



Representative Matthew J. Shepherd
Speaker of the House
1 Capitol Mall, Fifth Floor
Little Rock, AR 72201

Senator Jimmy Hickey
Senate President Pro Tempore
1 Capitol Mall, Fifth Floor
Little Rock, AR 72201

Representative Bruce Cozart
Chair, House Education Committee
1 Capitol Mall, Fifth Floor
Little Rock, AR 72201

Senator Missy Irvin
Chair, Senate Education Committee
1 Capitol Mall, Fifth Floor
Little Rock, AR 72201

Dear Speaker Shepherd, Representative Cozart, Senator Hickey, and Senator Irvin:

We, the undersigned civil rights and education advocacy organizations, write to express our ongoing concerns with the Succeed Scholarship Program ("Succeed Voucher") and our opposition to any bills that would expand that program. As you know, the 2020 [state-produced biennial report](#) on the Succeed Voucher ("2020 Report"), authorized by Representative Cozart's bipartisan legislation passed in 2019, reveals that Succeed Vouchers fail to effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities and students in foster care in Arkansas. The 2020 Report shows that the Succeed Voucher program also widens racial disparities between Arkansas' public and private school systems, furthering inequities between the state's white students and students of color.

Behind the data disclosed in the 2020 Report are the stories of many families of students with special needs who feel betrayed because the Succeed Voucher failed to meet its promise to provide their children with high-quality educational opportunities. Parents of children receiving Succeed Vouchers have reported that their children were taught by uncertified teachers, some of whom lacked a college degree and many of whom lacked formal experience and training to serve students with special needs. One mother reported that her daughter, who received the Succeed Voucher for two years, made no academic progress during her time enrolled in the program. This mother felt that using a Succeed Voucher wasted two critical years of her child's education. Another mother expressed similar sentiments, also noting that the Succeed Voucher program excludes transparency and accountability provisions that she and others could use to assess whether the participating private schools' policies and practices are conducive to learning for the state's highest-need students. She also reported that her child's performance noticeably improved after re-enrolling in the Little Rock School District. Many parents also reported that they did not understand or were not made immediately aware that their children were losing their Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) rights and their right to due process by accepting a Succeed Voucher.

Many of the parents whose experiences are described above enrolled their children at the Hannah School in Little Rock using a Succeed Voucher. As the 2020 Report shows, as of the 2019-20 school year, the Hannah School enrolled the most Succeed Voucher recipients of any private school – 64. Any school that accepts voucher funding from a state-administered program must be fully accountable to the state; however, the Hannah School’s participation illustrates that neither accountability to the State and its taxpayers nor compliance with basic accreditation standards are prerequisites for participating in the Succeed Voucher program.

Reports from dissatisfied parents, coupled with findings from the Succeed Voucher’s first biennial report, demonstrate that the Hannah School’s broken promises and lacking accountability are not outliers. Instead, they represent the Succeed Voucher program’s failure to provide educational opportunities and choices for families in Arkansas. For example, the passage of Act 327 in 2017 allowed unaccredited schools – ones in the process of seeking accreditation – to receive taxpayer dollars through the Succeed Voucher program, opening the door for the Hannah School and other unaccredited institutions to participate. While the Hannah School is now accredited (despite its educational malpractices), a troubling 25 percent of schools participating in the Succeed Voucher program were not accredited as of the release of the 2020 Report. This means that the Succeed Voucher program allows private schools in Arkansas to receive millions in taxpayer dollars even though they failed to complete a rigorous accreditation process and are exempt from accountability and reporting standards applicable to public schools.

The 2020 Report demonstrated that the Succeed Voucher program poses myriad accountability challenges and exacerbates inequities cloaked in state-funded promises of educational opportunity. The report revealed:

- **White students are overrepresented in the Succeed Voucher program compared with Arkansas’ public school system.** Of the Succeed Voucher student population for whom demographic data was available, five percent were Latinx, 12 percent were Black, and 78 percent were white. Students in Arkansas’ public schools are 14 percent Latinx, 20 percent Black and 60 percent white¹, and students with disabilities in Arkansas’ public schools are 11 percent Latinx, 23 percent Black, and 61 percent white.
- **The Succeed Voucher program disadvantages rural school districts in Arkansas.** Although this program is funded through a state appropriation, over one-third of voucher recipients are in Little Rock, while many others are in suburbs. This provides only the illusion of choice for families who live in rural communities with few to no private schools.
- **The 2020 Report lacks sufficient assessment data and shows poor performance among existing data.** Private schools accepting Succeed Vouchers do not administer norm- or criterion-referenced assessment(s) of their students’ academic progress, so it is impossible to measure a student’s progress before and after receiving a voucher. The 2020 Report acknowledges (p. 12) that this prevents meaningful comparison or analysis of academic outcomes for participating students. The assessment data that the State was able to collect indicates troubling education outcomes for voucher students.

¹ “Arkansas Schools Data – Demographics.” Office for Education Policy. University of Arkansas, 2021. <http://www.officeforeducationpolicy.org/arkansas-schools-data-demographics/>.

- **Succeed Vouchers disproportionately benefit wealthy families who do not need private school tuition assistance.** Available data shows that as of 2019-20, just 30 percent of voucher recipients were Free or Reduced Price Lunch (FRL) eligible, compared with 60 percent of public school students. The FRL status of 44 percent of Succeed Voucher recipients was unknown due to inconsistent reporting and data collection standards between participating private schools.
- **Succeed Voucher recipients leave their private schools at alarming rates.** The 2020 Report revealed that nearly 20 percent of voucher recipients left their private schools for reasons including involuntary dismissal, inability to pay tuition in excess of the voucher amount, and lack of access to transportation.

The evidence is clear: The Succeed Voucher program is inequitable, ineffective, and an inefficient use of hardworking Arkansans' taxpayer dollars. It should be phased out immediately. The evidence on the State's existing voucher program counsels strongly against any expansion of the Succeed Voucher, let alone the establishment of an additional voucher program, as House Bill 1371 would have done had it passed. We appreciate Representative Cozart's recognition of this evidence, his vote against House Bill 1371, and his consistent opposition to the use of public funds for private schools.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's lives emphasized the urgent need for nutritional, social and emotional, health and academic supports for students in Arkansas. The recent educational adequacy study, commissioned by the General Assembly and conducted by outside consultants, also reveals that the state underfunds special education services and services for other vulnerable student populations, leading to performance gaps between students with and without special needs, as well as between students from privileged and marginalized backgrounds.² While the combined \$2 billion granted to Arkansas through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds in the CARES Act, Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, and American Rescue Plan Act will help alleviate the fiscal concerns of school districts and education services across the state, federal funding alone is insufficient to adequately support public school students. The state must also uphold its constitutional responsibility to "maintain a general, suitable, and efficient system of public schools and...adopt all suitable means to secure to the people the advantages and opportunities of education."³ The Arkansas constitution does not include language compelling the state to fund private schools or an alternate system of education.

As you know, Arkansas was once the center of the nation's struggle to desegregate its public schools. The long and painful history of racial inequity and segregation associated with school vouchers should compel the General Assembly to act in a way that discourages the advancement of legislation that continues this history, working instead to improve public education opportunities for students of color. As such, we urge the General Assembly to re-center its priorities and ensure that public education comes first.

We once again ask the Arkansas General Assembly to dismantle Succeed Vouchers and reject any other attempts to fund private schools using public funds. Attend to the needs of the 473,004 students in

² Silverstein, Julia, and Amanda Brown. "Recommendations to the Arkansas Senate Committee on Education and House Committee on Education." Arkansas Legislature. Augenblick, Palaich and Associates, 2020. [https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Calendars/Attachment?committee=810&agenda=3658&file=Exhibit+D+-+Recommendations+\(updated\).pdf](https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Calendars/Attachment?committee=810&agenda=3658&file=Exhibit+D+-+Recommendations+(updated).pdf).

³ "Arkansas Constitution of 1874." FindLaw. <https://codes.findlaw.com/ar/arkansas-constitution-of-1874/>.

Arkansas' public schools by fully funding public education. Doing so improves opportunities for the most vulnerable students to succeed inside and outside the classroom – students with disabilities, foster care students, students of color, and students from low-income families. We welcome the opportunity to discuss the contents of this letter, our analysis of the 2020 Report, and other pressing concerns related to private school vouchers and education equity in Arkansas. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Rich Huddleston
Executive Director
Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

Tracey-Ann Nelson
Executive Director
Arkansas Education Association

Bill Kopsky
Executive Director
Arkansas Public Policy Panel, Arkansas Citizens First Congress

Tom Masseau
Executive Director
Disability Rights Arkansas

David G. Sciarra
Executive Director
Education Law Center

Jessica Levin
Director
Public Funds Public Schools

Raymond C. Pierce
President and CEO
Southern Education Foundation

Bacardi Jackson
Managing Attorney;
Lauren Winkler
Senior Staff Attorney
SPLC Action Fund

CC: Governor Asa Hutchinson, Commissioner Johnny Key, Senator Joyce Elliott, Representative Fredrick J. Love, Representative Joy Springer