



**Executive Summary**

While Arkansas is serving many children in early childhood programs that have been highly rated, too few children and families have access to early care and education, and many children are not entering kindergarten ready to learn. To achieve Arkansas’s early learning goals, the state must create a unified early childhood system.

The LEARNNS Act puts Arkansas on track to do this. The Act calls for the state to build on the good work of its early childhood programs, to date, by unifying programs and funding under the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE). As Arkansas implements this legislation, ADE commits to:

- **Partner with those closest to children and classrooms:** Create a system of strong state-local partnerships to improve access to quality early care and education options in all communities in Arkansas.
- **Know how many kids already have a seat:** Collect an accurate count of all children served by publicly funded early care and education in partnership with local leads to provide leaders with information to guide decision making.
- **Define excellence:** Establish a single vision for quality early care and education that is tied to kindergarten readiness and drives improvement for all sites, in partnership with local leads.

Overview of LEARNNS Executive Order	1
Current State of Arkansas’s Early Childhood System	1
<i>Access</i>	2
<i>Quality</i>	5
<i>Coordination</i>	6
New Legislation	7
Commitments	8
Conclusion	8

**Overview of LEARNNS Executive Order**

On January 11, 2023, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders published the Executive Order to prioritize Literacy, Empowerment, Accountability, Readiness, Networking, And School Safety (LEARNNS). Included in this executive order is a call for a report analyzing kindergarten-readiness and Arkansas's early childhood system. This report aims to provide an overview of the available data that policy makers can use to understand the current number of families accessing early childhood programs and the quality of available options while identifying any gaps in the system.

**Current State of Arkansas’s Early Childhood System**

For decades, Arkansas has been committed to serving young children and their families by administering high-quality early childhood programs that offer affordable spots and services. Arkansas is home to an estimated 180,000 children from ages birth to 5. Approximately two in three of these children – 120,000 total – are considered economically disadvantaged.<sup>1</sup>

Early childhood funding streams, including the Arkansas Better Chance Program, the Child Care Assistance Program, and Head Start and Early Head Start, currently reside in two different state agencies. The Arkansas Department of Education

---

<sup>1</sup> Free and reduced price lunch eligibility (185% FPL) is used to define economically disadvantaged. [66%](#) of Arkansas children in grades K-12 are FPRL eligible.

## An Analysis of Arkansas’s Early Childhood System



(ADE), the Arkansas Department of Human Services (ADHS), and the Head Start State Collaboration Office (HSSCO) are required to coordinate across agencies to provide services to Arkansas children.

While access to early childhood programming in Arkansas has improved over time, not every child who needs it has access to early childhood options, let alone ones of high-quality. Existing challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the effects of the pandemic hindered access to early childhood services for many children and families.

### Access

There are several distinct funding streams that provide free or subsidized access to early care and education before kindergarten, access to which may vary by age, geography, or family income and work status.

Program	Description
<a href="#">Arkansas Better Chance Program</a> (state preschool)	ABC offers free preschool in mixed delivery <sup>2</sup> settings to families with incomes below 200% of the Federal Poverty Limit who have children between the ages of birth to five.
<a href="#">Child Care Assistance Program</a>	CCAP, funded through the Child Care Development Fund, offers free or subsidized care and education to working, low-income families (<85% State Median Income) with children from birth to school age, and before, after, and holiday care up to age thirteen.
<a href="#">Head Start &amp; Early Head Start</a>	Head Start (3-5 years old) and Early Head Start (0-3 years old) serves children from low-income families through full day spots and comprehensive services that support early learning and development, health, and family wellbeing.

In addition, Arkansas also provides access to a variety of other funded early childhood services for children and families, such as special education services through the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), state and federally funded home visiting services, and other family support services. While these are critical services that support many of Arkansas’s most vulnerable children, this report focuses on the access to and quality of early care and education spots.

Funding Source	Children Served
IDEA Part B (3-5 year olds)	9,925
IDEA Part C (0-3 year olds)	910
Home Visiting (state-funded)	2,765
MIECHV Home Visiting	1,517
<b>Total</b>	<b>15,117</b>

<sup>2</sup> The term “mixed delivery system” means a system -- (A) of early childhood education services that are delivered through a combination of programs, providers, and settings (such as Head Start, licensed family and center-based child care programs, public schools, and community-based organizations); and (B) that is supported with a combination of public funds and private funds. Every Student Succeeds Act: <https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf>

## An Analysis of Arkansas's Early Childhood System

Arkansas's early childhood system has been nationally lauded for its focus on quality and attempts to improve access.

- ✓ Every county has an ABC program.<sup>3</sup>
- ✓ Every county has a Head Start or Early Head Start program.
- ✓ All counties have options for subsidized early care and education through CCAP.
- ✓ There is no waitlist for CCAP.
- ✓ Arkansas has an interactive data visualization from the center level information, which indicates the location of all early childhood centers in the state.

Each agency - ADE, ADHS, and HSSCO - collects data individually by each funding source. While that allows Arkansas to improve each program, the siloed nature of these data has made it difficult for the three agencies to truly understand gaps and opportunities across all funding sources and to best use funds to strategically expand access and improve quality.

**Currently in Arkansas, it is impossible to arrive at a count of children age birth to five being served across all early care and education as called for in the executive order. For example, given these limitations and the lack of true coordination in the system, it is currently impossible to report an accurate count of children served in publicly-funded early childhood programs.** Across all early childhood programs, no one is able to know:

- The unduplicated number of children currently served by age, program type, location, quality
- The number of children that are not able to access program(s) for which they are eligible
- The true capacity of the system (i.e., spots, number of professionals, facilities)
- The quality of each spot in a way that is comparable across sites
- The number and location of spots needed to meet needs of families
- The number of early childhood professionals who are qualified or on the path to be qualified and how this compares to the need across the state

**While this is a common challenge shared by many states, getting answers to these questions is possible.** As this report will later detail, unification of early childhood funding streams into one agency, combined with increased partnership at the state and local level, will help to equip leaders at the state and local level to get answers to these questions, and allow those answers to drive strategy for funding, improvement efforts, and scaling access.

Without data, decision makers face challenges when seeking to determine the necessary investments needed to close gaps in access to high-quality services. Arkansas early childhood leaders only have reliable data about individual programs, not the full early childhood system, resulting in incremental change. They cannot make critical financial decisions that would ensure every available dollar is marshaled toward a unified vision for expanding access to high-quality early childhood options.

Given the challenges in getting an accurate count, it is impossible to know exactly how many children are served, as an unknown number of children are served by multiple funding streams (e.g., a child attending an ABC preschool program during the day may also be dually enrolled in Head Start, while also participating in CCAP to cover the cost of afterschool care). **Aggregating across programs leads to an overestimation of the number of children served, but is also Arkansas's**

---

<sup>3</sup> See the Office of Education Policy's interactive data [dashboard](#) for more information.

## An Analysis of Arkansas’s Early Childhood System



best answer at this time: 38,366 children out of an estimated 120,000 eligible children ages birth to 5 are participating in publicly-funded care and education.

Funding Source	Infants	Ones	Twos	Threes	Fours	Total
ABC	107	179	417	5,742	11,084	17,530
Other school-based preschool <sup>4</sup>	2,106					2,106
CCAP	874	1,868	2,117	2,338	2,290	9,487
Head Start & Early Head Start	3,465			5,778		9,243
<b>Total</b>						<b>38,366<sup>5</sup></b>

Each of these programs has varying eligibility criteria, but primarily focus on providing low-income families access to early childhood programs. Given that these programs mainly serve low-income families, the number of economically disadvantaged children (120,000) can be used as a proxy for the number of children who would benefit from publicly-funded early childhood programs. Subtracting the number of children currently served, there are at least 81,600 eligible children who lack access.

***At least 81,600 eligible children lack access to a funded early childhood program***

Similarly, Arkansas struggles to get a clear picture on the current status of the early childhood workforce. While there are 65,211 professionals who are participating in the Professional Development Registry, this does not offer comprehensive data on the state’s workforce. As Arkansas aims to expand access to more children, decision makers need to understand the supply of and need for early childhood professionals in order to increase the offerings available. Further, the state needs to understand the experiences, credentials, and professional development qualifications of its early educators in order to drive improvements to quality, to retain and promote qualified staff, and to sustain a pathway that ensures staff are receiving the appropriate training to deliver high-quality care, education, and services. It will be critical for this data to be collected on the workforce as the system unifies.

Qualitative data from a [survey](#) conducted by the Office for Education Policy at the University of Arkansas of over 600 Arkansas families reveals 26% of those completing the survey did not enroll their child in an early childhood program outside of their home with affordability ranked as a major deciding factor. Of those that did enroll their child, 55%

<sup>4</sup> This number represents students served through district funding distinct from the ABC program.

<sup>5</sup> This number is an overestimate due to the fact that data is aggregated across all programs and some children receiving funding from multiple sources.

## An Analysis of Arkansas’s Early Childhood System



reported spending no more than 10% of their monthly household income on early care and education in the year prior to kindergarten.<sup>6</sup>

### Quality

Arkansas’s Better Beginning’s program is the state’s primary way of measuring quality. Run by ADHS, Better Beginnings collects information and evaluates participating sites with a rating system of 0-3 stars, communicates this information to families so that they can make informed decisions, and offers support and training to sites so that they may increase their star rating.

Currently this system is based upon a variety of indicators, including:

- Administration training and professional development
- Staff training and professional development
- Environmental rating assessment
- Classroom operations and procedures
- Family engagement

Star Level <sup>7,8</sup>	Percent of Licensed Birth to Five Providers
Three Star	34%
Two Star	38%
One Star	10%
Unrated	18%

These indicators evaluate the structural quality elements of sites. Often, increasing ratings with these indicators can be expensive and complex for providers to navigate. Under the current system, there is no way to measure the quality of experiences children have daily that would promote kindergarten readiness (i.e., adult-child interaction quality).

Individual funding streams require minimum program standards that go above and beyond minimum licensing standards and are designed to support consistent quality experiences for children across sites that administer the programs. However, similar to Better Beginnings, these program standards are not measuring the quality of the experiences children have daily that would promote kindergarten readiness.

Minimum program standard requirements often differ based on the funding stream they are attached to - for example, programs with Head Start funding must meet the federal program requirements, while providers with ABC funding must implement ABC program standards. For example, ABC program standards meet 8 of the 10 nationally recognized NIEER preschool benchmarks, showing the high bar ABC classrooms must meet to offer preschool in the state.<sup>9</sup>

Examples of program standards include:

<sup>6</sup> See Office for Education Policy [Parent Pre-K Survey](#) for more information.

<sup>7</sup> Better Beginnings is in the process of revising their rating system, expanding the levels of quality from a range of 1-3 stars to 1-6 stars. As this shift is still in progress, the data below will reflect 1-3 star ratings.

<sup>8</sup> See Office for Education Policy [State of Preschool Report](#) for more information on quality.

<sup>9</sup> [https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Arkansas\\_YB2021.pdf](https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Arkansas_YB2021.pdf)

## An Analysis of Arkansas's Early Childhood System

- Ratios and group sizes by age that exceed the standard set by licensing
- Educator qualifications, licenses, and credentials for both lead teachers and aides
- Training and professional development requirements tied to individual growth plans
- Plans to support family engagement, child development, transitions to kindergarten, etc.

Entrepreneurial providers use multiple public funding streams to meet the needs of the children in their communities, which is a national best practice and one Arkansas should encourage in order to maximize funds. However, those providers carry the burden of ensuring individual classrooms meet different requirements, staff meet all training requirements, and their businesses comply with all organizational requirements. Navigating all of these program standards is both bureaucratic for providers and also means Arkansas misses the opportunity to be clear about what should be true for all kids at each age, regardless of program, funding, or setting.

Based on data gathered from a [survey](#) conducted by the Office for Education Policy at the University of Arkansas completed by over 600 families of children currently or recently enrolled in Arkansas's early childhood programs, over 90% ranked quality as the most important factor in determining their child's early childhood classroom setting. 42% of those completing the survey were unaware of the quality rating for the early childhood center selected for their child. And, while most were aware of their center's rating, they may have been unclear as to the criteria that defined that rating. In addition, while 76% of families rated their child's early childhood program as excellent in providing a caring environment, only 52% described it as excellent in developing their child's reading and math skills, noting the importance in providing targeted professional development opportunities to support early literacy and cognitive development.

### *Coordination*

**Currently, no one is accountable to the Governor, taxpayers, and families for closing the gap of 80,000+ children who do not have access to early care and education. This results in children entering kindergarten behind, families being unable to work, and losses for Arkansas's economy.**

ADE, ADHS, and HSSCO have made every effort to prioritize collaboration on behalf of children. For example, since ABC programs are not offered during the summer, CCAP funding is used to cover the cost of care and education during the summer months in an attempt to ensure continuity of care for families. Further, Head Start programs across the state dually enroll with ABC funding to provide the most comprehensive care and education opportunities for children and families.

However, a split governance structure and siloed data systems create inevitable challenges to the state as it works to maximize every dollar to provide high-quality slots and services for families where and when they need it. Right now, policy makers in Arkansas do not have the information they need to fully understand and improve the experiences of children, families, and providers: it is impossible to know the accurate count of children being served across all programs, at what level of quality, and to what extent the available services match family needs, and thus impossible to know the exact number of children who still need access to high-quality services. This is a challenge to achieving kindergarten readiness for all children entering school in Arkansas, as elevated by the executive order.

At the local level, there is no requirement or structure for coordinating slots, programs, or funding, which can result in complex processes for families and unnecessary barriers to increasing access to quality spots where families need them.

There is no one captain responsible for ensuring a spot for every eligible child who wants one, providing information for families about their choices, and ensuring families have what they need to apply simply to the programs that meet their needs. Rather, there are several different actors with a variety of responsibilities, administering services and funding streams for different units of geography, including school systems, counties, and other misaligned regional-level splits. This makes it impossible to ensure a seamless process for families seeking to understand where to go and what process to use to learn about and select an early care and education option that works for their family, resulting in families applying many places, on different timelines, costing them both money and time, and resulting in system-wide inefficiencies.

### **New Legislation**

On March 8, 2023, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed the LEARNs Act which calls for the unification of the early childhood system under ADE. This bill seeks to improve the experience of families and early childhood providers by increasing coordination and efficiency within the system by:

- **Unifying early childhood programs into the Arkansas Department of Education.**

This bill calls for the creation of an Office of Early Childhood within the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) which will house the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), state preschool, early childhood special education (IDEA Part B and C), and the Head Start State Collaboration Office. This unified system aims to decrease administrative burden, ensure all dollars are maximized for children, and improve the experience of families and providers.

- **Establishing local early childhood lead organizations.**

This bill calls for ADE to competitively select local early childhood lead organizations in communities around the state who will:

- Support access to early childhood programs by identifying and closing gaps in access
- Create partnerships and alignment between public and private providers
- Facilitate the development of a local early childhood plan that will:
  - Measure local gaps in care and education
  - Conduct an unduplicated child care
  - Establish local collaboration structures
  - Identify shared resources
  - Coordinate enrollment processes
  - Plan for the use of future funding

- **Convening stakeholders to advise on the unification.**

ADE must convene a representative group of stakeholders (i.e., child care providers; families; experts in early childhood, early literacy, and early numeracy; business leaders; agency leaders; advocates) to advise on the unification of the system.

- **Establishing an accountability system indicative of child outcomes.**

As programs are unified under ADE, the bill calls for the creation of a simple, unified accountability system that includes ratings indicative of child outcomes. The 2024-2025 school year will be used as a transition year from



current rating systems to a unified rating system, implementing practice ratings for publicly-funded sites.

- **Reducing bureaucracy and burdensome licensing regulations.**

This bill calls for a review of licensing regulations to minimize bureaucracy. It also establishes a process to review regulations every 5 years, with a process for providers to submit desired changes.

- **Increase transparent, family-friendly reporting.**

ADE must develop a family-facing website that includes information on locally available schools and centers (e.g., curriculum, tuition, ratios, accountability results).

This legislation builds upon Arkansas’s success to date and sets the state on a path to create a more unified system driven by a shared vision for closing the gaps in access and quality. These shifts in the system should result not only in increases in access and quality, but also a more streamlined experience for families and providers resulting in more children entering kindergarten ready to learn.

**Commitments**

As ADE implements the legislation, it commits to the following in order to achieve this unified vision for early childhood in Arkansas.

Current Challenges	Legislative Requirement	Commitment
Coordination at the state level is complex, and there is no consistent plan for local coordination.	Unify early childhood programs into the Arkansas Department of Education and establish local early childhood lead organizations.	<b>Partner with those closest to children and classrooms:</b> Create a system of strong state-local partnerships to improve access to quality early care and education options in all communities in Arkansas
No one knows a true, unduplicated count of children being served and where gaps exist	Establish local early childhood lead organizations who will facilitate the development of a local early childhood plan	<b>Know how many kids already have a seat:</b> Collect an accurate count of all children served by publicly funded early care and education in partnership with local leads to provide leaders with information to guide decision making
There is no accountability system that incentivizes providers to improve their quality toward increased kindergarten readiness.	Establish an accountability system indicative of child outcomes for all programs taking public funds.	<b>Define excellence:</b> Establish a single vision for quality early care and education that is tied to kindergarten readiness and drives improvement for all sites, in partnership with local leads



## **An Analysis of Arkansas’s Early Childhood System**



### **Conclusion**

As a result of the planned shifts called for by the legislation that will be implemented by ADE, Arkansas will transform the experience of children, families, and providers, and ensure that children are granted access to the set experiences needed to prepare them for success in school and beyond.