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## **The State of Early Childhood Education & Pre-Kindergarten in Arkansas**

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The State of  
Early Childhood Education  
& Pre-Kindergarten

# ARKANSAS

Developed by the Office for Education Policy | University of Arkansas  
Sarah McKenzie PhD and Josh McGee PhD

# The State of Early Childhood Education & Pre-Kindergarten in Arkansas

**Developed by the Office for Education Policy**

**Sarah McKenzie PhD and Josh McGee PhD**

This report describes the state of pre-Kindergarten and Early Childhood Education (ECE) access and quality in the state of Arkansas. This report focuses on the 1,571 licensed public and private ECE centers in the state, describing the number of licensed seats in these centers, transportation and funding options, quality ratings, staffing, and distribution of ECE opportunities. The report also includes survey results from 520 leaders of those pre-Kindergarten and ECE centers about their experiences with and thoughts about early childhood education in Arkansas. The findings detailed here should inform interested parties of the current state of ECE and pre-Kindergarten across the state.

According to recent census data, there are an estimated 186,714 Arkansas children under 5 years of age (US Census 2021). While some children are cared for by a parent, many parents seek alternative options for child care since children cannot attend kindergarten in Arkansas before they reach 5 years of age. There are two main categories for outside child care: child care family homes or center-based care.

Family home providers care for children in the provider's home or other family-type of residence. In Arkansas, child care family homes caring for fewer than six children are not required to be licensed. Family homes can be licensed to a maximum capacity of sixteen children, and the maximum number of seats in the 227 licensed homes was 4,795 in 2020-21.





## **This report focuses on center-based care, as the majority of Arkansas children attend center-based care prior to starting school.**

Center-based care includes child care centers and preschools that are typically established in a commercial building. Centers can be independent businesses, or they can be affiliated with a public or non-profit organization, like schools and religious institutions.

According to information from the Arkansas Department of Human Services, in 2020-21, there were 123,763 licensed child care spots for children from birth through preschool age in care centers in the state, enough spots to serve 66% of Arkansas' children under 5. It is important to note that these numbers reflect the licensing maximums, so this is an upper bound for the state's licensed preschool capacity. There is anecdotal evidence that many centers elect to serve fewer students than they are licensed to serve, but we do not have data on the actual number of seats available at each center or how many students are currently enrolled.

Center-level information was received from the Arkansas's Department of Human Services (DHS) for the 1,571 centers in the state of Arkansas licensed to serve children between the ages of six weeks and 5 years. We present several characteristics of the centers statewide as well as at the county level, including the number of centers, the number of licensed seats, and the percentage of potential coverage of the under 5 population given licensed seats.

A quality rating from Better Beginnings, a program of the Arkansas Department of Human Services, distinguishes the quality of each Arkansas child care center. Centers can apply to receive a rating, which range from 1 to 3 stars, with 3 indicating the center is of the highest quality. Although voluntary, 92% of centers have a Better Beginnings rating. We report the average quality rating at the state and county levels, as well as the percentage of licensed seats identified "high-quality" by nature of being in a center that received a quality rating of 3.

We also report the percentage of centers that provide transportation, and the average monthly cost of care for a single child. These values are provided at the state and county level.



# Subsidized Centers

**Many centers are subsidized, which means they are free for children to attend if their family meets eligibility requirements.**

Subsidized centers are those that are identified as a Head Start program or ABC center, which receive funding for serving qualified children. The percentage of subsidized centers is presented for the state as well as at the county level. We provide descriptions of the programs below.

## **ARKANSAS BETTER CHANCE (ABC):**

ABC is a state-funded initiative that provides pre-K access to low income families as well as to students with a variety of other academic risk factors. ABC centers are primarily available for 3- and 4-year-old children and are frequently housed within public school buildings. The ABC program now meets eight of ten quality standards set by the National Institute for Early Education Research, including early learning and development standards, curriculum supports, teacher specialized training, assistant teacher degree, maximum class size, staff-child ratio, screening and referral, and continuous quality improvement system. ABC educators are required to have bachelor's degrees and current Arkansas teacher licenses. These teaching requirements are more rigorous than the ones in many public and private pre-K centers. In the 2020-21 school year, 17,723 children were enrolled in 411 ABC programs. According to licensing data, ABC centers have a capacity of 33,827 students.

## **HEAD START**

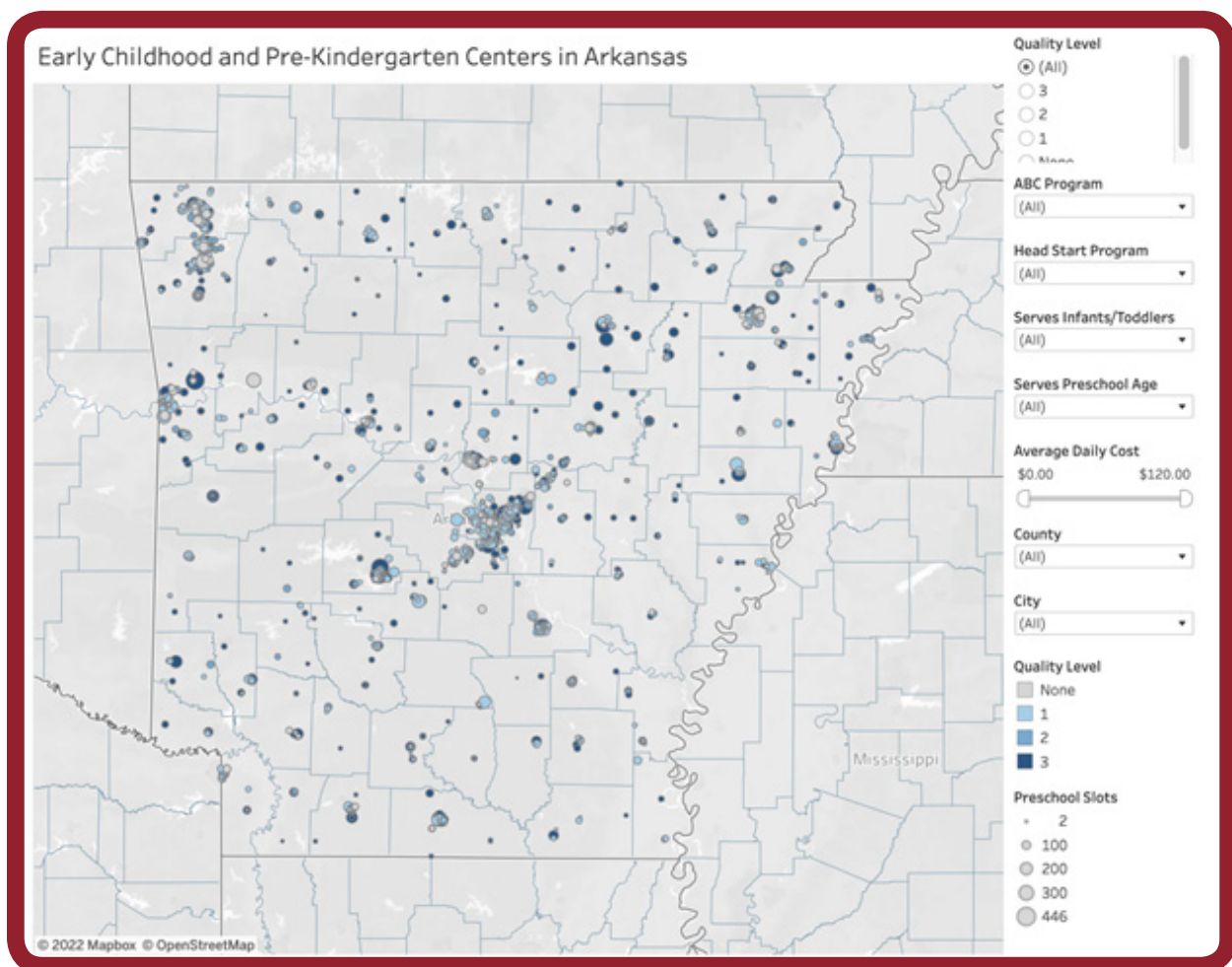
### **(INCLUDING EARLY HEAD START)**

is a federally funded program serving pregnant women and children from birth to 5 years of age. Eligibility for no-cost services, including attendance at a Head Start child care center, is determined by income level or student risk characteristics. Households earning at or below the federal poverty level are eligible, as are families receiving public assistance. Foster children, migrant children, and children from homeless families are also eligible for Head Start. In the 2020-21 school year, there were 208 centers identified as Head Start with a capacity of 12,467 students.

The vast majority of care centers are open during the traditional work day, with 93% of centers opening between 6 and 8 am, and 91% closing between 3 and 7 pm. Almost all centers reported being open September through May, but over a third close for at least a month between June and August, representing 85% of school-based centers and 20% of other centers.

# Interactive link to all Arkansas Centers

**We created an interactive data visualization from the center-level information, which indicates the location of all early childhood and pre-kindergarten centers in the state.** Each center is represented a dot, with the size of the dot reflecting the licensed preschool enrollment capacity. The visualization can be filtered by quality rating, child age, and average daily cost as well as county and city. Additional details about each center, including operating hours, cost by child age, program participation (ABC and Head Start), voucher acceptance and transportation are available by hovering over the dot representing the center.



**Interactive link:**

<https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/office.for.education.policy.university.of.arkansas/viz/PreKCenters/PreK>

# Statewide Early Childhood/ Pre-Kindergarten Centers

## Statewide Early Childhood/ Pre-Kindergarten Centers

- **1,571** centers with licensed capacity of 123,763
- **66%** Potential coverage of under 5 population based on licensed seats
- **2.02** Average quality rating (range from 1 to 3)
- **44%** of licensed seats are High-quality
- **27%** of centers provide transportation
- Average cost is **\$498** per month (varies by age)
- **35%** of centers are subsidized through Head Start or ABC

## Information by Counties

Early Childhood/ Pre-Kindergarten Center information by county is presented at the end of this report. For each reported measure, we highlight the lowest and highest counties below:

- **Number of centers:**
  - o LOW: 3 Searcy, Calhoun
  - o HIGH: 257 Pulaski
- **Potential coverage of under 5 population based on licensed seats:**
  - o LOW: 20% Madison
  - o HIGH: 127% Dallas
- **Average quality rating (1 to 3):**
  - o LOW: 1.30 Miller
  - o HIGH: 3.00 Calhoun, Cleveland, Grant, Newton, Van Buren, Woodruff
- **High-quality seats:**
  - o LOW: 6% Miller
  - o HIGH: 100% Calhoun, Cleveland, Grant, Newton, Van Buren, Woodruff
- **Transportation provided:**
  - o LOW: 0% Clay, Jackson, Madison, Marion, Montgomery, Newton, Scott, Sharp, Stone
  - o HIGH: 100% Cleveland, Lafayette
- **Average cost:**
  - o LOW: \$250/ month Newton
  - o HIGH: \$730/ month Benton
- **Subsidized centers<sup>1</sup>:**
  - o LOW: 8% Miller
  - o HIGH: 100% Calhoun, Cleveland, Lafayette, Newton, Searcy, Woodruff

<sup>1</sup>Head Start or ABC center: funding for qualified children



# Survey Data

**We administered a survey of center leaders at the beginning of the 2021-22 school year to collect more nuanced center-level data.**

We received responses from 521 center leaders, reflecting a 34% response rate. The survey asked questions about challenges faced by the center and center leaders' perceptions about challenges facing ECE across the state. In addition, the survey contained questions about curriculum, assessment, income limitations, tuition and fees, student enrollment, and staff characteristics. Responses were received from every county, although not all questions were completed by all respondents. We summarize the responses below.



## **1. QUESTION?** What is the biggest challenge YOUR CENTER is currently facing? (n=431)

- **STAFFING: 45%** of center leaders identified staffing as the biggest challenge facing their center. “We have no one applying and ones that do are unfamiliar with Early Childhood. Fast food establishments and big box stores are paying more than we can pay, so there is no incentive to be employed in Early Childcare.”

- **COVID-RELATED ISSUES: 40%**

Following COVID protocols, low enrollment and inconsistent staffing due to COVID were the main concerns.

*Other concerns raised by center leaders were space, competition with the public school programs for students, funding, and behavior issues among the children.*



# Survey Data

## 2. QUESTION?

What do you see as the biggest challenge facing early childhood education in Arkansas? (n=390)

Center leaders indicated that **STAFFING** and **COVID-RELATED ISSUES** were also the most frequently cited challenges for early childhood education in the state overall, at 33% and 22% respectively. Center leaders also expressed concerns regarding a lack of parental knowledge of and engagement in early childhood education.

**SIXTY-ONE PERCENT** of center leaders reported that their center currently had a waitlist (n=273).

### Center leaders also reported about assessment and curriculum use in their buildings.

Nearly half of responding center leaders (47%) indicated that they use an entrance or placement assessment to determine students' developmental and/or academic levels upon enrollment (n=419), while 79% reported using assessments to monitor students' developmental/academic progress (n=402).

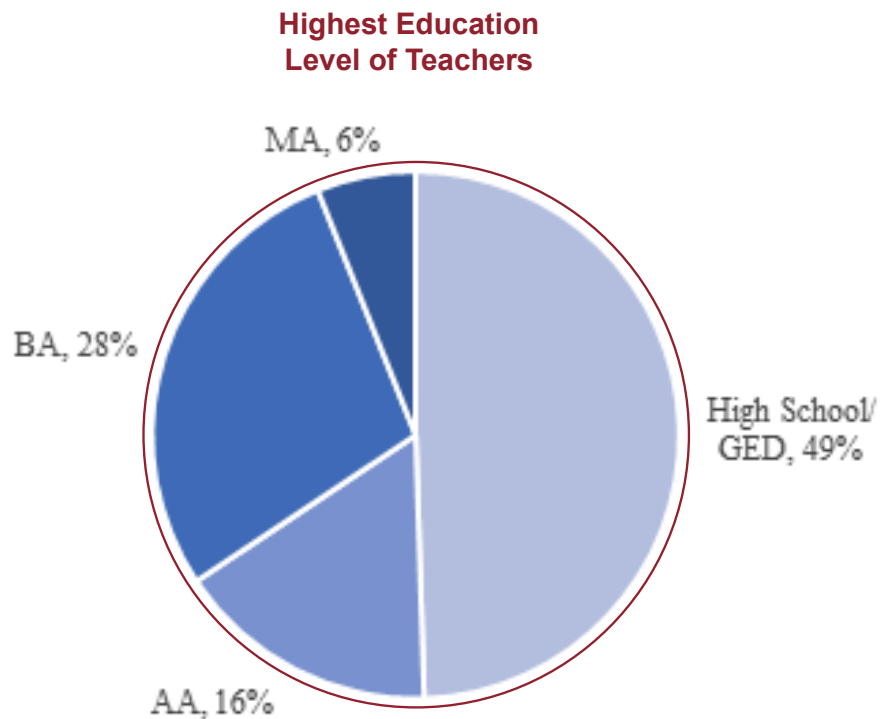
Nearly all center leaders (95%) reported using a curriculum for classroom instruction (n=356).



# Education Level & Salary

## Center leaders provided information about the highest educational level attained by the teachers in the center.

The majority of teachers were reported to hold an Associate's degree (**16%**) or were a high school graduate (**49%**). (N=219 centers containing 2,548 teachers)



**Centers leaders also reported on teacher and other staff pay at their centers.** We transformed reported hourly values into annual salary assuming 40 hours/week for 50 weeks/year. (n=134)

Reported teacher average pay was **\$29,050 per year**, while other staff average pay was **\$24,500 per year**. For comparison, Arkansas's mean annual wage is **\$44,780** and is **\$32,930 for preschool teachers**.

# Next Steps

**This report provides an overview of what we know about Early Childhood Education in the state, but there is much that we do not know.** Perhaps most important is the lack of information regarding actual enrollment and vacant spots at each center. Licensing allotments may be higher than centers accommodate, preferring smaller groups of children. Additionally, while staffing and teacher pay were addressed in survey data, we do not actually know how many people are working in these centers and what their rate of pay is.

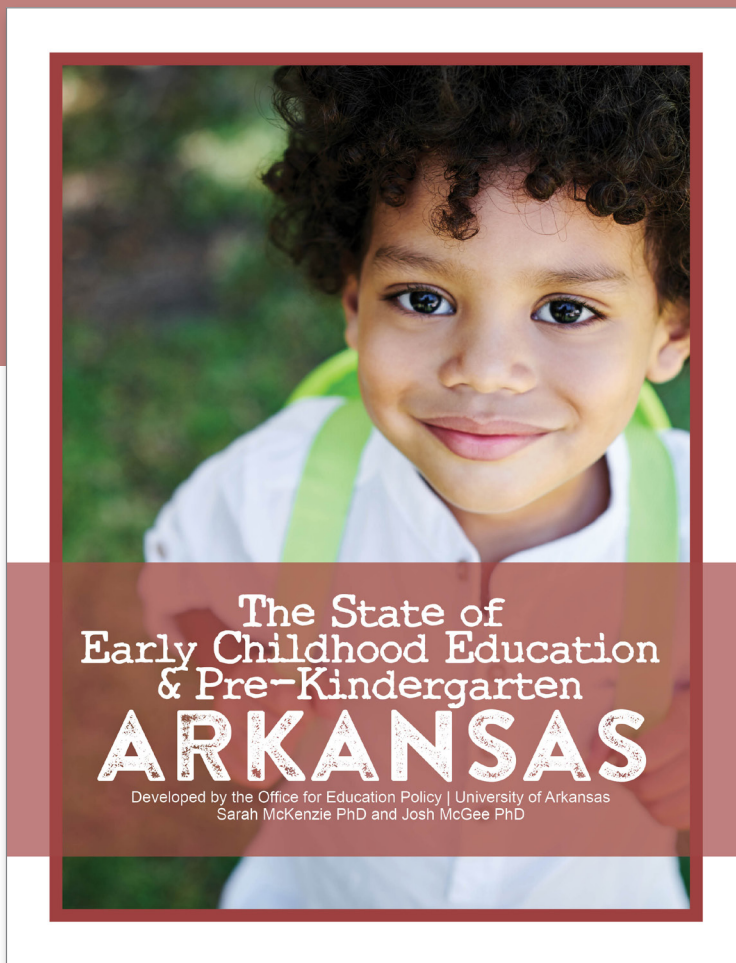
To help identify actual enrollment and vacant spots, we are **planning to administer another survey to centers across the state asking more detailed questions** about enrollment and availability. In addition, we expect workforce data will provide some insights into ECE staff salary and pipeline patterns. Regional convenings in the spring will add additional practitioner context to inform future research.



# Early Childhood Education & Pre-Kindergarten Data

COUNTY	% of population under 5	Number of kids under 5	Number of centers	Number of Infant/Toddler seats	Number of preschooler seats	Potential coverage of kids under 5	Average Quality Rating	% of seats that are High Quality	% of Infant/Toddler seats that are High Quality	% of Preschooler seats that are High Quality	% of centers that are High Quality	Transportation Provided	% of centers subsidized (ABC or Head Start)	Average monthly cost	Number of survey respondents	Percentage of centers responded to survey
Arkansas	6.5	1,115	12	266	467	66%	2.00	45%	44%	46%	45%	8%	17%	\$ 400	1	8%
Ashley	5.6	1,067	13	193	710	85%	1.78	39%	0%	49%	33%	38%	38%	\$ 335	2	15%
Baxter	4.5	1,873	17	332	905	66%	2.12	43%	46%	42%	53%	19%	53%	\$ 493	6	35%
Benton	6.9	19,619	111	3,459	6,954	53%	1.82	32%	25%	35%	29%	18%	15%	\$ 731	33	30%
Boone	6.0	2,242	18	296	992	57%	2.22	49%	5%	62%	56%	11%	50%	\$ 448	3	17%
Bradley	6.0	633	7	118	363	76%	2.33	66%	48%	71%	67%	14%	57%	\$ 353	2	29%
Calhoun	4.6	218	3	17	64	37%	3.00	100%	100%	100%	100%	50%	100%	\$ 330	0	0%
Carroll	5.6	1,583	11	142	547	44%	2.22	47%	45%	47%	56%	36%	55%	\$ 416	3	27%
Chicot	5.5	561	11	306	355	118%	2.20	50%	49%	52%	60%	70%	45%	\$ 420	2	18%
Clark	5.3	1,137	16	200	764	85%	2.19	64%	55%	66%	56%	25%	31%	\$ 430	1	6%
Clay	5.7	829	9	105	354	55%	2.78	88%	100%	85%	89%	0%	78%	\$ 413	0	0%
Cleburne	4.5	1,112	10	236	621	77%	1.80	25%	16%	29%	40%	10%	40%	\$ 494	1	10%
Cleveland	5.2	393	4	51	159	53%	3.00	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	\$ 494	1	25%
Columbia	5.7	1,300	16	355	749	85%	2.20	55%	46%	59%	60%	33%	50%	\$ 404	3	19%
Conway	6.0	1,243	11	290	537	67%	1.73	29%	0%	45%	27%	9%	36%	\$ 397	7	64%
Craighead	7.0	7,786	60	1,767	3,640	69%	1.78	37%	14%	48%	33%	34%	30%	\$ 512	13	22%
Crawford	6.4	3,849	19	420	1,298	45%	2.53	82%	75%	84%	73%	16%	47%	\$ 446	7	37%
Crittenden	7.7	3,709	31	699	1,702	65%	1.83	36%	16%	44%	33%	27%	32%	\$ 463	7	23%
Cross	6.1	1,027	13	236	613	83%	2.08	40%	35%	42%	50%	15%	46%	\$ 471	3	23%
Dallas	5.3	344	4	109	329	127%	1.67	28%	20%	30%	33%	25%	25%	\$ 365	1	25%
Desha	6.4	729	13	387	513	123%	2.00	33%	14%	50%	30%	33%	38%	\$ 361	1	8%
Drew	6.1	1,058	13	375	610	93%	1.83	38%	29%	43%	33%	62%	31%	\$ 405	2	15%
Faulkner	6.0	7,410	50	1,267	3,362	62%	2.00	50%	42%	53%	42%	34%	22%	\$ 504	15	30%
Franklin	5.5	940	9	144	616	81%	1.86	29%	0%	37%	43%	11%	44%	\$ 384	2	22%
Fulton	5.4	652	5	60	223	43%	2.80	85%	63%	91%	80%	20%	80%	\$ 451	3	60%
Garland	5.4	5,410	46	1,237	2,853	76%	2.00	60%	49%	65%	49%	24%	50%	\$ 496	3	7%
Grant	5.4	970	4	40	175	22%	3.00	100%	0%	100%	100%	25%	50%	\$ 441	0	0%
Greene	6.6	3,019	18	457	1,005	48%	1.73	42%	10%	55%	20%	29%	28%	\$ 416	3	17%
Hempstead	7.0	1,405	9	124	523	46%	2.43	80%	72%	81%	71%	11%	56%	\$ 333	4	44%
Hot Spring	5.1	1,685	13	176	756	55%	2.33	49%	9%	58%	67%	15%	62%	\$ 427	2	15%
Howard	7.1	908	10	184	570	83%	2.10	44%	0%	58%	50%	30%	30%	\$ 333	2	20%
Independence	6.6	2,504	16	594	1,331	77%	2.00	60%	43%	67%	50%	27%	44%	\$ 420	5	31%
Izard	4.1	557	6	70	210	50%	2.67	79%	74%	80%	83%	17%	83%	\$ 375	0	0%
Jackson	5.7	955	7	153	427	61%	2.14	58%	27%	69%	57%	0%	57%	\$ 420	1	14%
Jefferson	5.9	3,968	38	889	1,909	71%	1.53	24%	10%	31%	15%	42%	21%	\$ 473	9	24%
Johnson	6.5	1,674	11	248	660	54%	1.89	29%	0%	41%	44%	9%	55%	\$ 423	2	18%
Lafayette	5.0	315	4	-	197	62%	2.75	78%	0%	78%	75%	100%	100%	\$ 295	1	25%
Lawrence	6.1	989	10	124	508	64%	2.44	72%	33%	80%	67%	11%	50%	\$ 438	1	10%
Lee	5.2	447	5	66	268	75%	1.60	30%	0%	37%	20%	40%	20%	\$ 459	1	20%
Lincoln	4.0	518	6	123	233	69%	1.83	38%	16%	49%	33%	67%	33%	\$ 319	1	17%
Little River	5.8	698	5	62	241	43%	2.40	59%	0%	75%	60%	20%	20%	\$ 392	1	20%
Logan	5.8	1,226	8	167	568	60%	2.00	52%	17%	62%	50%	13%	63%	\$ 345	3	38%
Lonoke	6.5	4,811	39	831	1,872	56%	2.13	50%	35%	56%	50%	67%	31%	\$ 530	6	15%
Madison	6.3	1,041	6	49	162	20%	2.83	78%	55%	85%	83%	0%	50%	\$ 515	2	33%
Marion	4.7	791	7	55	295	44%	2.14	59%	0%	70%	57%	0%	57%	\$ 373	1	14%
Miller	6.4	2,726	24	491	1,187	62%	1.30	6%	0%	10%	5%	26%	8%	\$ 542	10	42%
Mississippi	7.2	2,929	35	816	1,597	82%	2.24	50%	34%	58%	55%	27%	66%	\$ 428	10	29%
Monroe	6.0	408	6	64	184	61%	2.60	79%	78%	79%	80%	80%	67%	\$ 425	0	0%
Montgomery	5.2	441	4	-	141	32%	2.75	50%	0%	50%	75%	0%	75%	\$ 304	3	75%
Nevada	6.3	524	7	63	231	56%	2.00	16%	0%	20%	33%	29%	43%	\$ 354	1	14%
Newton	5.1	368	8	52	126	48%	3.00	100%	100%	100%	100%	0%	100%	\$ 254	1	13%
Ouachita	5.8	1,314	13	130	545	51%	2.38	76%	28%	87%	69%	31%	69%	\$ 348	2	15%
Perry	6.1	611	5	75	182	42%	2.00	23%	0%	33%	40%	20%	60%	\$ 430	4	80%
Phillips	7.6	1,259	19	344	679	81%	2.11	38%	14%	49%	50%	35%	42%	\$ 424	0	0%
Pike	5.3	539	8	165	421	109%	2.38	46%	30%	52%	63%	13%	50%	\$ 359	2	25%
Poinsett	6.5	1,493	15	279	575	57%	2.50	74%	49%	86%	75%	14%	67%	\$ 438	2	13%
Polk	5.6	1,076	9	116	465	54%	2.00	42%	0%	53%	44%	11%	56%	\$ 313	3	33%
Pope	6.3	3,993	31	585	1,575	54%	2.07	40%	23%	46%	48%	21%	45%	\$ 498	6	19%
Prairie	5.3	439	5	30	149	41%	2.60	76%	0%	91%	80%	60%	80%	\$ 310	1	20%
Pulaski	6.5	25,943	263	7,245	17,201	94%	1.78	39%	30%	43%	31%	31%	21%	\$ 521	40	16%
Randolph	6.5	1,207	11	268	431	58%	1.73	45%	32%	53%	36%	22%	36%	\$ 468	3	27%
Saline	5.7	7,035	50	1,309	3,114	63%	1.93	41%	44%	40%	42%	51%	20%	\$ 515	0	0%
Scott	6.0	590	4	120	274	67%	2.00	83%	53%	96%	50%	0%	75%	\$ 295	1	25%
Searcy	5.1	399	3	68	144	53%	2.33	42%	0%	61%	67%	33%	100%	\$ 436	10	333%
Sebastian	6.7	8,563	66	1,299	3,868	60%	2.10	37%	20%	42%	49%	20%	38%	\$ 481	3	5%
Sevier	7.5	1,188	7	137	480	52%	2.00	48%	9%	60%	43%	14%	43%	\$ 385	6	86%
Sharp	5.5	950	11	177	371	58%	2.45	68%	59%	73%	64%	0%	45%	\$ 415	0	0%
St. Francis	6.2	1,432	10	189	806	70%	1.80	36%	17%	41%	40%	20%	40%	\$ 475	0	0%
Stone	4.9	606	6	61	279	56%	2.33	63%	49%	66%	67%	0%	67%	\$ 402	3	50%
Union	6.6	2,578	27	613	1,532	83%	2.41	65%	46%	72%	68%	33%	44%	\$ 380	6	22%
Van Buren	4.7	742	8	101	301	54%	3.00	100%	100%	100%	100%	14%	75%	\$ 371	3	38%
Washington	6.7	16,473	114	2,596	5,879	51%	2.07	37%	27%	41%	40%	18%	32%	\$ 657	24	21%
White	5.9	4,532	33	731	2,055	61%	2.24	55%	38%	62%	55%	30%	39%	\$ 412	6	18%
Woodruff	5.6	351	4	78	223	86%	3.00	100%	100%	100%	100%	25%	100%	\$ 337	1	25%
Yell	6.1	1,236	11	286	571	69%	2.00	55%	38%	63%	45%	45%	64%	\$ 412	0	0%
STATEWIDE	6.2	186,714	1,571	35,967	87,796	66%	2.02	44%	30%	50%	44%	27%	35%	\$ 498	521	34%





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### **Mission:**

The Office for Education Policy (OEP) provides relevant education research, data, and policy analysis to support data-driven decision-making for Arkansas PK-12 policymakers and educators.

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