanthropy is using its student and faculty resources to provide academic grounding around strategies that work. Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) is providing background research on potential models and is using reports, videos, and other tools to highlight effective strategies for improving access to high-quality early care in Arkansas. AACF is using communications to encourage system-level change through policy.

This important work has the potential to make our canvas even brighter.

In the midst of all the grant and funding awards, Congress also reauthorized the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). As with many of the grants already discussed, CCDBG's reauthorization includes an emphasis on quality along with health and safety. It also focuses on the ease with which families can get and keep child care assistance. This reauthorization, unlike those in the past, did not come with additional resources. That means additional state or federal funding will be necessary to meet the new requirements without decreasing the number of children helped by the program. In Arkansas, during FY2016, CCDBG provided child care funding for 7,800 children each month. Of those, 89 percent were cared for in licensed or regulated child care centers and 11 percent were cared for in licensed or regulated family child care homes.

How does this reauthorization impact our state's CCDBG? The law's new requirements fall into three broad categories.



## New Requirements in the Child Care and Development Block Grant

### Opportunities

### Provisions

Protecting the health and safety of children in care through more consistent standards and monitoring of standards

- Establishes minimum health and safety standards, including pre-service or orientation training and ongoing training for providers on specific topic areas.
- Requires comprehensive criminal background checks and on-site inspections for all providers, including those who are license-exempt.
- Requires training for licensing inspectors and appropriate inspector-to-provider ratios.
- Requires that states establish group size limits and appropriate provider-to-child ratios.

Improving the quality of care, including through increased supports for child care providers

- Increases the quality set-aside over five years and authorizes a set-aside to increase the supply and quality of infant-toddler care.
- Requires states to mandate ongoing training that provides for a progression of professional development to improve the skills of providers.
- Requires states to implement early learning and development guidelines.
- Promotes building the supply of high-quality care for underserved populations.
- Requires states to establish payment policies and practices that reflect generally accepted payment practices for child care providers.

Enabling families to more easily access child care assistance that supports stable and continuous care and that can be coordinated with other programs

- Expands consumer education and outreach requirements.
- Establishes a minimum 12-month eligibility period for all families.
- Allows for continued assistance as families' income increases (as long as it remains below the federal eligibility limit).
- Requires redetermination processes that do not unduly disrupt parents' employment.
- Encourages states to take steps to meet the needs of underserved populations.

Each state has until March of 2016 to submit their state plan for meeting the new requirements, and Arkansas is in the process of taking the steps necessary for full compliance.

Our pre-K paint-by-numbers picture is closer to completion after this past year and a half. Let's take the next year and a half and fill it in completely. This is within our reach. All we have to do is:

- provide ongoing revenue to ensure that our ABC program maintains the high quality that kids need in order to start their schooling off on the right foot (and possibly fund additional slots)
- take the best practices learned from the Good 2 Great grant and apply them broadly
- provide state funding to meet the new standards for CCDBG, and
- successfully implement our new pre-K standards and Kindergarten assessment.

Then all our pre-K canvas will need is a few finishing touches.