

Introduction

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“Only Arkansas and West Virginia lagged behind Mississippi in equivalent educational attainment,” reported a 2001 study of poverty and inequality in the Mississippi Delta region. Because of this statistic and many like it, Arkansas has developed a reputation for having a poor education system. The fraction of Arkansas residents earning college degrees has consistently been among the lowest in the nation and, in the early 1990s, only a handful of states scored lower on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exams. Although Arkansas schools and scores have strengthened in recent years, our students still generally score below the national average and the Arkansas education “stigma” remains. While the Natural State has been in the process of school reform for several decades, real education problems persist.

Fortunately, Arkansans are anything but apathetic or complacent about our schools. Rather, we are keenly interested in educational improvement, despite the fact that there is no consensus on the first steps of reform. In fact, the annual statewide

Arkansas Poll reveals that education is consistently ranked as one of the highest priority issues. In 2002, the Blue Ribbon Commission on Public Education sponsored public forums to discuss education issues in nearly one hundred local sites, engaging some 6000 live participants and televised across the state.

Over the last decade, Arkansas leaders have looked to national education reform models and to success stories in other states for policy ideas. The state's first charter school law was passed in 1999. Pilot programs in teacher licensure and induction mentoring, the Milken Foundation's "Teacher Advancement Program," and the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) Academy program have been implemented with public and private funding. Private funding has also helped to advance professional development programs for such school reform movements as "Great Expectations of Arkansas" and "Arkansas A+ Schools."

All this illustrates Arkansans' keen interest in education reform. Our citizens are committed to improving our state's schools and finding the best ways to educate our children. The question we now face is how to take advantage of the current interest in reform to leap over historic impediments and resistance to change. The Supreme Court's *Lake View* mandates have encouraged citizens and legislators to focus on funding. Our lawmakers have responded and increased the resources in our schools. To find solutions, however, we must now ask ourselves what steps can be taken beyond injecting more money into the current system.

Governor Huckabee shares our interest in improving education in Arkansas. As chairman of the Education Commission of the States and the National Governors Association, he has shown a willingness to engage in aggressive educational reform. The Governor recognizes the value of outside perspectives and fresh ideas—even when controversial. In that spirit, he took the initiative to invite the Koret Task Force on K–12 Education, a group

Introduction**xv**

of well known education scholars gathered together by Stanford University's Hoover Institution, to visit Arkansas, look around, and share some of its ideas for improving the state's education system.

The essays in this volume represent an important collaboration between nationally-renowned education experts and Arkansas policymakers, a collaboration that began in January 2005 with a visit by the Koret Task Force to Little Rock to participate in panel discussions and conversations with policymakers, educators, and others interested in improving education in our state. Since that initial meeting, task force members have studied and considered the issues facing Arkansas in light of what they have seen in the state and their many years of research in the field.

The Koret Task Force is known for its willingness to challenge the status quo. We welcome the group's forthright and challenging recommendations. It is time in Arkansas to do away with provincial prejudices and the assumption that outside ideas are suspect, and instead listen intently to these insightful voices. We should be willing to consider criticism that is well-intended even if we wish it weren't needed. And we should not dismiss from consideration any reform strategies simply because they stand outside the traditional public school system or its familiar assumptions. We may not embrace every proposal in these chapters, but their injection into our public debate is crucial and will serve to strengthen our eventual policy conclusions.

A wide variety of reform strategies are discussed in this monograph. The topics range from improving the state's academic standards, teaching, and assessment systems to providing more options for parents and students outside the traditional system. In each case, the authors bring their considerable experience to bear in presenting policy options to improve schools for all Arkansas students.

E. D. Hirsch Jr. and Diane Ravitch begin by appraising our

state frameworks for English and social studies and offering recommendations. Williamson M. Evers and Paul Clopton do the same in mathematics. Herbert J. Walberg reviews the current assessment strategies employed in the state, discusses some of the requirements made by legislators in the area of assessment, and offers helpful advice on how we can best use assessment to foster educational improvement. Of course, no discussion of education reform would be complete without a discussion of the federal No Child Left Behind Act; Chester E. Finn Jr. takes on this task and examines that law's implementation in the state. Much of the debate surrounding NCLB today involves school ratings; particularly whether schools should be judged by "point-in-time" scores or change over time (also known as "value-added"). Prominent education economists Caroline M. Hoxby and Eric A. Hanushek tackle this complicated and challenging issue.

Teachers, of course, are central to the academic growth of students. Political scientist Terry M. Moe examines issues of teacher preparation, certification, and performance in Arkansas. Economists Hanushek and Hoxby investigate teacher compensation issues and push the envelope in an essay on overhauling the teacher salary structure by incorporating performance-based pay.

Arkansas educators face some unique challenges due to the fact that so many of the state's children attend rural schools. Paul E. Peterson and John E. Chubb shed light on the challenges and opportunities facing those who would strengthen that sector of the K–12 system. In a separate chapter, Chubb and Peterson examine ways that Arkansas could make fuller use of charter schools to widen school-choice options. And Paul T. Hill explains why making education more transparent—better informing parents, voters, and policymakers—will improve our schools and the system as a whole.

This report surely will not end the debate on school reform

Introduction**xvii**

in the state. Nor do these ideas span the entire spectrum of potentially worthwhile reforms. They do not, for example, discuss such interesting whole-school reform schemes as Accelerated Schools or Success for All. Nor is there discussion here of Teach for America, a unique strategy for placing bright and capable young graduates into our nation's troubled school systems. (How wonderful would it be for Arkansas' brightest college graduates to vie for the opportunity to win a "Teach for the Delta" fellowship, in which recipients receive generous stipends for spending a few years teaching in our neediest rural schools.) We hope, however, that the ideas set forth in these pages will serve to push the current education debate in this state forward and infuse it with new ideas and perspectives.

Some may caution against moving too quickly because of potential risks for our children. And while change does bring uncertainty, the consequences of inaction are certain—and disastrous for all. We should carefully weigh the recommendations in this report as we consider our next steps. We must seek data, implement reforms, and carefully evaluate these reforms so that we can discard ineffective strategies and expand effective ones. And, as we act, we should continue to be guided by one overarching idea: the status quo is *not* good enough. Our children deserve better.