



Arkansas's **LEARNS Act** A Model for the Nation

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— FEBRUARY 2023 —

BACKGROUND

During her candidacy to become Arkansas’s 47th governor, Sarah Huckabee Sanders stated that “I believe every child growing up in Arkansas should have access to a quality education, a good-paying job, and a better life right here in our state.”¹

She released a detailed plan for what this would look like. Specifically, the governor said she would pursue a plan that addressed literacy, empowerment, accountability, readiness, networking, and safety (LEARNS).² Now, in the state’s highest office, Governor Sanders is delivering on that promise.

The transformational education plan she has proposed as governor, dubbed the LEARNS Act (SB294 of the 2023 Arkansas General Assembly), will achieve that vision.³

Governor Sanders’s plan focuses on key concepts she campaigned on: empowering parents with educational freedom; improving the education workforce; investing in student outcomes in key subject areas; enhancing career readiness; and much more.

The status quo finds kids trapped in failing schools based simply on their zip code. It has made it virtually impossible for the state to recruit top-notch teachers. And it has resulted in disastrous educational outcomes for students for generations.

The LEARNS Act represents a transformative approach and would give Arkansas’s education system the jolt that it needs, completely reshaping the state’s educational landscape.

This primer takes a deep dive into every aspect of the Arkansas LEARNS plan and illustrates just how vital its passage is to the future of the state of Arkansas.



1. PUTTING PARENTS IN CHARGE

Status quo

- ◆ Less than one-tenth of one percentage point of Arkansas’s K-12 expenditures are used on school choice.⁴
- ◆ Today, private school choice is only available to a select few Arkansas students.⁵
- ◆ Public school choice is muddled with arbitrary limits, such as a 3 percent open enrollment cap for inter-district transfers.⁶
- ◆ Arkansas has fallen behind when it comes to educational freedom and parental empowerment.

What LEARNS *does*

UNIVERSAL EDUCATIONAL FREEDOM

LEARNS creates the Children’s Education Freedom Account Program. This initiative will make school choice available to all parents and students in the state of Arkansas, phased in over a three-year period with full implementation for all families by the 2025–2026 school year. Participating families will receive deposits equal to 90 percent of the prior year’s average net public school aid per student.

Much unlike a “voucher” system, these funds will be directly available to families and may be used for tuition, fees, school supplies, tutoring services, transportation costs, and much more.

The amount of the deposit will roll over from quarter to quarter and year to year until the student graduates from high school or turns 21.

The phasing-in of the program will begin immediately, starting in the 2023–2024 school year, with students who are disabled, homeless, current or former foster children, eligible to participate in the Succeed Scholarship program, whose parents are active duty military personnel, attend a F-rated public school, or are enrolling in kindergarten for the first time.

The following year, the program will be expanded to include students in D-rated public schools, or kids whose parents are veterans, first responders, law enforcement, or in the military reserves. The year after, every student in Arkansas will be eligible.

Alternatively, students can participate in the Philanthropic Investment in Arkansas KidsProgram, whose income tax credit awards will be tripled from \$2 million to \$6 million. The SUCCEED Program will roll into the Children’s Education Freedom Account Program.

Homeschool students will also be eligible for Education Freedom Accounts.

TRANSPORTATION RESOURCES

In addition, a new Transportation Modernization Grant Program will be created to distribute grants to participating schools based on relevant criteria, which will help aid the school choice effort and the new students who will be participating as the program scales.

COMMON-SENSE ACCOUNTABILITY

The Education Freedom Account program will have numerous reporting requirements, as well as other protection provisions, such as a means for preventing unreasonable inflation or fraud in tuition.

Private schools may be eligible to participate if they do not discriminate, have been in operation for at least one year, remain accredited and academically accountable, employ teachers with at least a bachelor's degree, and comply with all other relevant state laws.

Schools may also become ineligible if they fail to meet eligibility criteria, demonstrate a lack of academic confidence, misrepresent information, fail to refund overpayments, or fail to provide students with promised educational services.

Random audits of accounts, schools, and other providers will be conducted annually with strict provisions for misuse of funds. Students participating in the program also will have to take a state-approved or portfolio examination provided by their school each year.

OPEN ENROLLMENT FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS

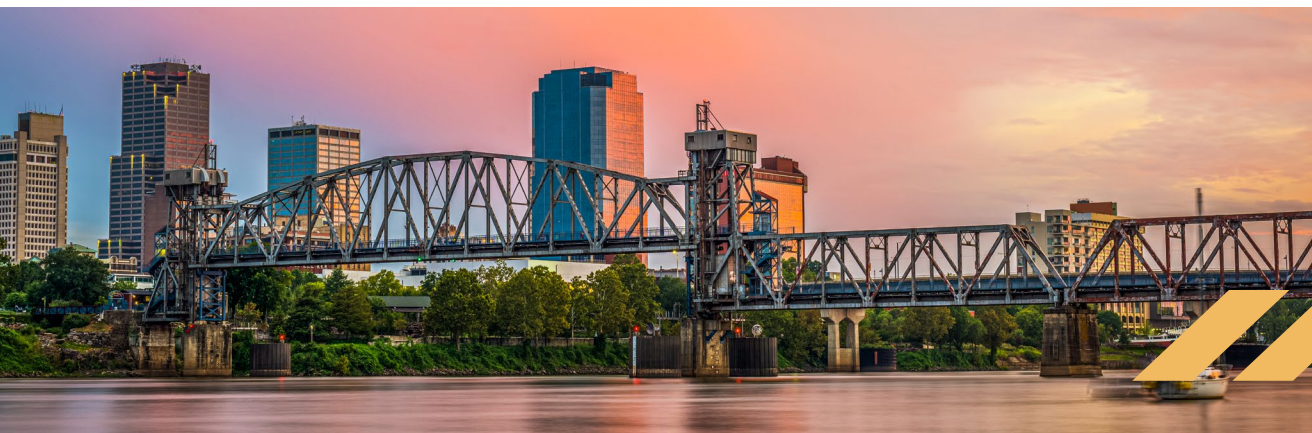
With respect to public school choice, there will no longer be any state limit on the number of inter-district school choice transfers. Additionally, there will no longer be a maximum cap on the number of charter schools that can be granted, and charter school applications will no longer need to be approved by local school districts.

The state will create an expedited renewal process for high-performing open enrollment charter schools based on school ratings and academic growth. The state may also create a revolving loan fund for charter schools, subject to appropriations by the legislature.

Furthermore, local school boards also will be able to contract with open-enrollment charter schools or private companies to run a school campus that is at risk of state takeover due to low performance, and the state may provide incentives to these charters. However, these companies must be in good standing and meet other eligibility criteria.

NEW COURSE OPTIONS

Finally, Arkansas LEARNS also creates the Course Choice Program, which catalogs available courses for students to enroll in, allowing students attending a public school to take courses not offered in their school. Students at public schools with a low rating may take required courses through this program. Local school boards will be responsible for creating policies and procedures for students enrolling in the program.

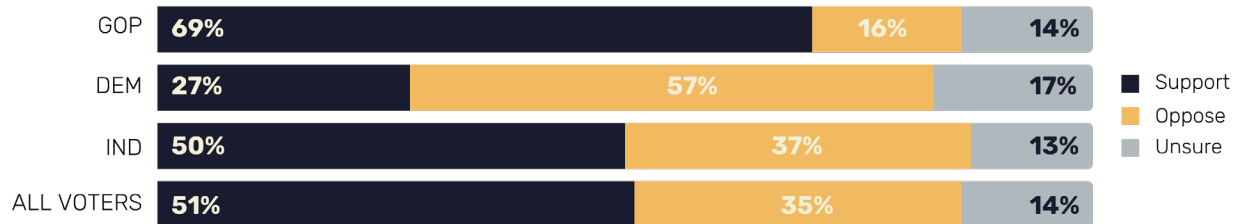


What LEARNS *means*

- ◆ More than \$100 million investment in the future of Arkansas students will constitute the largest expansion of educational freedom in the history of the state of Arkansas.
- ◆ LEARNS is the most expansive school choice program in the entire nation.
- ◆ LEARNS will instill accountability in our education system as a whole, forcing low-performing schools to improve.
- ◆ Students will take priority over systems and a student's zip code will no longer determine their educational success.
- ◆ Parents will be empowered to choose where their children attend school.
- ◆ The future of Arkansas students will be put back where it rightfully belongs—out of the hands of bureaucrats and into the hands of parents.

What Arkansans *think*

Voters support allowing all Arkansas parents to use a portion of their tax dollars to enroll their kids in any school of their choice.



2. IMPROVING ARKANSAS'S EDUCATION WORKFORCE

Status quo

- ◆ Arkansas faces a systemic teacher shortage that is plaguing schools.⁷⁻⁸
- ◆ Low teacher pay is one of the key drivers of this shortage.
- ◆ In 2020, Arkansas ranked 47th in average teacher salaries—down from 44th in 2018.⁹
- ◆ In fact, Arkansas's average teacher salary is more than 20 percent below the national average, and below the average in every neighboring state.¹⁰

What LEARNS *does*

Unless and until Arkansas confronts its massive gap in teacher compensation compared to the rest of the nation, this teacher shortage will persist, and Arkansas students will suffer as a result. Arkansas LEARNS tackles this issue through enhancements to teacher compensation coupled with greater accountability.

RAISES FOR ALL TEACHERS

First and foremost, LEARNS raises the minimum teacher salary in the state of Arkansas from \$36,000 to \$50,000. Teachers already earning above the minimum salary will benefit, too, receiving a \$2,000 raise in the 2023–2024 school year compared to what they were earning as of September 1, 2022. These changes replace certain existing minimum salaries in state statute, but they do not in any way preclude school districts from setting their own step schedules, nor do any of the measures in Arkansas LEARNS cut teacher pay.

(Waivers and exemptions are available in limited circumstances. To be eligible for this funding, districts must employ teachers for at least 190 days and be open for at least 178 days. Districts must commit a minimum amount of additional funding to teacher salaries, with the state general fund contributing approximately \$180 million each year.)

MERIT-BASED PAY FOR TEACHERS

Arkansas LEARNS also creates the Merit Teacher Incentive Fund Program, which provides up to \$10,000 in annual bonuses for high performing teachers or those who serve in a critical shortage area of the state or subject matter. This program also will be available to aspiring teachers who are participating in year-long residencies and teachers serving as mentors to aspiring teachers.

Furthermore, the amount of loan forgiveness for teachers will be doubled from \$3,000 to \$6,000 in a three-year period, focused on licensed teachers who graduate from a teacher education program and teach in a critical shortage area.

Together, these two initiatives will invest another \$11.1 million annually in Arkansas teachers.

ENHANCED MATERNITY LEAVE

In addition to higher salaries, all educational personnel will be able to receive up to 12 weeks of paid maternity leave, with the costs being split 50/50 between the state and the school district.

TEACHER SCHOLARSHIPS

Additionally, a new Teacher Academy Scholarship Program will be created to provide scholarships to college students at eligible schools who enter the teaching profession or commit to teaching in a critical shortage area of the state or subject area. The scholarship will cover between two and four years of tuition plus the cost of a teaching license exam. This program will dedicate another \$12 million each year in Arkansas teachers.

INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY

However, increased compensation is coupled with enhanced accountability. For example, all school district superintendents will be required to have performance targets tied to student achievement and graduation rates.

School districts will have to make employment decisions based on performance, effectiveness, and qualifications—and principals will be given authority to make hiring decisions, subject to the approval of superintendents. School boards still have the final approval for hiring decisions, as recommended by superintendents. Moreover, ineffective teachers (as determined by their performance) will not be eligible for loan forgiveness.

Additionally, the Teacher Fair Dismissal Act will be repealed, which places unnecessary red tape and onerous restrictions on the ability of districts to hold educators accountable. Its repeal will mean more accountability in Arkansas's education system.

What LEARNS *means*

- ◆ LEARNS is the largest investment in teachers in the history of the state of Arkansas. From pay raises to bonuses to maternity leave and more, this historic investment will jump-start the Arkansas educator workforce and go a long way to remedy the state's teacher shortage.
- ◆ LEARNS is not just a giveaway: it compensates educators more robustly, but also ensures that adequate accountability protocols are in place to terminate incompetent teachers as needed and tie superintendent employment to district performance.
- ◆ The merging of these two concepts—investments and accountability—will simultaneously generously reward teachers and infuse educators with greater responsibility.



What Arkansans *think*

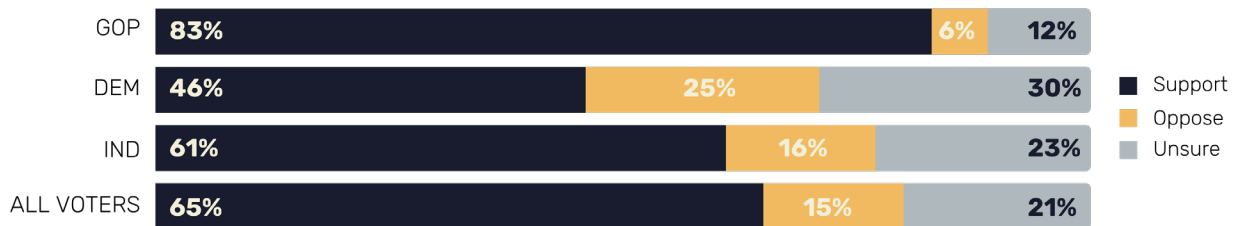
Voters support **increasing the minimum teacher salary in Arkansas** from \$36,000 a year to \$50,000 a year.



Voters support providing **free college tuition to teachers** if they agree to teach in high-need subject areas or geographic areas in Arkansas for a certain number of years.



Voters support making it **easier for school districts to terminate problematic teachers**.



Voters support providing **12 weeks of paid maternity leave** to Arkansas teachers.



3. EXPANDING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Status quo

- ◆ More than half of Arkansas kids aged 3 and 4 do not attend a preschool program at all—worse than in surrounding states like Mississippi and Louisiana.¹¹
- ◆ Arkansas is only educating about 1,000 more 3 and 4-year-olds than it was eight years ago.¹²
- ◆ Less than half of all early childhood teachers in Arkansas possess a degree in their field.¹³
- ◆ The average Arkansas family will spend nearly \$7,000 per year for infant childcare costs, nearly as much as in-state tuition at a public four-year college.¹⁴⁻¹⁵

What LEARNS *does*

REALIGNING ACCOUNTABILITY

Arkansas LEARNS will relocate the existing Division of Early Childhood Education from under the Department of Human Services to the Department of Education.

As part of this transition, a new “Office of Early Childhood” will manage all state programs related to early childhood education in Arkansas, from Head Start to childcare block grants and much more. New fund accounts within the Education Fund will be created to accommodate this transition.

As part of this innovative transition, the new Office of Early Childhood will work with local partners to identify gaps in childhood services, improve access to programs, and improve alignment among existing entities. This will culminate in a “plan” for early childhood programs and services with useful metrics, structures, and shared resources for the childhood space.

REDEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Critically, the Department of Education will be responsible for defining what “kindergarten readiness” means—and how it aligns with state curriculum—as well as launching a pilot program that will include outcome-based ratings for early care and education sites throughout the state.

Eventually, early learning centers will be required to receive licensure by the Department of Education under this new, unified system, based on meeting these standards designed to improve early care. The state will be responsible for producing progress reports to indicate the status of implementation.

MORE RESOURCES FOR ARKANSAS PARENTS

Finally, a new parent-centered website will be launched to give families more information about local schools and childcare centers—including curriculum, tuition, student-to-teacher ratios, and accountability results.

What LEARNS *means*

- ◆ Arkansas LEARNS will replace the scattered, disjointed early childhood education system in Arkansas and replace it with a holistic, unified system.
- ◆ With better planning and a new office dedicated to bringing early childhood partners together, Arkansas can take best practices from proven models and replicate them elsewhere through improved standards.
- ◆ Meanwhile, Arkansas parents will be empowered with more knowledge of their local early childhood options through an easy-to-use website that tracks costs, staffing, curriculum, and outcomes.
- ◆ LEARNS will eliminate gaps in Arkansas’s early childhood system, building a future where every young Arkansan can enter kindergarten ready and well-prepared.

4. IMPROVING K-12 OUTCOMES

Status quo

- ◆ Arkansas currently ranks 37th in reading, 43rd in math, and 45th in college readiness.¹⁶
- ◆ In fact, just 38 percent of Arkansas kids are “ready in reading”—a grim figure for the state’s future.¹⁷
- ◆ These poor results are the product of an antiquated system that has failed to laser-focus on these key K-12 education indicators.

What LEARNS *does*

Arkansas LEARNS will dramatically shake up the status quo through several mechanisms designed to improve K-12 education quality in Arkansas. One of the cornerstones of the Arkansas LEARNS plan is to improve outcomes in key K-12 indicators related to reading, math, and college readiness.

LITERACY SCREENINGS AND GRANTS

Arkansas LEARNS places a major emphasis on improving literacy. This starts by better identifying where the problem lies with evidence-based literacy screeners in third grade. Every child in kindergarten through third grade (K-3) will be given a literacy evaluation at least three times a year, with results published annually.

Struggling readers in grades K-3 also will be given additional support through a \$500 literacy tutoring grant through a new Literacy Tutoring Grant Fund.

LITERACY COACHES

Based on the results of these screenings, the state will ensure that schools with low-literacy rankings have access to qualified literacy coaches that will support teachers directly. These 120 literacy coaches will constitute a \$6.2 million investment in reading readiness through well-compensated coaches who will be eligible for bonuses based on performance outcomes.

Coaches will also be held accountable; they will be unable to participate in the literacy tutoring grant program if they fail to demonstrate improvement in students' reading. Individualized reading plans will be developed for all students in grades K-3 who fail to meet reading standards, providing these students with the tools to make progress.

Students must be able to read in order to move onto fourth grade (with tailored exemptions). Students who are unable to meet this requirement will be given special instruction and priority consideration for literacy tutoring grants—with parents being involved throughout the entire process.

MATH INTERVENTION PLANS

Arkansas LEARNS takes the same serious approach to improving math results. Students who fall behind in math will be provided with individualized math intervention plans that emphasize targeted tutoring, assignment to the best performing math teachers, and more. These intervention statistics will be reported back to the state to monitor progress and program success.

TUTORING PILOT PROGRAM

The state will launch a \$20 million High Impact Tutoring Pilot Program with grants, training, technical assistance, and other support. Both school districts and public charter schools can apply for 50/50 funding grants to support tutoring programs. The state will collect and report to the Arkansas legislature key data and metrics on the success of the program.

PROTECTING STUDENTS FROM DIVISIVE AND EXPLICIT TEACHING

Finally, in tandem with the state's efforts to focus on key subject areas, Arkansas LEARNS restricts instruction in controversial and divisive subject areas. No school employee or student will be required to attend training on prohibited indoctrination and Critical Race Theory (CRT). The Department of Education's policies, regulations, and materials will be reviewed to ensure they do not contain indoctrination that conflicts with the principle of equal protection under the law.

Educators also will be prohibited from providing instruction prior to fifth grade on sexually explicit materials, gender identity, sexual orientation, and similar sexually-charged materials. Parents also will have the opportunity to preview curriculum materials before instruction and exempt their children from child sexual abuse and assault content.



What LEARNS *means*

- ◆ Arkansas LEARNS will immensely improve Arkansas’ students’ standing in key subject areas like literacy and math.
- ◆ The outdated current system will be replaced by one that emphasizes outcomes over processes, innovation over complacency, individualized attention over collective methods, and accountability over bureaucracy.
- ◆ LEARNS will specifically focus on the areas where the state’s education system is falling behind—which will be better identified through regular screening.
- ◆ By focusing on these problematic areas, the state will not only deploy existing resources more effectively, but also create new resources and assist with individual learning.

What Arkansans *think*

Voters support giving Arkansas students in grades three through eight an **individual intervention plan if they fall behind in math.**



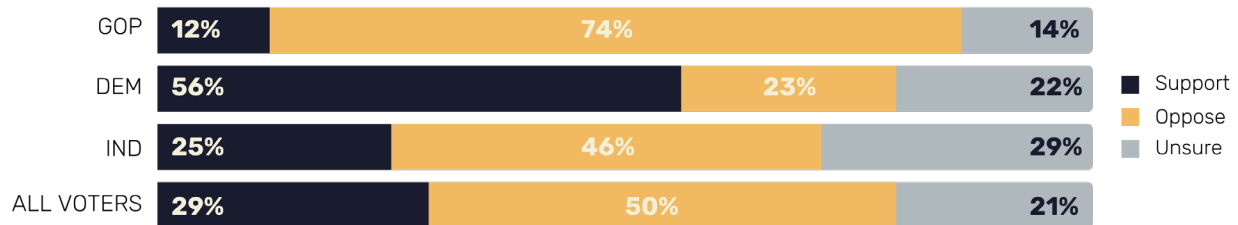
Voters support a proposal to **deploy 120 literacy coaches** to help students in low-performing schools throughout Arkansas.



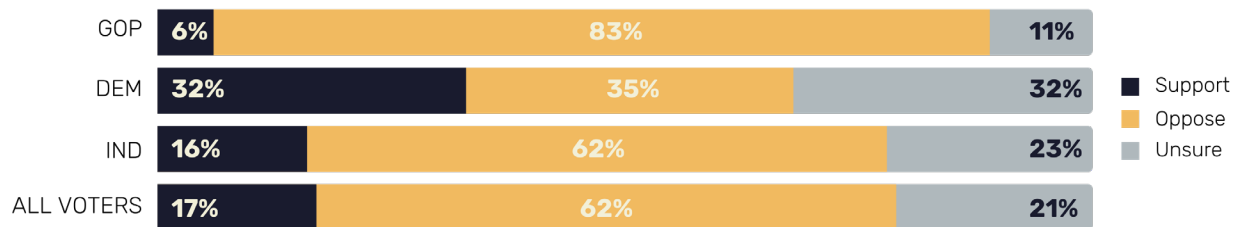
Voters support providing grants or similar support to Arkansas school districts and public charter schools that provide high-impact tutoring to their students.



Voters oppose the teaching of Critical Race Theory in Arkansas's schools.



Voters oppose teaching concepts like sexual reproduction, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other sexually explicit material in Arkansas schools in kindergarten through fourth grade.



5. PREPARING THE NEXT GENERATION FOR THE WORKFORCE

Status quo

- ◆ Arkansas does not have the educated workforce needed for today’s jobs.¹⁸
- ◆ Moreover, ranking at 45th in the nation, most Arkansas students are not even prepared for college.¹⁹

What LEARNS *does*

LEARNS tackles Arkansas’s workforce-readiness crisis head-on through a number of strategies to ensure the next generation of Arkansans has the tools they need to succeed as productive members of society.

DUAL-TRACK DIPLOMAS

Arkansas LEARNS creates an alternative career-focused pathway for high school students to receive a “dual-track” diploma, developed by the State Board of Education. These diplomas will be treated with the same level of recognition as a conventional diploma. To ensure these diplomas adequately prepare students for high-wage opportunities, the Arkansas Workforce Development Board will develop a system for collecting, analyzing, and reporting student outcomes associated with career-ready pathways.

STUDENT SUCCESS PLANS

Every student in eighth grade or above also will have a student success plan, allowing them to change their diploma pathway with parental approval.

CAREER AWARENESS TRAINING

To help prepare students for career readiness prior to the high school level, every public school district and public charter school will be required to incorporate career awareness activities into their curriculum, such as career-focused field trips, guest speakers, community services, and more.

These school districts will also partner with local career leaders—such as businesses, economic development agencies, and more—to review and expand their career-ready pathways offerings. To facilitate the development of this career-centric program, districts will be given flexibility for program development and may employ content experts who hold certificates or credentials relevant to specific career pathway programs.

CLASS CREDIT FOR CAREER TRAINING

Furthermore, similar to the concept of AP classes, the state will create rules allowing postsecondary credit to be given to high school students who complete certain intense career-focused programs, such as through International Baccalaureate programs.

COMMUNITY SERVICE

In addition, students will be required to complete at least 75 hours of community service in high school in order to graduate, helping to expose them to the world outside of the classroom.

WORKFORCE DASHBOARD

Lastly, the state will create a strategic workforce dashboard, giving job seekers critical information on the labor market and program outcomes.

What LEARNS *means*

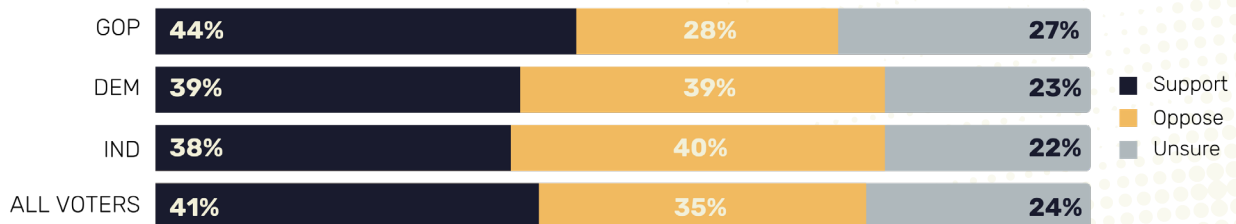
- ◆ Arkansas transforms career readiness from an afterthought to a priority.
- ◆ LEARNS’s dual-track approach will give career readiness the same manner of treatment as a conventional high school education.
- ◆ Students will also be given the building blocks to their eventual career at an earlier age through school partnerships with local business leaders, the development of career awareness activities prior to high school, new postsecondary credit opportunities, and additional community service requirements.
- ◆ Data will be captured and reported every step of the way—and job seekers will be given a new powerful tool via an online dashboard to help them find meaningful, high-paying employment opportunities.
- ◆ Arkansas LEARNS will bridge the connection between K-12 education and the workforce in a way the status quo does not.

What Arkansans *think*

Voters support creating an **Arkansas workforce dashboard for job seekers to find available jobs and training in their region.**



Voters support requiring Arkansas students to **complete 75 hours of community service in order to graduate from high school.**



6. PROTECTING STUDENTS' SAFETY

Status quo

- ◆ A 2022 report from the Arkansas School Safety Commission issued a report identifying potential areas in need of focus with more than 50 new recommendations to improve school safety.²⁰

What LEARNS *does*

Every Arkansas student deserves to feel safe and secure in their school. Arkansas LEARNS tackles school safety in a comprehensive fashion, focusing on not only securing school facilities themselves but also transportation safety, training and support systems, and sexual abuse prevention and education.

SCHOOL SAFETY EXPERTS

Arkansas LEARNS expands the School Safety Act by requiring school districts to have a school safety expert provide advice and review school plans prior to the new construction of any school.

CRISIS RESPONSE TRAINING

The Department of Education will be charged with making crisis response training available to school staff and conduct an analysis to determine how the state can more effectively handle information relating to potential school threats and provide timely school-safety information to school districts. The state will also develop a school bus safety initiative for all schools to use.

MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING

Districts and schools themselves will be responsible for improving access to staff training in youth mental health, establishing a behavioral threat assessment team, increasing the training standards for school safety personnel, enhancing emergency medical response training, and improving reporting of suspicious activities and threats.

ANNUAL SAFETY ASSESSMENTS

To ensure school safety plans are not falling out-of-date, schools will have to conduct annual school safety assessments and form a district safety and security team to review emergency operations and security procedures. Schools also will have to implement a communication plan in the event of an emergency to effectively communicate with staff, students, parents, and law enforcement.

SEXUAL ABUSE TRAINING

To prevent sexual abuse, schools will also provide training for teachers on child sexual abuse and assault awareness, prevention, and reporting.

NOTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

Finally, school districts will be required to promptly notify the State of Arkansas of any substantiated allegation, arrest, or charge involving an educator so that this incident may be reflected in the state's teacher licensing system.

What LEARNS *means*

- ◆ Arkansas LEARNS fundamentally transforms the way Arkansas treats the issue of school safety.
- ◆ It broadens the scope of “safety” to include training related to mental health and sexual abuse, as well as new provisions to ensure transportation-related safety.
- ◆ It makes sure school safety is factored into account before a new school is even constructed.
- ◆ And it ensures that safety procedures are regularly reviewed and updated to guarantee that no weaknesses emerge in protocols.
- ◆ Under the LEARNS act, parents can feel more comfortable and confident that their school will truly be a safe place for students to learn and thrive.

What Arkansans *think*

Voters support **expanding school safety measures in Arkansas**, such as crisis response training and mental health awareness training.



BOTTOM LINE: THE LEARNS ACT IS A HISTORIC INVESTMENT IN ARKANSAS STUDENTS, TEACHERS, SCHOOLS, AND PARENTS.

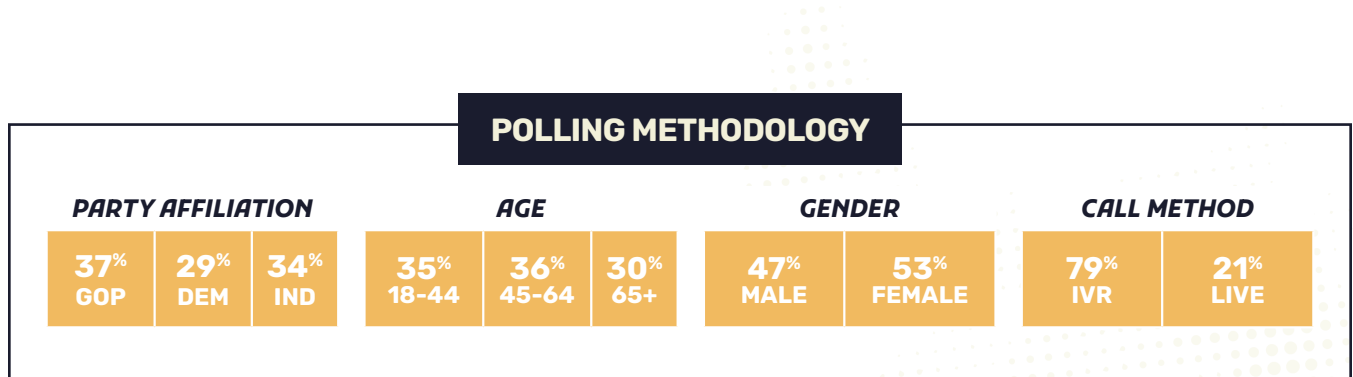
Despite attempts to mislead and misrepresent by defenders of the failing status quo, the core outcomes of Arkansas LEARNS are indisputable.

The plan will:

- ◆ Build the strongest educational freedom program in the country, putting every Arkansas child on a level playing field;
- ◆ Responsibly reward and recruit high-quality educators;
- ◆ Invest in critical subject areas where Arkansas has long fallen short;
- ◆ Protect students’ physical safety and insulate them divisive and age-inappropriate content;
- ◆ Prepare students for the 21st century workforce;
- ◆ Hold teachers and school districts accountable; and
- ◆ Finally fund students, not systems. Without LEARNS, Arkansas’s education system will continue on its downward trajectory.

It requires courage and conviction to advance the bold vision that Governor Sanders has presented, especially when it threatens the status quo. But transformational change is precisely what Arkansas’s education system desperately needs.

Through the LEARNS Act, Arkansas can—and will—build a brighter future for students, parents, educators, and all Arkansans.



Results for this poll were collected by Opportunity Arkansas Foundation using an independent polling firm. The questions utilized an IVR and live call survey from a statewide sample of 505 likely Arkansas voters, conducted February 13–15, 2023, with a margin of sampling error of ± 4.36 percentage points. The margin of sampling errors may be higher for subgroups. Results presented may not always appear to total 100 percent due to rounding. Data were post-stratified using weighted demographic information from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement and the state election authorities. Demographic information for actual voters in past elections was used to construct sample target weights. Opportunity Arkansas Foundation paid for all costs associated with these surveys.

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