



“Putting the PUBLIC back in public policy since 1963”

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Dear Friends of Education and the Panel,

February 20, 2008

We are very pleased to enclose a copy of the executive summary of a new report on the education achievement gap. The Panel and Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families commissioned the report from researchers at the Clinton School and Hendrix College.


You can download a full copy of the report or additional copies of the executive summary at our website after Thursday afternoon: www.ARPanel.org. Let us know if you need a paper copy and we'll be happy to send you one. We will also have a Spanish language version of the executive summary on the website Thursday, and a Spanish version of the full report by early next week.

The achievement gap is one of the defining issues of our time. If you care about civil rights, fighting poverty, economic development, or a strong democracy, this is one of the biggest front lines in Arkansas – and it's an issue ripe with the potential for big progress if we work together.

It is our hope that this report will spark discussions about improving education at two levels.

First we hope the report will get communities, parents, students and teachers talking more about what they can do to help close the achievement gap. The mere act of getting organized and involved in school improvement efforts has beneficial impacts on kids. There are a lot of things that communities can do with or without support from the school to close the gap, and there are a lot of things that schools can do with or without help from the state to close the gap. Local *organizing* and *action* are critical. Call our Organizing Director, Bernadette Devone, at 870-718-7700 to learn more and get involved.

We will follow this report with conversations with community organizations and leaders about how these suggested reforms may actually play out on the ground. We will help groups develop strategic plans for improving their own schools and pushing for reforms on the state level. As we develop those plans we will ask leaders what else we need to know to make progress. Those questions will become the template for a second round of research.



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Secondly, we hope the report will spark debate at the state level. Arkansas has unmistakably made big progress on overall school achievement, but not as much progress on the gap between low-income and higher-income kids, or the gap between white students and African-American or Latino kids. Arkansas lawmakers need to do more to support closing the achievement gap, and this report lights the way.

Another new study just out from the Pew Charitable Trust points out that the achievement gap is a major cause of decreased economic mobility. Put another way, low-income kids are less likely to do well in school and are less likely to rise out of poverty as adults. African –American and Latino kids, even middle class minority kids, are also less likely to do well in school and are more likely to remain in or slide back into poverty. You can find that report at www.economicmobility.org.

Our report identifies proven methods for closing the gap, and focuses on what Arkansas is or isn't doing in those areas. It reminds us that progress on the gap can be accomplished, that the US closed it by half in the '70's and that several surrounding states do better on the gap than Arkansas does. It reinforces our strategy to press for change on three levels: in families and communities; in schools and school districts; and in state policy. Significant progress will require coordinated efforts at all three levels.

It found that Arkansas can make the biggest gains by focusing on areas that are currently weak like student health programs, high quality after school and summer programs, reducing class size in early grades, and parental engagement and/or organizing in the schools.

It found Arkansas has made some progress, but can still do more on access to high-quality pre-school, improved teacher quality, and the few charter programs with certain key traits that are focused on closing the gap.

It found Arkansas is likely doing more already to improve facilities, improved curriculum and improved instructional strategies. Further investments in these areas at this time will have less impact than others.

Our deepest thanks to our friends at Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families who helped conceptualize and create this report. Our thanks also to Keith Nitta at the Clinton School, Jay Barth at Hendrix College and their research assistants who did a great job with the research and writing.

And thanks to you for reading this and letting us know what you think. We're trying to spark a conversation about how to improve our schools and we welcome your feedback. Together we can do it!

Sincerely,

- Bill

Executive Director
The Arkansas Public Policy Panel

*The Panel is a 501(c)(3) putting the PUBLIC back in Arkansas public policy since 1963.
Organize to win.*