

SPRING 2015
Little Rock
Arkansas

public policy WATCH


ARKANSAS
public policy panel
Putting the PUBLIC back in public policy since 1963
1308 W. 2nd St.
Little Rock, AR 72201
501.376.7913
www.ARPANEL.org

ARKANSANS PUSH FOR PROGRESS AMID PARTISAN POLITICAL DIVIDE



Members of the Arkansas Citizens First Congress rally on the Capitol steps to tell legislators to put Arkansas families first.

Arkansas just finished our first session under Republican control of the legislature and the executive branch.

Through bright spots and disappointments it illustrated the importance of getting the public involved.

The biggest win this session came early, with the passage of the Private Option. Years of organizing by Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, the Panel and others got the mes-

sage through that Arkansas can't afford to abandon the 250,000 Arkansans who access quality healthcare through the Private Option. It also preserved our rural and public health facilities while creating jobs and saving the state nearly \$100 million. At the same time the legislature created a taskforce to study changes to the private option and placed several members on it who are determined to end the program. The battle over access to healthcare will continue.

We definitely saw the power of people this session.

The Citizens First Congress made an extraordinary effort to engage and mobilize members throughout Arkansas. Lawmakers requested that we stop asking members to call them on a few issues and the phones in the Governor's office stopped working at one point because of the public outcry.

Several hundred members of the CFC filled the Capitol in Febru-

*see **Progress**, pg 4*

WHY YOUR VOTE MATTERS: PANEL ORGANIZERS BUILD GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP

The Arkansas Public Policy Panel is building a foundation of leaders to engage citizens in the state's political process, and to educate non-voters on the importance of getting involved.

"People don't understand the relationship between elections, the legislative process and their daily lives," said Organizing Director Bernadette Devone.

Skipping the ballot box will not stop the political process, but it does allow legislators to ignore the needs of non-voters.

"They're not a part of the decision making process," Devone said.

"We're trying to get them to understand why it is important for their voices to be heard."

Devone is supporting a core group of community leaders from the Southern part of the state, and encouraging them to bring members of their communities into the fold.

"State legislators are not going to change their ways until we put people in there that will support our best interests," she said. "You are allowing people to make decisions for you without holding them accountable."

Panel Board Chair Curtis Mangrum says many Arkansans have been

conditioned to avoid the polls.

"The people who don't vote feel like the system is not beneficial to them," he said. "They say, 'What's the use of voting, if it won't improve my situation?'"

Mangrum says he's always voted, but didn't know how to hold politicians accountable until he found the Panel.

"You really have to keep educating people on that process," he said. "I've seen people's minds change, and personally I've changed. Without the Panel I know I would not be at the point I am now."

Devone says bringing people to the capitol to see lawmakers in action is an eye opening experience.

"When people go to the General Assembly and sit there and listen to the decisions these people are making, they're totally flabberghasted," Devone said. "They realize legislators are making calls without really understanding the situation on the ground level."

The only way to change that is to build alliances at that ground level, and show people how to make their voices heard. Devone says the Panel has plenty of work ahead.

"Right now we are educating," she said. "It's a foundation, but it's not yet to the level we need to make systemic change over the long haul."

Members of Crossett Concerned Citizens for Environmental Justice meet with their representative, Mark McElroy, on the Capitol steps during the CFC's South Arkansas Advocacy Day.

**SKIPPING THE BALLOT BOX WILL NOT STOP THE
POLITICAL PROCESS, BUT IT DOES ALLOW LEGISLATORS
TO IGNORE THE NEEDS OF NON-VOTERS.**



Welcome!

New Panel Staff

Communications Coordinator **Kyle Leyenberger** came to the Panel from Rogers, Arkansas where he was a TV reporter for KNWA/KFTA.

Development Coordinator **Caitlin Savage** is from Jonesboro and a graduate of UAF Leflar School of Law. Caitlin worked as an investigator for the Arkansas Fair Housing Commission.

Program Assistant **Bruno Showers** is a UALR graduate who was previously employed in the newsroom of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

Lasonia Standoak and **Topeka Jackson** are VISTA Volunteers who will work to increase the voices of parents to ensure local children have access to effective, high-quality pre-K programs in the cities of Marvell and Prescott.

Organizer **Jonathan Brooks** joined the Panel as a VISTA in Southwest Arkansas. He will work with the Monticello Community Awareness Council to engage local residents in the public policy process.

PANEL PARTNERSHIP PUSHES FOR BUFFALO RIVER PROTECTIONS

The Arkansas Public Policy Panel and the Ozark Society are pressing Arkansas to adopt a ban on industrial hog farms in the Buffalo National River watershed.

The Buffalo National River is one of our state's most important natural assets. It fuels the North-Central Arkansas economy. Nearly 1.1 million visitors spent \$43.78 million in communities surrounding the river in 2012.

"This is a critical matter for every Arkansan who has enjoyed the pristine beauty of our beloved Buffalo River," said Ozark Society Conservation Chair, Alice Andrews.

A joint hearing of the Public Health and Agriculture committees of the Arkansas legislature considered the proposal in December. They took no action but it was clear that this is not a partisan issue.

Senate Majority Leader Dismang and several other members from both parties support protecting the

Buffalo. Governor Hutchinson on the campaign trail last summer said, "I think there is broad agreement that we have to protect the Buffalo River at any cost. It's a national treasure, and certainly an Arkansas treasure."

The issue has garnered intense public support. More than 2,000 Arkansans sent emails, letters and made public comments to the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality. More than 90% supported the proposed changes.

"This is an issue where we can engage a larger number of Arkansans because of the popularity of the Buffalo," said Debbie Doss, of the Arkansas Canoe Club. "We're hoping this issue brings more attention to water quality issues across the state."

You can help. Please call Governor Hutchinson at 501-682-2345 and ask him to protect the Buffalo River and adopt the ban on future industrial hog farms on the river.



PROGRESS | continued from page 1 |



CFC members packed the Old Supreme Courtroom in March for an update on legislation filed to improve Arkansas' education system.

ary to highlight the needs of hard working families. The CFC's South Arkansas Caucus led the call to expand pre-K funding, support after-school and summer programs, enact prison reform, improve the election process and create a state level Earned Income Tax Credit to lift the working poor from poverty.

"A closed mouth is never fed," said CFC member Pamela Blake of Huttig. "We're here to show our strength, and that we care in South Arkansas."

Legislators and the Governor had to abandon legislation to turn our public schools over to private companies thanks to thousands who rallied around the state. The CFC joined the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign and a diverse group of education advocates, parents and teachers to point out that privatizing public schools doesn't work.

"We will not allow political power plays to threaten the future of our children," said Mark Robertson, CFC Co-Chair and a Little Rock parent. "We can't afford unproven and ideological experiments on our students."

Arkansans again flooded the Capitol to fight discrimination during the final week of the session. HB1228 opened the doors to discrimination against any Arkansan for any reason on the false premise of religious freedom. Thousands from every county signed our petition telling the Governor hate and discrimination are not Arkansas values. African-American and Latino community groups joined religious, GLBT and civil liberty organizations to lead the campaign. At the 11th hour the Governor, who had encouraged the bill, retreated and asked for changes. They passed a better, but still unnecessary, bill that simply mirrors existing Federal law.

"If you're not engaged you will get left out," said LaKenya Williams of the CFC. "You don't want people behind closed doors making decisions for you."

The legislature also created a task force on Special Education. Shirley Renix, a mother of a student with special needs, testified in support of the bill.

"Don't you want to know whether your money is being used effectively?" Renix asked lawmakers. "All people are special, and we need to make sure we are doing everything we can to give these children what they need to be successful!"

Another new law will allow Arkansas cities and counties to issue bonds for energy efficiency improvements, saving money and creating new jobs.

But somewhere along the way our legislative leaders lost con-

cont. →

trol. The Governor's original budget proposal fell apart. The pragmatic moderation that Arkansas is known for evaporated.

On economics, attacks on the middle class and poor consumed this session, while lawmakers lavished special favors on the elite. The state's final budget slashes funding for libraries, health clinics and technology. Tax relief for the working poor, who pay the highest rates in Arkansas, was rejected. Afterschool and summer programs went unfunded again. Pre-K was given less than 1/5th of what it needs to keep up with inflation. Prison reforms to reduce recidivism, help the mentally ill and focus on the most dangerous criminals were woefully underfunded. A proposal for paid maternity leave for new mothers was rejected.

Why did so many priorities for families go unfunded? Capital gains tax cuts that heavily favor millionaires were reinstated after the Governor asked to delay them, and several other tax giveaways to big business and the wealthy passed. The Governor's much ballyhooed \$100 million

middle class tax cut averages just \$39 for taxpayers making between \$30,000 and \$50,000 a year. After the Governor asked the legislature to end pork barrel GIF funding, he signed a bill giving himself \$20 million and the legislature another \$20 million of the spending. And lawmakers gave themselves a huge pay increase.

The legislature cut unemployment benefits. They rejected giving workers the basic right to see a pay stub documenting how much they should be paid. They rejected ending the only debtors' prison left in America by continuing to criminalize being late on your rent. Families in poverty are now going to be harassed with regular drug tests despite proof the testing is unnecessary and wastes taxpayer money.

On education, where Arkansas has some of our biggest needs but has also been making some of our biggest gains, the legislature made a mass retreat from high standards. They cut minimum curriculum standards. They cut teacher certification standards. They cut minimum facility standards. They

rejected a proposal to make sure money spent to help low income students is used effectively.

On environmental issues, the Legislature sided with big oil, big gas and big power over individual property rights. They made it harder for Arkansas to create its own clean power plan. They rejected a green energy bill endorsed by grassroots citizens, Entergy and the Public Service Commission because some big utilities feared mom and pop clean power producers would cut into profits. They rejected informing the public of major environmental polluters.

On civil rights, in all the talk about taking away some people's rights, the legislature never stopped to talk about expanding opportunity. Arkansas has large gaps in opportunity that we should address. Instead, lawmakers rejected proposals to make sure no one loses a job because of who they are or who they love. They rejected a proposal to study the racial impact of new legislation. They took local control away from communities who

see *Progress*, pg 7



Regina Von Tungeln calls on legislators to fight House Bill 1733 that would allow private charter companies to take over public schools.

GET INVOLVED!

www.citizensfirst.org

Facebook.com
[/CitizensFirstCongress](https://www.facebook.com/CitizensFirstCongress)

Twitter
[@Citizens_First](https://twitter.com/Citizens_First)



Liobardo Ibarra, Jr. and members of the Hispanic Women's Organization of Arkansas meet with their representative at the CFC's Youth Advocacy Day.

LEADERS FIND COMMON GROUND IN EDUCATION

A diverse coalition of education advocates from across Arkansas stopped an attempt to privatize public schools, and called on legislators to instead focus on proven reforms.

House Bill 1733 would have allowed private charter corporations to take over public schools or districts in academic distress, killing local control and excluding community input in the process.

“Our organizations represent a wide variety of education stakeholders including student, parent and community groups, teachers and administrators,” said Richard Abernathy, Executive Director of Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators. “All of our organizations occasionally differ on how to improve student learning most effectively, but we are united in our view that HB1733 is deeply flawed.”

“None of our organizations are opposed to accountable charter schools,” said Regina Von Tungeln, Co-Chair of the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign. “However,

**“WE’RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER FIGHTING FOR
THE SAME CAUSE, SO WHY NOT HAVE YOUR
VOICE HEARD THROUGH A GROUP OF PEOPLE?”**

— Justin King, student & member of the Gould Citizens Advisory Council

this bill would allow the state to permanently usurp local control and contains almost no community involvement. Parent, student, and community engagement are proven to boost student performance. We should be encouraging this cooperation, not eliminating it.”

Nine groups signed a letter to legislators expressing their opposition, and the sponsor of the bill quickly responded by killing it for the 2015 session.

Following the decision, more than 400 Arkansans gathered at the Capitol to make it clear we will not allow political power plays to threaten the future of our children.

Although this bill is now dead, Arkansas schools have other issues that must be addressed.

“We are proud that Arkansans recognized that privatizing public schools is a failed strategy across the country and we rejected it here,” said Mark Robertson, Co-Chair of the Citizens First Congress and a Little Rock parent. “We need to keep our focus on research proven reforms that we know will boost the learning of every student in Arkansas.”

Parents, students and teachers from all over the state met with education experts in October to develop those strategies for **cont. →**



Over 200 Arkansans at the 2014 Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Summit shared their perspectives, and voiced concerns in issue-based workshops.



Hundreds gathered at the Capitol to oppose school privatization.

PROGRESS | continued from page 5 |

might consider their own civil rights ordinances. They rejected legislation that would have ended the expensive, unnecessary and discriminatory death penalty.

The legislature even refused the largely symbolic move of separating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day from a holiday honoring Gen. Robert E. Lee because confederate sympathizers and protectors of “white heritage” said it would be disrespectful to Gen. Lee to hold his holiday separately from Dr. King’s.

The moderation in the session, aside from the private option and some core education funding,

was in what they didn’t do. They didn’t pass the worst of the proposals introduced to limit the hours and right to vote. They didn’t completely abandon our responsibilities for an effective education system and the funding to pay for it. They amended anti-environmental legislation to put safeguards back in place that protect against polluted air and water.

It could have been worse, but Arkansas needs more than simply not doing our worst.

We need lawmakers who come together across party lines to support programs proven to create opportunities for people. We need

lawmakers to stop giving away the store to every well heeled lobbyist who comes calling. Then Arkansas can get back on the path of progress that will improve our education system, reduce poverty and create access to the American Dream.

“This session proves it’s vital for more Arkansans to get involved,” said CFC Co-Chair William El-Amin. “The more we get together and support one another, the more progress we can make for all Arkansans.”



See how your legislators voted!
**Arkansas Citizens First Congress
2015
Vote Guide and Scorecard**

www.citizensfirst.org

the future of Arkansas kids.

“This is a chance for them all to come together on a long term consistent basis to address the issue of real equity in public education,” says Richard Hutchinson, retired Policy Director of the Arkansas Education Association.

More than 200 Arkansans attended the October gathering, working together to find ways to close the gap between low income and minority students, and their higher income peers.

“We think all voices need to be part of education reform,” says Cassie

Schwerner of the Schott Foundation for Public Education. “The Panel can really touch all of those different pockets with all of their regional diversity.”

The Panel is organizing on education issues in 10 Arkansas communities. We help local leaders assess their schools and bring the community together to make a plan for improving them. Communities like Marvell, Prescott and Strong are making improvements with their local schools and then connecting with the Opportunity to Learn Campaign and the CFC to improve statewide education policy.





ARKANSAS
public policy panel

Putting the PUBLIC back in public policy since 1963

1308 W. 2nd St., Little Rock, AR 72201

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



public policy
WATCH

Save the Date!

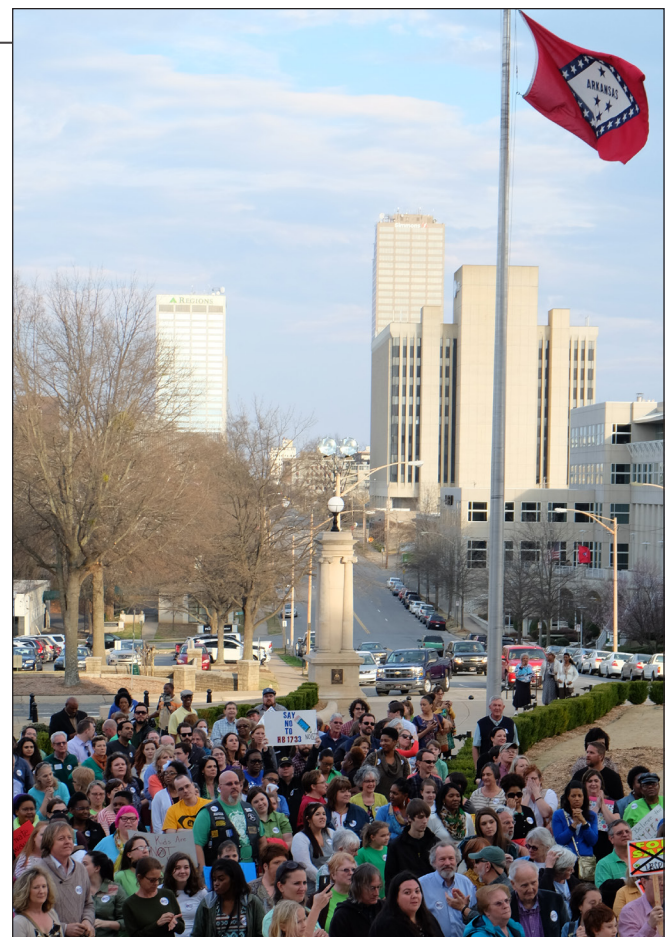
June 6, 2015

**Debrief the Session
and Celebrate with
our Legislative Champions!**

Luncheon in Little Rock

**Watch for more information
www.arpanel.org**

Non-Profit Org.
US Postage
Paid
Little Rock, AR
Permit 756



Your Voice Matters! 400 Arkansans celebrate in front of the Capitol after a surge in public opposition stopped House Bill 1733, which would have opened the door to privatization of our public school system.

Donate to the Panel at www.arpanel.org