



# PUBLIC POLICY WATCH

The Newsletter of The Arkansas Public Policy Panel

Spring 2004

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## THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN ARKANSAS

### Reforming Arkansas Public Schools – a Grassroots Approach

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The fiery debates on education reform have subsided for now, but not before over 1000 Arkansans joined in to influence the outcome. Many are now back at work in their hometowns, applying the new rules in their schools.

Just a year ago, most community people were still outside the action. Although the state Supreme Court had set a deadline of January 1, 2004 to fix Arkansas schools, very few grassroots voices were being heard in the debates.

It wasn't because people didn't know the problems, or care. The challenge was how to gain a place in a debate that was dominated by more powerful interests.

The Panel pulled together grassroots leaders and organization representatives from across the state to find a way. A campaign and a group emerged, Arkansas for Excellence in Education (AEE).

AEE began by hosting 12 regional meetings around the state. Community people debated the issues, developed positions, and appointed delegates to a statewide education summit. In August, the delegates convened with the Arkansas Citizens First Congress to turn the position statements into an elected platform for the coalition. They used a hands-on political process much like the Arkansas legislature.

The final platform called for 1) setting high standards for academics and efficiency, giving every school a chance to meet those standards and not consolidating schools based on an arbitrary minimum number; 2) sharing the tax burden for education reform fairly among all income and business groups, and raising adequate revenue to fund the needed reforms, including preschool for low income kids; 3) more accountability from the Department of Education by electing their board; 4) raising teacher salaries to a level at least equal to those of surrounding states; and 5) fair distribution of resources to schools, with extra funding for schools in high poverty areas to help close the achievement gaps between rich and poor.

Delegate John Austin said the agenda united Delta



The principal of Martin Elementary School in Altheimer takes AEE members on a tour. AEE members from around the state visited each other's schools to develop and promote education reforms.

and South Arkansas communities confronting long-term underfunding of their schools with small Northern communities fighting to save their schools.

"The people from predominately black districts in the Delta came together with people from predominately white districts in the Ozarks. It's a new thing...we have many issues in common," said Austin.

The groups conducted tours of schools in the Ozarks, the Delta and South Arkansas. They hosted forums, convened an education conference with legislators and officials, and held a prayer vigil at the Capitol.

South Arkansas and Delta members created additional recommendations to achieve equity: 1) create a Civil Rights Commission within the Department of Education; and 2) bonuses for teachers in high poverty districts.

Tied to education reform was an opportunity to reform the regressive Arkansas tax system, where the less money you make the higher your tax rate. AEE and CFC adopted the tax proposal of Advocates for Children and Families. [aradvocates.org](http://aradvocates.org) They made a fact sheet explaining how sales taxes are unfair to middle and low income families, and laid out several tax options that are more fair. [CitizensFirst.org](http://CitizensFirst.org).

By the time the Arkansas Legislature convened in December, Arkansans for Excellence in Education and the Citizens First Congress

*Education cont. on page 4*

## ANNOUNCING

**Congratulations** to Ghazal Mir, Panel VISTA, on leave from working with farmers developing the Arkansas Farm Community Alliance, and to her husband Dr. Zulfi Mir on the birth of a strong and healthy boy, **Khizer Ali Mir**.

**A big thank you** to these funders who are working with us for a more just world: Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation, Norman Foundation, The Rural School and Community Trust, Corporation for National and Community Service, The Southern Organizing Cooperative, Greensboro Justice Fund, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Catholic Campaign for Human Development, The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, Southern Partners Fund, National Rural Funders Collaborative, Southern Education Foundation, the Belvedere Fund of the Rockefeller Family Fund, the Presbyterian Hunger Fund, and the churches, organizations, and many individual donors in and outside of Arkansas. Thank you!



**Join the Arkansas Citizen's First Congress as they plan for the next Legislative Session! The Conference will be held August 13-15 in Hot Springs, AR. Contact Beth Pease at 501-376-7913 or [bethp@arpanel.org](mailto:bethp@arpanel.org)**

# CFC SCORES AT THE LEGISLATURE

Arkansas activists are finding they can win legislation that was once just a dream. Working together in coalition, the member groups of Citizens First Congress (the Congress) turned out at the capitol last spring to lobby their legislators for laws that will help farmers, protect victims of violence, create more opportunities to vote, and end conflicts of interest on state boards.

Two of the four campaigns resulted in the passage of legislation. Each campaign was led by a member group of the Congress.

## SUCCESS

- The first win was a fair election bill that will extend the hours that voting polls are open for early voting, including Saturdays! The campaign was led by New Pine Bluff Coalition for Fairness and Equality members. Activists lobbied their legislators and attended committee hearings sporting pink stickers that read "Weekend Voting for Working Folks".

- The Coalition Against Domestic Violence led a second successful campaign for three new laws that will provide state funding for domestic violence shelters and programs. Coalition members frequented the capitol, lobbying their legislators.

- Farmers waged a campaign for a Department of Agriculture (DoA) that was a cliff hanger right up to the end of the legislative session. Four years ago Arkansas Farm-Community Alliance had the support of just one legislator to create a DoA to help farmers with marketing and other resources. This year three bills were

introduced. One won in the House but failed in the Senate. Another won in the Senate but failed in the House. Farmers were pleased. "If it had just come out of the House committee, that would have been reason for celebration," said Ed Martsoff, a sheep and honey farmer from Morrilton.

- Other campaigns continue to build support. Eric Reese, Director of Arkansas Equality Network, says the campaign to increase penalties for hate crimes "will take time and public education, but we need this law in Arkansas. We plan to win."

Check the website [CitizensFirst.org](http://CitizensFirst.org) for details on other bills from the session. The Congress will release a legislative guide where you can see how your legislator voted on critical progressive issues.

The Congress is guided by a Steering Committee of leaders from Congress member groups.

## ACTION UPDATES

**The Audubon Society of Central Arkansas** invites you to its website [www.ascabird.org](http://www.ascabird.org) for information about monthly meetings, birding field trips, etc. May 8, The International Migratory Bird Count. For more information contact Barry Haas, 501-821-4097 or [bhaas@sbcglobal.net](mailto:bhaas@sbcglobal.net)

**The Arkansas Farm Community Alliance** will host an Arkansas Food Celebration June 2, 2004 at the Little Rock River Market Tower Plaza. There will be dishes from farms around Arkansas, live music, and lots of time for fellowship. Proceeds will go to the Arkansas Regional Food Network, a project of AFCA, and the Arkansas Rice Depot. Tickets are \$15 and can be ordered through [ragan@farmtable.org](mailto:ragan@farmtable.org), [www.farmtable.org](http://www.farmtable.org), or 1-888-633-1204.

# THE PANEL CELEBRATES 40 YEARS

On December 6, 2003 people gathered to celebrate forty “Panel” years. The Little Rock Panel of American Women was organized in 1963 during the aftermath of Little Rock’s 1957 school crisis by women who wanted their children to attend integrated public schools.

White, African American, Asian American, Protestant, Catholic and Jewish mothers broke new ground when they came together and initiated public discussions about diversity. Despite their families’ fears for their safety, they carried that discussion to civic groups across the state. They confronted public opinion as well as their own stereotypes and perceptions, and founded “The Panel”.

The celebration was a very special fundraiser for the Panel, a time to reflect and honor women who came together in a time of crisis in dedication to fairness, respect, and diversity. For more photos, past and present, see the Panel’s web site at [www.ARPANEL.org](http://www.ARPANEL.org).

Thank you Panelists,  
for your vision for  
Arkansas!



**Little Rock Panel of American Women circa May 1964: Gwen Riley, Brownie Ledbetter, Sandra Green, Connie Obsitnik, and Shirley Strauss**



**The crowd listens to Tom Dillard, Curator at the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, describe the historical importance of the Panel’s early work.**



**Mildred Terry, a Panel founder, looks over the Panel’s history.**



**Honoree Jim Lynch dances with wife DeDe Rhodes after receiving the annual Dragon Slayer Award for community activism.**

## EDUCATION CONT.

were maintaining a daily presence at the Capitol. Many members had never been there before. “This helped me see for the first time how the process works,” said Ernest Cunningham, who provided testimony before a committee.

When the legislature adjourned, AEE and the CFC had racked up both wins and losses:

- **School reorganization** was limited to administrative consolidation of districts with under 350 students. Measures that are proven to actually improve schools like lowering class sizes, raising teacher salaries and getting more community input were not sufficiently addressed.
- No **fair taxes** yet, but a proposed one-cent sales tax increase was dropped to 7/8<sup>th</sup>-cent, lessening the unfairness slightly. And legislators promised they would not raise additional education funding next session from sales tax. But the highest taxes were levied on the poor and middle class. Big corporations fought hard to keep their taxes low, and won.
- **Preschool** for children from families making less than 200% of the poverty line was passed, one of the brightest spots of the session for the coalition.
- No progress on **electing the State Board of Education members**.
- **Teachers’ minimum salaries** were raised significantly, but not enough in high poverty areas.
- **Money was targeted to schools and teachers in high poverty districts**, although not enough. Adequate proposals kept getting whittled down by those afraid they’d have to raise corporate taxes.
- The proposed **civil rights commission** is still pending, with hearings scheduled for this summer.
- Other legislation related to testing and much more passed and can be found on the Congress website.

Linda Polk, Panel board co-chair, says that “just as



Arkansans gathered in the capitol rotunda to pray for Arkansas schools.

important as the policy gains and losses is the strength this fight built in Arkansas people.” The campaign was led by the people who got involved in the process.

“Many of these people had never created their own policy platform, never lobbied their legislator, never before seen the Arkansas Legislature in action,” said Polk. “The real gain is that they have a stronger voice in their own future. We will pass more progressive laws and policies as more people understand that Arkansas belongs to all of us.”

The end of the Special Session on Education does not mean the end of education issues. There are many local issues in communities across the state. The Supreme Court is considering further action. Every successive legislature is going to grapple with how to improve and fund Arkansas schools. Call the Panel to learn more or get involved. Arkansas’ children need you!

## SUMMER OF CIVIL RIGHTS HEARINGS

### Two sets of hearings about civil rights issues are set to take place

A Racial Profiling Task Force is conducting hearings to gather stories about experiences people have had with racial profiling by local or state police in Arkansas. Police officials claim that drivers are not stopped based on the color of their skin. This is the community’s chance to tell their stories.

The 13-member committee is planning hearings in Pine Bluff, Helena, Rogers, Hope and Jonesboro. Dates are not set yet. The Task Force was created by legislation from Sen. Hank Wilkins of Pine Bluff and supported by the Arkansas ACLU and NAACP.

Also this summer, with a date to be announced, the Arkansas Legislature will have a public hearing about civil rights problems in Arkansas Schools. The study, sponsored by Sen. Tracy Steele and Sen. Irma Hunter-Brown, comes after attempts to create a Civil Right Commission for Arkansas stalled when some state legislators stated that there are no civil rights problems left in Arkansas schools.

The success of these committees depend on people coming out to share real stories about problems that others wish to sweep under the rug. Arkansas needs to hear from you. For more information contact Panel Organizer Bernadette Devone, 870-872-8980.

# EDUCATION REFORM...

## ...The Good, The Bad and What's Next



### A Message from Shirley Bondon

The Special Legislative session that just ended was wild, but education reform is not finished. There are major issues yet to tackle and more work ahead.

One of the most disturbing things we heard during the session was from one of our legislators who said that we should just “*stay home and wait for the legislature to tell you what to do. Grassroots people aren't intelligent enough to understand education issues.*”

Well we didn't listen to that. We did get involved. We talked to experts and became informed. We formed local action committees, generated hundreds of phone calls and letters, turned out people to public meetings and the legislature. Together we shaped and changed policies and we are going to stay involved.

We built a lot of new relationships. We found some true leaders in our communities and in the legislature. Sadly we also found some others who were more bent on preserving the status quo than making real progress.

The consolidation issue was more polarizing than we expected. While I personally think consolidation would be good for some communities, I also understand the concerns of rural people.

I was willing to bow to the overall group's election to oppose consolidation based on a minimum number. We must stick together. I may not get everything I always want, but through the Citizens First Congress I'll get more of what I want than I will acting alone – that's the strength of our

coalition.

We missed an opportunity. Consolidation should have been a small part of a much bigger debate about things we all agree on, like improving performance, enriching offerings, accountability, better teacher pay, fair funding, closing achievement gaps, and cost efficiency.

Legislators hardly touched those subjects. One group thought that no other reform mattered if consolidation didn't happen, while another group felt that consolidation would destroy their children's education no matter what else was done. And the debate had precious little data about what consolidation has actually achieved in other places. We should study how to achieve the worthy goals of consolidation rather than attach to the tactic.

I hoped a compromise plan would emerge that was focused on standards, enriched offerings, and accountability. That would have given us tools we could use for better schools in big cities as well as small. But the compromise never happened.

Two well-intentioned but opposing sides seemed caught in the passion of a frustrating issue without simple answers. They never reached common ground on their many shared goals.

That left two bad choices: a consolidation bill based on a small, arbitrarily created minimum number with little evidence that it would improve schools; or a “standards based plan” without a minimum number that was so confusing that even its sponsors couldn't explain it. We all share some blame for not finding a better solution.

Nevertheless, some important reforms were passed. We now have a core of activists who are tracking state education reforms and working on local school issues.

We have to keep fighting for better

schools, more opportunities, fairer funding and taxes, civil rights, higher teacher salaries and more accountability.

Another State Senator told us “*There are no civil rights problems in Arkansas schools anymore; we resolved all of that in the 1960's.*”

**“Two well intentioned but opposing sides... never reached common ground.”**

But we know that there are still large achievement gaps between students of different races and incomes, and more direct civil rights problems as well. We proposed a civil rights commission to face the challenges directly and help find solutions.

We must find common ground between people who are dedicated to improving education but who differ on the means to that end.

Thank you to everyone who got involved. You *did* make a difference. Let no-one think that grassroots people are just going to stay home and leave it to our lawmakers and big lobbyists – in fact we're going to do just the opposite.

-Shirley Bondon, Chair,  
Arkansas Citizens First Congress

### **Education Resources online:**

[www.ARPANEL.org](http://www.ARPANEL.org)  
[www.CitizensFirst.org](http://www.CitizensFirst.org)  
[www.aradvocates.org/](http://www.aradvocates.org/)  
[www.aeaonline.org](http://www.aeaonline.org)  
[www.southerned.org](http://www.southerned.org)  
[www.uca.edu/org/aeaa/](http://www.uca.edu/org/aeaa/)  
[www.acure.us](http://www.acure.us)  
[www.ruraledu.org](http://www.ruraledu.org)

### **Government:**

[www.accessarkansas.org/](http://www.accessarkansas.org/)  
[www.educationinarkansas.com/](http://www.educationinarkansas.com/)  
[www.arkedu.state.ar.us/](http://www.arkedu.state.ar.us/)

### **Tax study:**

[www.wrockefellerfoundation.org](http://www.wrockefellerfoundation.org)

# BIG CITY GRASSROOTS

The big city has grassroots too! Citizens armed with petitions and a determined attitude scored a major victory in Little Rock on February 24th when the Little Rock City Board of Directors revoked a commercial zoning permit to build The Summit Mall. This was to be the largest shopping mall ever proposed for Arkansas, one-million square feet, and would have been built in a wooded 97-acre parcel.

In April 2001 grassroots groups such as the Sierra Club, Women's Action for a New Direction, the Coalition of Little Rock Neighborhoods, the Little Rock New Party and others successfully referred the zoning ordinance to a referendum. 21,000 signatures were collected in 21 days.

After contesting the proposed referendum in a legal battle, Little Rock City Hall bowed to an order by the Arkansas Supreme Court directing the election to be held. The Supreme Court said that zoning issues were subject to citizen referendums as provided by Amendment Seven, the state's initiative and referendum law.

Congratulations to the citizens who activated themselves three years ago to stand up for sound planning and sustainable urban development. The proposed Summit Mall would have generated 34,000 new auto trips per day on an inadequate local street system and would have helped shutter the existing commercial shopping corridor on University Avenue located in midtown Little Rock. -Jim Lynch, Founding President, Coalition of Little Rock Neighborhoods

## ACTION UPDATES

**The Scott County Organization to Protect the Environment (SCOPE)** is involved in forest conservation and local community projects. Members comment on and appeal National Forest decisions, furnish affidavits for lawsuits, comment on environmental issues, and are active with the Citizens First Congress. Locally SCOPE promotes recycling, conducts an adopt-a-highway program, and is establishing flower and butterfly gardens at Waldron School and Mena Hospital. Contact Al Brooks 479-637-4471.

**The Newton County Wildlife Association** will have a Sustainable Living Fair in conjunction with the Junebug Jam. Join us June 13, at Headwaters School in Red Star, noon to 8:00pm. For information call Perry 479-530-1339

**Unite and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees unions** have unanimously agreed to a merger. Members are expected to ratify the tentative agreement in July. The new union, UNITE HERE, will represent 440,000 members plus over 400,000 retirees.

## ACTION UPDATES

**The Arkansas Audubon Society's** spring meeting will be held in Harrison on April 30-May 1. Fri: Suzie Rogers of the Buffalo National River speaks. Sat: Joe Neal presents new bird species recorded in Arkansas since the 1986 publication of *Arkansas Birds*. Registration information at [www.arbirds.org](http://www.arbirds.org) or call DeLynn Hearn 501-771-4886

**The Arkansas Community Action Agencies Association** annual conference is May 25-28 at the Wyndham Riverfront Hotel in North Little Rock; celebrating the 30th anniversary of ACAA and the 40th anniversary of community action and the War on Poverty. For more information, contact Rose Adams at (501) 372-0807 or [info@acaaa.org](mailto:info@acaaa.org).

**The Arkansas Assets Coalition and the Central Arkansas Development Council** will co-sponsor a conference in Little Rock from Sept. 30 through Oct. 1, focusing on asset development practices and policies, developing leadership skills, and advocacy training. For more information call 501-661-0322.

**Citizens for Independent Public Broadcasting** is a national organization dedicated to putting the public back into public broadcasting. Contact Cody Ausler for information on the Arkansas Chapter, [heritagehope@aristotle.net](mailto:heritagehope@aristotle.net). [www.cipbonline.org](http://www.cipbonline.org)

**The Arkansas Citizens First Congress** will release a legislative vote guide on their website: [www.CitizensFirst.org](http://www.CitizensFirst.org). See how your legislator voted on progressive issues related to education, civil rights, agriculture, the environment, fair taxes and more. You can also call 501-376-7744 x 14 to request a copy of the Vote Guide.

**Arkansas ACORN** is also looking for partners to help register thousands of Latino and African-American voters. Call 501-376-7151 for information. Jefferson County ACORN has a drive to place an initiative before voters that will require the city to pay a living wage.

# ARE YOU UP FOR THE CHALLENGE?

An anonymous donor will match **\$5,000**, if the Panel can raise an equal amount in “new” money.

If you’ve never given to the Panel before, give now and double your donation! Just tear off and use the form below to send your gift to the Panel. If you don’t use the form, just be sure you mention The Challenge with your donation.

If you are already a Panel donor, Hold On. The Challenge will match what you give *above and beyond* your current level of giving. We’ll send you a request that includes your record of giving. Look for it soon.

**TOGETHER, WE  
CAN RAISE  
\$10,000 IN NEW  
MONEY IN  
2004!**

The Challenge means we can raise an extra \$10,000 more to work for better education, better protection for civil rights, for the environment, for victims of domestic violence, and more.

Help Arkansas become a more progressive state – Give to the Challenge, and get a bigger bang for your buck in 2004!

***Yes! I am up for the challenge!***

I am a new donor or have not donated since 2000

**Enclosed is my donation:**

\$15     \$30     \$50     \$75     \$100     \$\_\_\_\_\_ Other

Make checks out to **The Panel**, 1308 W. Second Street, Little Rock, AR 72201

**Please Charge my Visa/Master Card**

Name as it appears on card: \_\_\_\_\_

Card Number \_\_\_\_\_ Expiration Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

I wish to remain anonymous

I want to volunteer some time.

Contact me at (include name) \_\_\_\_\_



## The Arkansas Public Policy Panel

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## PANEL STAFF

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From left: Willie Allen, Joy Andrews, Beth Ardapple, Jennifer Cook, Bill Kopsky, Celestine Wesley, Beth Pease, Fay Knox, Marilyn Kountz, Chandra Anderson and Bernadette Devone.



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## WHAT'S INSIDE

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- \*Big City Grassroots
- \*CFC Scores at Legislature
- \*Are You Up For The Challenge?
- \*The State of Education in Arkansas

## CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

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Members of the original *Little Rock Panel of American Women* were honored for their work to promote racial and religious diversity across Arkansas.