

public policy WATCH

ARKANSAS ORGANIZES TO PUSH BACK SCHOOL PRIVATIZATION PLANS



Hundreds of students, parents, teachers, and administrators gathered at the Capitol to protest a bill that would have handed over schools or districts in distress to private charter companies.

The Panel is strengthening its efforts to ensure a better future for public education through proven reforms, rather than unproven experiments.

A group of panel organizers and the Panel Board Chair attended a national education reform conference in New Jersey. The event focused on ways to improve public education by engaging parents and building community support for proven education reform. The conference was built around the stories of states facing a push for privatization. Charter schools can, and often do provide children with a great education. However, the push for expansion of these schools has not played out well in other states.

"Charter schools were first conceived as laboratories for innovation, and the idea was to see what kind of great ideas work, and then to scale it out to the broader public," said Ana Phakin, the Panel's Deputy Director of Education

Organizing. "We support this traditional use as a way to find new and better ways to educate our kids. Unfortunately these aren't the type of schools being replicated."

Student outcomes have failed to improve in other public school districts and schools in distress that were privatized. New Orleans, Philadelphia, Memphis and a few other communities have tried educational experiments with expanded charter schools. An objective analysis of these experiments shows that student performance did not improve, and overall charter schools perform no better than traditional public schools. But privatizing public schools creates other problems such as loss of local control, less civic engagement and growing inequality of opportunity.

"Looking at the situations in other states, it's hard to believe Arkansas lawmakers are even considering charter school expansion,"

see **Privatization**, pg 4

GOOD 2 GREAT CAMPAIGN IMPROVES RURAL PRE-K PROGRAMS AS MODEL FOR STATEWIDE REFORM

The Panel is teaming up with parents, educators, community leaders and other advocates to improve early childhood education in Arkansas.

The Good 2 Great initiative is underway in Prescott and Marvell, the two Arkansas communities chosen for the study. Takema Robinson-Bradberry, a Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation Senior Fellow, said the initiative intentionally chose places where pre-K programs are already doing well.

“We didn’t go to districts that are super far behind,” Robinson-Bradberry said. “We went to places that had some capacity, and the experiment is to work with the existing early childhood education providers and ask them, ‘What do you need? What do you need to move yourself forward? You set the goal and then we will help you get there.’”

Pre-K providers in both communities are working with Arkansas State University Childhood Services to improve performance over the next two and a half years. The effort will be carefully documented so it can be replicated statewide.

“We can double down over the next two and a half years, really pour the resources in and leverage the expertise of some key organizations to try and prove this theory that we can move Arkansas from good to great,” Robinson-Bradberry said. “If we can make it happen in Prescott, if we can make it happen in Marvell, then we can offer the state two shining examples of how to improve early education.”

Increasing community participa-

tion in education is a big part of the project. The Panel collected hundreds of surveys from parents in Marvell and Prescott to find a baseline perception of pre-K and education in general.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families analyzed the results of those surveys, and found most people feel welcomed and encouraged to be involved in their schools. However, many respondents also

increase parental engagement, but they will also help parents to become better advocates for their kids.

“Can we start to build some appetite, and some muscle in parents to begin to demand quality?” Robinson-Bradberry asked. “We want to help parents understand why we need them in Little Rock at the legislative session helping to advocate on behalf of their childcare providers.”



Parents, teachers, and education advocates gather for a community meeting in Prescott, one of two cities chosen as Good 2 Great pilot programs.

said they don’t go to the parent resource center, attend school board meetings, or vote in local elections.

“Most people said they don’t have time to attend board meetings or visit the resource center because of work or other commitments,” said Ana Phakhin, the Panel’s Lead Education Organizer. “Getting more parents involved is an essential piece of this puzzle.”

The Panel is working with the Concerned Citizens of Prescott and the Concerned Citizens of the Marvell Area to organize parent groups in both communities. The groups will

Good 2 Great is also working to engage the community at large. Members from all walks of life have been invited to participate on the Community Advisory Committee. This includes teachers, pre-K providers, the districts’ Superintendents and business leaders.

“We want to establish a space where all of the community is building an agenda about what we want for little kids,” Robinson-Bradberry said. “If we have a cross section of people, different races, different genders, different jobs and roles, maybe we can move things forward.”

CFC Vote Guide Shows Growing Partisan Divide in Arkansas



The Arkansas Citizens First Congress' new legislative scorecard illuminates a deepening partisan rift at the Capitol.

The 2015 session also showed public engagement will be vital in ensuring a better life for all Arkansans.

See the Full Vote Guide Online: citizensfirst.org/scorecard/

SOUTH ARKANSAS COMMUNITY GROUPS COLLABORATE TO INCREASE INFLUENCE



The Gould Citizens Advisory Council met with Mayor Cableton in June. Each South Arkansas group is meeting with their mayor to discuss ways to improve the community.

A new organizing strategy in South Arkansas is bringing communities together and increasing participation in the Citizens First Congress.

The Panel helps 10 groups organize in Southwest and Southeast Arkansas. Although many of the groups are just miles apart, they've been working in isolation.

"Every one of the different groups have their own issues at the local level, but if I have an economic problem in Gould, I've got one in Monticello and one in Star City," said Organizing Director Bernadette Devone. "We were trying to solve all of these problems as individuals.

If we put all this energy together we have a base of people we can call on, not for just one community but for all of South Arkansas."

The groups come together every three months to discuss issues and develop a regional agenda. The new strategy is more effective, combining similar campaigns and also empowering leaders to work with one another.

"The 200 people who came to the Capitol this session, that's because of our new structure," Devone said. "Usually the organizers have to make hundreds of calls to get people to show up. This time those leaders came together, determined an outreach plan and literally worked to get the people there themselves."

In addition, leaders are attending

neighboring community meetings, and calling one another when they run into snags.

"There are all kinds of resources within the groups themselves," Devone said. "The Gould Citizens Advisory Council has been with us for 12 years now. They have plenty of knowledge to share with our less experienced partners."

The increased collaboration will be put to the test this year, when the Center for Social Innovation works with South Arkansas Leaders to establish a plan to address institutionalized racism in the state. At the same time, group members are talking about ways to get more members of the white and Latino communities involved.

"Everybody is just beginning to understand that this is not a me problem, this is an us problem," said Van Page, a CFC leader in Huttig who also serves on the city council. "We're pulling all of that energy together to develop a think-tank of people who are going to say, 'Ok what can we do as a movement in South Arkansas to bring our issues to the state's attention.'"

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The Journey for Justice Alliance National Organizing Conference brought together grassroots, student, and parent-led groups to support public education as a gateway to social and economic justice.

said Curtis Mangrum, Chair of the Panel's Board. "We want to keep the debate focused on the reforms that we know will help our students. Unfortunately privatizing public education, despite its broken track record, is a nationwide agenda. It's an organized—and well funded—campaign by big businesses looking to tap into our education dollars."

The timing of the conference couldn't have been better. The Citizens First Congress, Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign and a diverse group of education advocates joined students and parents during the 2015 session to defeat an attempt to hand public schools over to private corporations.

"Some of the things that are happening now in Arkansas were things that happened in places like New Orleans, Chicago and New Jersey," Mangrum said. "It opened my eyes to the fact that we are just at the infancy of this struggle."

Although the community reaction forced lawmakers to kill the bill this session, Phakhin said informing and engaging the people of Arkansas re-

mains vitally important.

"Not all charter schools are bad, and not all public schools are super awesome," she said.

"There's a lot of gray areas there, and one of the reasons—not the main one—but one of the reasons privatization is happening is because people are dissatisfied with public education. We need to stay focused on the proven reforms that will boost learning for all students."

There are far better alternatives to privatization for improving Arkansas schools and we're already doing some of them in Arkansas. Overall the state has one of the fastest improving education systems in the country because we have deliberately built consensus around research proven strategies to boost learning.

"Research shows pre-K, summer and afterschool programs are some of the best ways to improve student outcomes," Phakhin said. "Parent, student and community engagement is key. Proper special education, improving teacher quality and

helping students with hunger and health problems are all proven to boost learning, but we are not doing enough to make sure they are used effectively."

To continue the push for research based solutions, Arkansans must build a widespread coalition, including parents, teachers and administrators. At the conference, presenters shared successful education organizing strategies being used around the country.

"The success of organizing is based on building relationships instead of specific issues," said David Cook, the CFC Outreach Coordinator. "We need to continue developing partners and be sure to keep them informed and engaged."

"We have to all be working on this," Phakhin said. "Public education is something that's accessible to all kids. It doesn't matter where you are, where you're from, public schools must serve every kid that comes through the door. Together we can make sure the public education system survives and thrives."

CROSSETT GROUP FIGHTS FOR TOUGHER PROTECTIONS FROM GP PAPER MILL

What would you do if your livelihood depended on something that could be killing you?

This is the very real dilemma facing the community of Crossett, Arkansas.

“Both my parents died from lung cancer, and my grandmother too,” said Leroy Patton, who was born in the town. “None of them smoked, or used tobacco. I think it was from that paper mill.”

The mill Patton blames for his parents’ death gave birth to his hometown. Crossett began as a tent city, filled with workers constructing a lumber mill just north of the Louisiana border. The first trees felled contributed to the permanent mill, company offices and employee housing around the turn of the 20th century.

In 1962, Georgia-Pacific purchased and expanded the operations of the Crossett Lumber Company. In 2005, Koch Industries bought GP. The industry continues to be a vital piece of Crossett’s economy, with GP employing more than one-fifth of the community. However, many of the people living there say GP’s business practices are also poisoning them.

“I have something similar to asthma, and an irregular heartbeat,” Patton said. “Whenever that mill puts out the scent, whatever it’s putting out in the air, it causes me to be nauseated and congested. I’ve been going to the doctor for breathing issues longer than I can remember.”

Residents from one of Crossett’s predominately African-American neighborhoods have been con-

cerned for many years about air emissions and water discharges from the facility. The Concerned Citizens of Crossett for Environmental Justice say long term exposure to hazardous chemicals is causing cancer, asthma and other public health issues.

“My daughter Samone was diagnosed with cancer at 9 years old,”



1906 view of the Crossett Company’s two original large mills. Logs hauled to the site by rail were stored in the mill pond until needed at the mill.

said Earnest Smith. “She had a 17 centimeter mass in her stomach. When she was diagnosed the doctor asked if we lived near a plant. He said they don’t usually find the cancer she has in little girls.”

Samone is doing better after two surgeries and chemotherapy treatment. But her father believes the cause of her cancer is still being pumped into the air all around his family.

“After my daughter was diagnosed, a neighbor told me the previous owner of my home died of cancer,” he said. “Now I worry every day, for my own health, but mostly for my family’s. I have a nine year old son, and he complains every day that his chest hurts and sometimes he can hardly breathe.”

The Panel is helping CCCEJ form a more organized group and stronger campaign to address their concerns and improve their community’s health.

In May, the Panel coordinated a meeting with a representative from EarthJustice, the nation’s largest nonprofit environmental law organization. CCCEJ took the representa-

tive on a tour of the Crossett area, showing her the lay of the land and how the facility is impacting their community.

“I have never seen black water,” said Panel Organizer Shirley Renix. “But there it was, totally opaque in broad daylight.”

GP’s air permit is up for renewal. In June CCCEJ voiced their concerns at a public hearing. Five members got up to speak, including Samone, who read an essay about her experience battling a disease she believes began with breathing Crossett’s polluted air.

Something appears to be making people in Crossett sick. If not GP, then what? What price tag should be put on a 9 year old’s life, and the health of her community?

NWA LAWMAKERS RECAP SESSION AT PANEL EVENT



The Panel brought together legislators from both sides of the aisle to discuss the 2015 session and encourage more citizen engagement in the future.

The Panel traveled to Northwest Arkansas in April to recap the 2015 legislative session and engage Arkansans on important issues going forward.

A bipartisan panel of five lawmakers talked about their experiences in Little Rock, and explained the importance of citizen participation to a crowd of more than 100 people. Rep. David Whitaker said many new legislators were unwilling to reach across the aisle this session.

"I worry that we may lose what we've always had in Arkansas, the ability to work together to do what's best for Arkansas, rather than harsh political rhetoric and personal attacks," Whitaker said. "I hope it's a flash in the pan. I hope these folks will learn better, or if not, their careers will be short."

Many of those newly elected lawmakers ran promising to eliminate the private option. Instead, the Governor secured the private option through 2016, and created a task force to find an alternative option

for healthcare in the state.

"I think the Governor has almost done a perfect job of straddling on the issue," said Senator Uvalde Lindsey. "It's funded for two years, but the Private Option as we know it will terminate. I'm concerned that reform potentially could give a lack of emphasis on the safety net, the public safety net for folks that need it the most."

Senator Jon Woods said the private option is working, offering access to healthcare to more than 250,000 Arkansans, and premiums are on target or better than expected. He said those critical of the program need to bring new options to the task force.

"We have to make this work," he said. "We have to help people that need help, so what do you want to do to improve it? I'm not in support of ending anyone's health insurance. That's not anything I would entertain a discussion on."

Rep. Charlie Collins is the co-chair of the 16 member task force. He

also said taking away access to healthcare is not an option, although not for humanitarian reasons.

"Unlike a lot of other people, I don't believe the government owes everybody healthcare just because people exist," Collins said. "But the federal government has raised taxes on Arkansans by \$600 million per year and those taxes are flowing out of our pockets and going to Washington DC and the question is, am I just going to say goodbye to \$600 million a year of Arkansas tax money, when the federal government is saying, 'Here's what you need to do if you want your money back?' No, because to me that's foolish."

Collins also claimed credit for restoring \$10 million in capital gains tax cuts, a move other panelists said hurt funding for more important programs like pre-K.

"We could have touched a lot more lives had we instead put it toward pre-K," Rep. Greg Leding said.

Senator Lindsey said the session did not do justice to pre-K. The program needed a \$16 million cost of living increase, and instead received just \$3 million in one time money.

"We have quite frankly turned our back on what we spent 18 months studying how to better deliver an education to every child," Lindsey said. "I'm disheartened about that... There are a lot of distressing things that are happening in the education committee."

Senator Woods said the Governor's \$100 million tax cut passed early in the session, and made funding important programs difficult.

"This is his first term," **cont.** →

Arkansas Citizens First Congress Hosts Post Legislative Conference

Grassroots groups from across the state met at the Capitol in June to review citizen engagement during the 2015 legislative session and strategize for continuing campaigns.

The Citizens First Congress Champions for Change Luncheon followed the conference. The CFC recognized 16 legislators and three citizen leaders for their work to advance social justice in Arkansas.

Utilizing leaders both inside the Capitol and outside in Arkansas' communities is the most effective way to accomplish substantive changes in state policy. Our coalition is strong and effective because we support each others' efforts and we work with legislators to pass effective and progressive policies.



Woods said. "The Governor's been in office three months, four months now and on the campaign trail he wanted to cut taxes. A lot of us that have been in the legislature knew... it was going to be a challenge. I was never fully comfortable with doing the tax cut up front. I wanted to fund pre-K first off the top."

Panelists also discussed the end of the session, when hundreds of Arkansans flooded the Capitol to oppose HB1228, the controversial religious discrimination bill, and its replacement SB975.

"I have yet to see any need for either one of those pieces of legislation," Leding said. "Even though I

choose to believe that the people who sponsored that legislation were sincere that they were trying to protect religious freedoms, perception is reality and the overall perception is that it's a mask for something else."

"(HB)1228 is gone," Whitaker said. "Part of the last 11th hour work we did way too late at night was to get that back on the governor's desk. (SB)975 isn't a perfect bill, but it took out those areas which myself and many of the other attorneys in the legislature felt would have been an excuse to discriminate."

Whitaker also mentioned SB202, now Act 137, which prevents cities

or counties from creating their own civil rights protections. "There's absolutely no redeeming value to that law," Whitaker said.

Leding hopes to see the same level of engagement continue through the next election cycle.

"There are people on both sides of the aisle where you can't have constructive conversations and that's not conducive to any kind of progress," said Leding. "We need to get more people involved, get more people paying attention so that more people show up in November of 2016 to help shape the process going forward."

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