



Senator Jane English
 Chair, Senate Education Committee
 1 Capitol Mall, Fifth Floor
 Little Rock, AR 72201

Representative Bruce Cozart
 Chair, House Education Committee
 1 Capitol Mall, Fifth Floor
 Little Rock, AR 72201

Senator Larry Teague
 Co-Chair, Joint Budget Committee
 1 Capitol Mall, Fifth Floor
 Little Rock, AR 72201

Representative Lane Jean
 Co-Chair, Joint Budget Committee
 1 Capitol Mall, Fifth Floor
 Little Rock, AR 72201

Dear Senator English, Senator Teague, Representative Cozart, and Representative Jean:

We, the undersigned education equity organizations, write to express our concerns with Arkansas’ Succeed Scholarship Program, the state’s voucher program for students with disabilities and students in the foster care system. In 2019, the Arkansas Legislature passed bipartisan legislation requiring a biennial [report](#) of critical information associated with the Succeed Scholarship Program (“Succeed Vouchers”). While the Legislature is to be commended for instituting such accountability measures, no level of accountability or transparency can change the fact that Succeed Vouchers, like all private school voucher programs, divert crucial public dollars from the state’s public schools, which educate over 93 percent of Arkansas’ studentsⁱ, including the vast majority of those with disabilities or in foster care.

Consistent with national data demonstrating the ineffectiveness of private school vouchers to improve academic outcomes,ⁱⁱ the recently released biennial report on Succeed Vouchers (the “2020 Report”) reveals several troubling findings. It shows stark data challenges in ascertaining the program’s academic effects; however, the academic achievement information that could be collected from student participants reveals low test scores for the majority of voucher recipients. The report also exposes inequitable enrollment statistics, troubling data inconsistencies, and little accountability for Arkansas’ public funds spent on this program. For these reasons, we urge the Legislature to eliminate Succeed Vouchers, especially as it grapples with unprecedented revenue shortfalls and increased resource needs of public schools and Local Education Agencies due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2020 Report illustrates in detail the deficiencies in Succeed Vouchers’ ability to improve academic outcomes and promote equity and access for historically – and currently – marginalized students. It also

illustrates the profound difficulties in ensuring appropriate oversight of this publicly-funded program. Specifically, the report shows:

- There are significant gaps in data on the racial demographics of students participating in the program. Of the population of voucher students for whom data was available, 5 percent were Latinx, 12 percent were Black, and 78 percent were White. Students with disabilities in Arkansas public schools, on the other hand, are 11 percent Latinx, 23 percent Black, and 61 percent White.
- Although Succeed Vouchers are funded by a state appropriation, voucher recipients are not statewide, but concentrated in cities and suburbs, with over one-third in Little Rock, Arkansas.
- The provision of “meaningful comparative data regarding student performance based on the assessment scores private schools provide is hindered by several factors” (p.12). Private schools accepting Succeed Vouchers do not administer a uniform norm- or criterion-referenced assessment of their students’ academic progress, and it is not possible to link student test scores from before and after receiving a voucher, thus preventing any type of meaningful comparison or analysis of academic outcomes for voucher students. However, the assessment data that was collected shows troubling education outcomes.
- Participating private schools use inconsistent reporting and data collection standards for students’ eligibility for Free or Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL), revealing that the FRPL status of 44 percent of participating students is either unavailable or not provided by participating private schools. Of available data, just 30% of voucher students were eligible for FRPL, while 60% of Arkansas public school students are eligible.
- Only three-fourths of participating private schools are accredited, while a quarter are on some type of path to accreditation. Thus, schools participating in the program are receiving taxpayer dollars without completing a rigorous accreditation process, let alone being held to the same or similar accountability and reporting standards as public schools.
- Nearly 20% of voucher students have left their private schools, for reasons including dismissal, inability to pay tuition amounts not covered by their voucher, and lack of access to transportation.

The Arkansas constitution expressly obligates the state to “maintain a general, suitable, and efficient system of public schools and . . . adopt all suitable means to secure to the people the advantages and opportunities of education.”ⁱⁱⁱ Arkansas has a fundamental duty under its constitution to use public resources for the advancement of public schools and their students. Arkansas’ Succeed Vouchers undermine that objective, making it more difficult for the state to fulfill its constitutional duty to public school students.

Given the pandemic’s profound impact on the state budget and funding for public schools, it is more important than ever to ensure public funds support research-based staff, programs and services that meet the needs of Arkansas’s public school students. These students urgently need nutritional, health, remote learning, and socio-emotional supports during and after current school closures, and the Legislature should do everything possible to resource them. The total impact of COVID-19 on Arkansas’ education budget in the coming Fiscal Year will be over \$2 billion.^{iv} The state could also lose over 16 percent of its teaching workforce, the lifeblood of Arkansas’ public education system.^v Despite these dire projections, the Governor’s proposal to allocate \$3 million in one-time funding to Succeed Vouchers^{vi} still stands. In addition, Arkansas is directing \$6 million in relief funds from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and

Economic Security (CARES) Act toward voucher programs, with \$1 million directly supplementing Succeed Vouchers and \$5 million going toward micro-learning homeschooling programs.^{vii} Limited public resources must now be focused on effective, research-based school improvement efforts rather than funding school privatization programs that lack effectiveness and accountability for precious state and federal resources.

With an economic downturn not seen since the Great Depression and historic protests of systemic discrimination and racism toward Black Americans, we are experiencing a life-changing moment that demands we seize real opportunities for education justice. One crucial strategy to address racial inequity is to make long-overdue investments in public schools serving, and accountable to, Arkansas' low-income communities and communities of color. This includes rejecting efforts to divert public funds to a parallel program of private education that hinders academic progress and undermines students' civil rights. Public education serves as a foundational base for a vibrant economy, opportunity for social mobility, and, indeed, democracy itself. As the Arkansas constitution requires, investments must be made to guarantee the right to a free, high-quality public education for each and every Arkansas student.

We ask the Arkansas General Assembly to dismantle Succeed Vouchers and redirect those public funds to the public school system in order to improve educational opportunity for students with disabilities, foster care students, and students from low-income families. We welcome the opportunity to discuss our analysis of the 2020 Report and other pressing concerns related to private school vouchers and education equity.

Sincerely,

Rich Huddleston
Executive Director
Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

Bill Kopsky
Executive Director
Arkansas Citizens First Congress & the Arkansas Public Policy Panel

David G. Sciarra
Executive Director
Education Law Center

Jessica Levin
Director
Public Funds Public Schools

Raymond C. Pierce
President and CEO
Southern Education Foundation

Bacardi Jackson
Managing Attorney;
Katherine Dunn
Regional Policy Analyst
SPLC Action Fund

Dr. Sybil Jordan Hampton
Philanthropist and Education Leader

cc: Governor Hutchinson, Commissioner Key, Senator Joyce Elliott, and Representative Vivian Flowers

ⁱ [“Private elementary and secondary schools, enrollment, teachers, and high school graduates, by state: Selected years, 2005 through 2015”](#), [“Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by region, state, and jurisdiction: Selected years, fall 1990 through fall 2018.”](#) (2018). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

ⁱⁱ *See, e.g.*, Abdulkadiroğlu, Atila, Parag A. Pathak, and Christopher R. Walters. “Free to Choose: Can School Choice Reduce Student Achievement?” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 10, no. 1 (2018): 175–206. <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20160634>; Boser, Ulrich, Meg Benner, and Erin Roth, “The Highly Negative Impacts of Vouchers,” Center for American Progress, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/03/20/446699/highly-negative-impacts-vouchers/>; Public Funds Public Schools, *Research*, <https://pfps.org/research/> (gathering research on voucher programs across the country).

ⁱⁱⁱ “Constitution Of The State Of Arkansas Of 1874.” Accessed August 12, 2020. <http://electls.blogs.wm.edu/files/2013/12/ArkansasConstitution1874.pdf>.

^{iv} “The Impact of COVID-19 on State Education Funding: Arkansas.” Learning Policy Institute, 2020. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Yssiymbpm46k_KO_JJQd5iWoAPMocp0E/view.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} “Governor Hutchinson Presents Balanced Budget That Reflects Savings, Emphasizes Public Safety and Education.” Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson, March 4, 2020. State of Arkansas. <https://governor.arkansas.gov/news-media/press-releases/governor-hutchinson-presents-balanced-budget-that-reflects-savings-emphasiz>.

^{vii} Smith, A. Drew. “CARES Committee approves emergency leave for teachers.” Pine Bluff Commercial, August 17, 2020. <https://www.pbcommercial.com/news/20200817/cares-committee-approves-emergency-leave-for-teachers>.