



Media Release

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State Pre-K Program Gains Momentum over Last 10 Years, Report Shows

A national report capping 10 years of research shows that Arkansas has made tremendous progress in early education over the last decade, offering high-quality preschool despite tough economic times that resulted in other states cutting funding.

The State of Preschool 2011: State Preschool Yearbook, released by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University, shows that 10 years ago, Arkansas ranked 24th for access and 30th for resources. Today, the state ranks 10th for access and 12th for resources nationwide. In addition, 44 percent of Arkansas 4-year-olds are enrolled in the Arkansas Better Chance for School Success (ABC) pre-K program, which is one of only eight states to meet nine out of 10 NIEER quality benchmarks.

“Through their continued commitment to the ABC program, Arkansas’s leaders have shown that they value early learning,” said Tonya Russell, Director of the Arkansas Department of Human Services’ (DHS) Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education. “This program will make a huge impact in the lives of children and will set the stage for a lifetime love of learning.”

As the NIEER report shows, Arkansas’s progress in pre-K programming is in contrast to what is happening nationwide.

“For the second year in a row, nationally, we’re seeing declines in real spending and per-child spending that strip resources from pre-K classrooms, many of which are already funded at levels below what it takes to deliver high-quality programs,” said Steve Barnett, director of the NIEER Institute. “Arkansas was able to increase enrollment as well as maintain level funding in 2010-2011, though per-child funding fell.”

Pre-K programs for the neighboring states of Georgia and Mississippi have been hurt by the economy, according to NIEER. Georgia reduced its program’s school year and has plans to increase class sizes; Mississippi has yet to fund a state pre-K initiative.

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“The latest rankings for Arkansas further confirm what we know about the importance of Pre-Kindergarten for our students,” Education Commissioner Dr. Tom Kimbrell said. “Research has consistently shown that students exposed to high-quality early education are better prepared for elementary school and perform at a higher level. We’re pleased our continued dedication to pre-K in Arkansas is recognized nationally.”

Data collected on children in the ABC and Head Start programs by the Arkansas Research Center shows they do better throughout grade school than children of similar economic backgrounds that attend basic child care facilities.

“Investment in quality pre-k pays dividends for decades,” said Governor Mike Beebe. “Early education helps students progress more quickly, and in time, results in an educated workforce prepared for highly skilled jobs.”

The ABC program was established in 1991 as part of a statewide education reform initiative. The original program targeted early childhood services for children from birth to 5 years old who were from low-income families and included a variety of risk factors for determining eligibility, such as being in foster care, having a developmental delay, family violence, having a parent on active overseas military duty, having a teen parent and low birth weight. When the program expanded in early 2000, eligibility focused on 3- and 4-year-old children in families below 200% federal poverty level.

Ninety-eight percent of Arkansas school districts either offer the state pre-K program on their campuses or partner with local non-profit organizations, education cooperatives or privately-owned child care centers. More than 254,000 children are enrolled statewide. The ABC program meets 9 out of 10 quality benchmarks set by NIEER. These benchmarks include setting comprehensive early learning standards; having highly qualified teachers with an early childhood focus; hiring assistant teachers with an early childhood credential; requiring professional development for staff; setting maximum classroom size; having staff to child ratios of 1:10 or better; providing vision, hearing and health screenings and supportive services; providing nutritious meals and snacks; and having regular site visits and monitoring.

To read the NIEER report, go to <http://nieer.org/node/660>.