

Let's Start at the Very Beginning: *Improving Early Childhood Outcomes in Arkansas*

*The seventh in a series exploring issues
from The Community Foundation's
Aspire Arkansas report.*

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Students at Redwood Early Childhood Center in North Little Rock

Early learning is worth the investment

by Julie Johnson Holt

The time to problem-solve had arrived. Chairs were pulled into a circle, and the concern was aired: The gray paint was missing. Where could it be? Someone might have taken it home, one participant suggested. Maybe the boogiemán snatched it, another offered.

After a few more proffered possibilities and a search around the room to help disprove the boogiemán theory, the group agreed that the missing paint was a mystery and that, indeed, some mysteries are never solved.

Then the group of lively 4-year-olds quickly pushed back

their chairs so they could bounce around like rabbits during music time.

The beauty of it is that these children never realized how much they had absorbed during the previous 10 minutes, but lessons included:

- Learning colors
- Counting (11 paints were still there, only one was missing)
- Talking in turn
- Listening respectfully to others
- Expressing ideas
- Expanding vocabulary (mystery)
- Reasoning

- Recognizing letters and sounds (gray starts with G)
- Boogiemen probably don't exist

It's all in a day's — make that a fraction of a day's — work in teacher Megan Wilson's fast-paced class for 4-year-olds at the Redwood Early Childhood Center in the North Little Rock School District.

In addition to mastering academic skills that will ready them for kindergarten such as writing their names, recognizing numbers and letters and knowing the different parts of a story's structure, Wilson and her colleagues want their young students to understand how to work through problems, to be able to recognize their feelings and to be able to express them with “feeling” and “power” words.

“We want their social well-being to be strong,” Wilson said.

Those dual goals of academic preparedness and social and emotional development are the hallmarks of all good preschool programs, particularly those funded to boost the early learning efforts of children from lower-income families.

They are goals that the nation, the state and even some local governments have decided are worth putting money behind.

When Libby Doggett, head of the Office of Early Learning at the U.S. Department of Education, was in Little Rock earlier this fall, she told a crowd at the Clinton School of Public Service that President Obama's proposed \$75 billion to provide quality preschool for all 4-year-olds is generating excitement nationwide.

“It could start equalizing the disproportion we have in this country,” she said.

She gave Arkansas kudos not only for expanding preschool opportunities over the past decade, but also for putting the emphasis on quality of programs.

Arkansas's Early Childhood Efforts

Improving early childhood education in Arkansas gained momentum a decade ago. The state, through a coalition of government and business leaders, committed \$100 million to expanding preschool to low-income children through the Arkansas Better Chance program.

Today, according to Tonya Williams, Arkansas's director of childcare and early childhood education, \$111 million funds about 25,000 slots for low-income 3- and 4-year-olds across the state. The state's newest program, Better Beginnings, puts the emphasis on specific quality standards for preschools.

Local communities such as Conway and Bryant, she said, are placing an organized focus on improving access to quality preschool as well. Lifelong Learners was founded last year after a Conway planning effort showed that the community felt a need for better preschools to prepare students for the city's respected public school system and colleges.

“We work with private daycares and preschool centers here,” providing support in the form of teacher training, educational materials and parent education, explained Charlotte Green, founder of Lifelong Learners, which receives funding from both city and community entities.

Evidence Supports Benefits of Early Education

So what's driving all this support for quality early childhood education? Hard evidence of its importance, and not just bits and pieces of it but a plethora of research findings that show that these early years in a child's life are critical in shaping his or her future.

Secretary Doggett pointed specifically to recent brain research that illuminates the “incredible effects” of early stimulation to the brain, as well as to two longitudinal studies that clearly show that lower-income children who had experienced the advantages of preschool were more likely to finish school and experience other positive outcomes throughout their lives.



“We want their social well-being to be strong.”

— Megan Wilson



how you can help

Have a preschool in your community you would like to help out? Early childhood education providers list a wide variety of ways to be involved:

- Volunteer to read, tutor or help out in the classroom
- Share your special skill or vocation with a class
- Provide clothing, especially coats, that fit young children
- Donate Thanksgiving and Christmas food baskets for students' families
- Organize an "angel tree" to provide holiday gifts and goodies for children
- Form a food pantry for students' families
- Donate professional services — dentists can do quick oral screenings, for instance
- Make book bags so students can take books home
- Provide preschool subsidies for your employees
- Raise money and give grants
- Advocate for preschool funding and opportunities with state legislators

"It's not what children are born with, it's what we do with what they are born with," Doggett said. "It's all about opportunity."

Arkansas's Williams said one of her primary motivators is research out of the Federal Reserve that shows that the return on investment in preschool exceeds that on investment in education at any other stage in life. For every dollar spent on preschool, she said, research shows that society reaps \$7 to \$20 back due to increased productivity and reduced costs to social programs and the justice system.

Williams also grows excited when talking about tracking the success of Arkansas students through its longitudinal data system. For instance, a recent Arkansas Research Center report followed preschool children into kindergarten, where students are tested on six indicators: general knowledge, oral communication, written language, math concepts, work habits and attentive behavior.

Across the board, low-income children who had been in an Arkansas Better Chance program were much more likely to enter kindergarten on pace to learn than those who had not.

Preschool Can Be a Game-Changer

Recent brain research out of Harvard shows that too much toxic stress in a young child's environment — hunger, fear, physical abuse, substance abuse — can disrupt the development of brain circuits, resulting in long-term negative effects on learning and memory. A quality, stable preschool environment, however, can ameliorate some of those effects.

"We're really brain architects," Williams said excitedly. "This is what we're doing. We can't change the family dynamic but we can provide a stabilized childcare environment and make it high quality."

That's why Williams would love to see early childhood education provided to all 3-year-olds. Right now, 47 percent of qualifying students in that age group are reached by Arkansas Better Chance or Head Start, compared with 80 percent of qualifying 4-year-olds.

"Having students who are economically disadvantaged for two years totally changes things," she said. "One year is a Band-aid."

Redwood Early Childcare Center's director Jody Edrington agrees completely. "You see a huge difference when children are here for two years. Some children come to us with no real language skills — they point and grunt because they haven't been made to talk at home." These children benefit greatly because in addition to developing and expanding their vocabulary, they learn to express feelings, wants and needs.

Kim Pettus' son J.J. is a recent graduate of the Redwood center. Now a teacher's aide at the center herself, she became a believer in the preschool program as she watched J.J. flourish.

"It wasn't just my work with him at home," she said. At Redwood, "the program taught him how to be independent, to socialize with other kids ... to go and make friends," adding, "He learned a lot!"



"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." — Nelson Mandela



ARKANSAS VIEWPOINTS

"What can Arkansans do to help ensure children get a healthy start in life?"



By Gloria Richard-Davis, MD, FACOG
Director of the Division on Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility (REI) in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at UAMS

Preconception counseling can help mothers have healthier pregnancies and babies get a healthier start. A mother's pre-pregnancy health significantly affects her pregnancy outcome. Optimizing pre-pregnancy health and knowledge may eliminate or reduce the risk of health issues. For example, taking folic acid supplements beginning at least one month pre-pregnancy reduces neural tube defects (spina bifida- spine defect) and anencephaly (brain defect). Adequate diabetes control before and throughout pregnancy can decrease the risk for a number of birth complications.

Nearly 50 percent of US pregnancies are unintended. Providers should educate and screen all reproductive age women at routine visits to identify potential risks before and between pregnancies. Pregnancies less than 18 months apart increase the risk of preterm deliveries (approximately 10 percent of pregnancies). Therefore, contraception counseling is important, particularly for teen mothers.

Considerations for developing a reproductive plan include 1) Undiagnosed, untreated, or poorly controlled medical conditions; 2) Immunization history; 3) Early pregnancy medication and radiation exposure; 4) Nutritional issues; 5) Family history/genetic risk; 6) High-risk behaviors including tobacco/substance use; 7) Occupational/environmental exposures; and 8) Social/mental health issues.

Questions such as "Are you considering pregnancy, or could you possibly become pregnant?" can initiate preconception care discussions on pregnancy readiness; overall health and improvement; and the significance of social, environmental, occupational, behavioral, and genetic factors. These conversations can help identify women for high risk or adverse pregnancy outcomes.

With almost four decades of reproductive years, optimizing women's health before and between pregnancies requires access to, and participation of, all health care system segments. If providers don't ask, patients should initiate conversations about preconception health and planning.



By Cindy Crone, APRN, CPNP
Deputy Insurance Commissioner, Arkansas Insurance Department

Children are our future. But too many Arkansas babies are born at risk for early death or a lifetime of poor health. Compared to the U.S. average, 20 percent fewer Arkansas infants will live until their first birthday. Black infants will die at a rate 238 percent greater than white infants in Arkansas. This can change.

Healthy children start with healthy mothers from supportive families and communities. One way we can help ensure healthy children is to prevent unwanted pregnancies, especially among teenagers. Then, working together, we can assist pregnant women in receiving adequate nutrition, early and regular prenatal care and emotional support. We can also provide supports to encourage them not to use harmful substances such as tobacco or alcohol.

Infants need nurturing, adequate nutrition (ideally breast milk) and quality childcare. Employers can help by allowing time off for prenatal visits — a quarter of our mothers don't get care during the first trimester — and children's health check-ups and immunizations. We can help ensure mothers make livable wages. Only in Mississippi and New Mexico do women make less money than in Arkansas.

We can work to better understand the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and how it will help improve children's health while resulting in a net economic benefit of \$500 million annually to Arkansas. Because of Arkansas innovations, health care providers under ACA will be paid private insurance rates whether premiums are paid by employers, individuals, tax credits or other government subsidies. This will help attract and keep local providers.

Add our commitments to personal responsibility and helping our neighbors, and the Land of Opportunity can become just that — a place where health can improve and families and communities can flourish.



How to Monitor, Encourage and Intervene in a Young Child's Development

By Monika Garner-Smith, M.Ed.
ACCESS Preschool

As a special educator, I never want to be in a position to say, "I wish I had had the opportunity to work with this child earlier," but I often find myself thinking it. Many caregivers find it hard to cope with what might be a learning or developmental delay. Too often, a "wait and see" approach is taken. When it comes to delayed development, however, every month without treatment between birth to age 3 is quality-of-life-threatening. These are the formative years in a child's life, when language-based skills and motor skills are developing at a rapid pace.

Monitoring Development

The primary areas of development for young children are speech-language, physical/motor, social-emotional and cognitive development. Because children aren't talking and walking from Day 1, delays in development can be difficult for caregivers to spot. Knowing what a child should be able to do at one month old, three months and other incremental ages is essential for all parents. Several online resources exist for charting baby and toddler milestones. If a child in your care is missing milestones, seek professional help, and be aggressive in pursuing treatment if you do not see steady progress in between checkups and evaluations. Pay special attention to children born prematurely or born under traumatic circumstances, exposed to drug use during pregnancy or genetically predisposed to syndromes or disabilities.

Encouraging Development

Play is a child's work; it is how babies, toddlers and preschoolers acquire the skills needed to fully develop their senses. It is never too early to work with your child by playing with him or her! Children benefit from multi-sensory activities that stimulate senses and promote memory and comprehension. This hands-on style incorporates hearing, seeing, touching and experiencing to assist learning among children with a variety of learning types, including auditory, visual and tactile. You can seek out an infant and preschool program with a literacy-rich multi-sensory curriculum and incorporate these activities at home. Activities should focus on prompting communication through reading, talking and singing; eliciting movement to improve balance, coordination, strength and endurance; and facilitating regular interaction with same-age peers, even before enrollment in a formal day program.

Intervening in Development

Suspecting a child has a developmental delay can be daunting. Maybe a child is displaying a problem that seems insignificant, and the inclination is to wait and see if the problem improves over time. While we always hope any problems are minor, it is always better to seek a professional opinion immediately if a milestone is missed. I have personally witnessed the power of early intervention, but it cannot happen without first acknowledging there is a problem. The birth-to-age-3 stage is a critical time for development when delays can be addressed with appropriate intervention. Arkansas is fortunate to have many resources for children who are not meeting developmental milestones. If a child in your care does get diagnosed with a developmental delay or disability, seek support in professionals and other caregivers, and educate yourself on the disability so you will know how to advocate for your child. Finally, pursue the funding our state and federal government provides for individuals with disabilities, no matter your child's age or your household income. This funding opens the door to vital, life-changing treatments.

Monika Garner-Smith, M.Ed., is director of the ACCESS Preschool, a Little Rock-based birth-to-5 program for children with developmental delays and their typically developing peers.



Baby Shower Program Promotes Infant Safety

Does that red and green shaker can contain grated parmesan cheese or Comet Cleaner? Is that blue liquid in the bottle Windex or Gatorade? To a newly mobile infant, the world is full of tantalizing treats now suddenly within arm's reach, and the difference between safe and harmful isn't so easy to distinguish.

Helping new parents anticipate and prevent common safety issues in the home is the aim of the Safety Baby Shower program developed by the Injury Prevention Center at Arkansas Children's Hospital.

Through the program, hospitals host baby shower-themed training programs for new and expectant parents. Participants learn about the most common causes of injury or death among infants and how to avoid them, but they also receive gifts to help them make their homes more safe — smoke detectors, cabinet latches, bathtub thermometers, carseats, refrigerator magnets that list poison control numbers and more.

"We know that in Arkansas, a high rate of infants die before their first birthday from injuries that are preventable," said Olivia Wilson, a home safety analyst with the Injury Prevention Center. The Safety Baby Shower curriculum teaches evidenced-based strategies for reducing injuries using games, discussion and a light-hearted setting that enables new parents to relax and have fun.

"Nobody wants to go sit and listen to a lecture, but if you go and everyone is playing games, you're still learning. We play bingo!" explained Autumn Autenreath of Ashley County Medical Center in Hamburg. Expectant mothers are encouraged to bring along their husbands/partners or other family members to expand the impact of the training.

Bobbie Webb, a nurse at Bradley County Medical Center in Warren explained that the program also gives medical staff at the hospital a chance to talk to expectant mothers about labor and delivery. "I've tried to make them feel more relaxed about coming to the emergency room," she said. "We're able to monitor the women better before labor so they don't go into pre-term labor."

The Safety Baby Shower curriculum is available through the Injury Prevention Center to be used by hospitals and clinics around the state; IPC trainers teach local facilitators to deliver the curriculum, and the local site raises funds to publicize and host the shower and provide safety gifts for participating parents.

IPC also collects data on the effectiveness of the training through quizzes administered to participants before and after the training. "The post-tests show that we are changing minds, attitudes and beliefs about safe sleep. And we're not just changing parent's minds, but also the grandparents who attend along with them," said Wilson.

Better-prepared caregivers lead to healthier babies. And that's something to celebrate.



Arkansas meets 9 out of 10 quality standards for preschool education, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research's State of Preschool 2012 report. We rank 5th in the nation for preschool access for 3-year-olds and 11th for preschool access for 4-year-olds.



Haley Knapp and her daughter Brooklyn read together.

HIPPY Parents Prepare Children for Kindergarten

by Alyssa Causey

The color of the day is purple: a purple princess dress, purple crayons and a purple Popsicle. Brooklyn Knapp, age three, begins enthusiastically coloring in her new coloring book, having received it just this morning from her HIPPY teacher. She is excited and permits her mother, Haley, to join her. Brooklyn, the middle child in the family, has followed in her older brother's footsteps and is learning a home-based, parent-taught curriculum from HIPPY, or Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters.

Brooklyn is one of countless children in over 13 countries and 21 U.S. states that received a developmental jump start thanks to HIPPY. Established in Israel in 1969 at Hebrew University, HIPPY made its way to the U.S. in 1984. It now serves more than 15,000 families, with the U.S. headquarters being Little Rock.

The program was created to provide access to children's literacy services without regard to poverty, lack of social isolation or education. Children are prepared for long-term school success by their parents, who are taught the lessons from the visiting HIPPY instructors. "School and sometimes teachers can be intimidating to kids. I



like the HIPPY model because we teach the parent that they can do this. They can successfully be their child's first teacher," said Beverly Wright, Arkansas's HIPPY director.

Wright has seen first-hand the advantages of the program. She appreciates that HIPPY empowers children for later in life. "For me, I feel like it's important to identify and catch things that can be corrected forever. If you can identify an area when they are really young and get that help or intervention to them, then that's not something that they have to worry about later," said Wright.

Instructors meet with children once a week for one hour over a 30-week program year. Parents reinforce the material with their children each day, using HIPPY books and activity packets. "The teachers teach us to teach the child and get the response back from them. They have taught me how to respond and how to correct, confirm and complete," said Haley Knapp, Brooklyn's mother.

Knapp learned about HIPPY in 2011 when her son was in Head Start. She talked to HIPPY representatives at the booth at her son's school and, soon after, enrolled. When asked about what the HIPPY experience was like for her son she said, "It prepared him for knowing what kindergarten was like. It was a good experience." Knapp was so pleased with the program that she enrolled Brooklyn the following year when she was old enough. "I was ready to sign her up!" she said. Knapp plans on enrolling her youngest son in the program, too.

HIPPY teachers engage children by letting kids do what they do best: playing. Skills are taught in ways you would expect like reading, writing, drawing, listening and talking. However, HIPPY teachers get creative in other ways. Children are also taught using singing, rhyming, cooking, sewing and puzzles.

The HIPPY curriculum is primarily cognitive-based, focusing on language development, problem solving, logical thinking and perceptual skills. Awareness of a variety of sounds, letter recognition, book knowledge and early writing experiences are the main literacy skills that HIPPY teaches. The curriculum is not a mastery-based; rather, the goal is to introduce children to important literacy skills and experience with books to foster a relationship between child and book. Creating this relationship is crucial in a child's later bond with books and literacy.

But, perhaps as importantly, the program emphasizes the bonds between parent and child. Watching Brooklyn and her mother interact, it's clear that both the educational and relational aspects of the program are working beautifully for this family.

With Brooklyn seated in her lap, Knapp begins reading their new HIPPY book, *Jump, Frog, Jump*. A few pages in, she asks Brooklyn what color the water is. "Blue," Brooklyn says, very sure of herself. It is. Knapp continues reading about the frog that jumps out of the water that catches the fly; Brooklyn enthusiastically repeats the lines of the book. She helps her mom turn each page of the book, absorbing the colors and images. Reaching the end of the book, Brooklyn recounts the elements of the book, unprompted: "The frog is green. That's the fish. That's the frog. And that's the fly."

"We teach the parent that they can do this. They can successfully be their child's first teacher."

— Beverly Wright



Getting Off to a Good Start

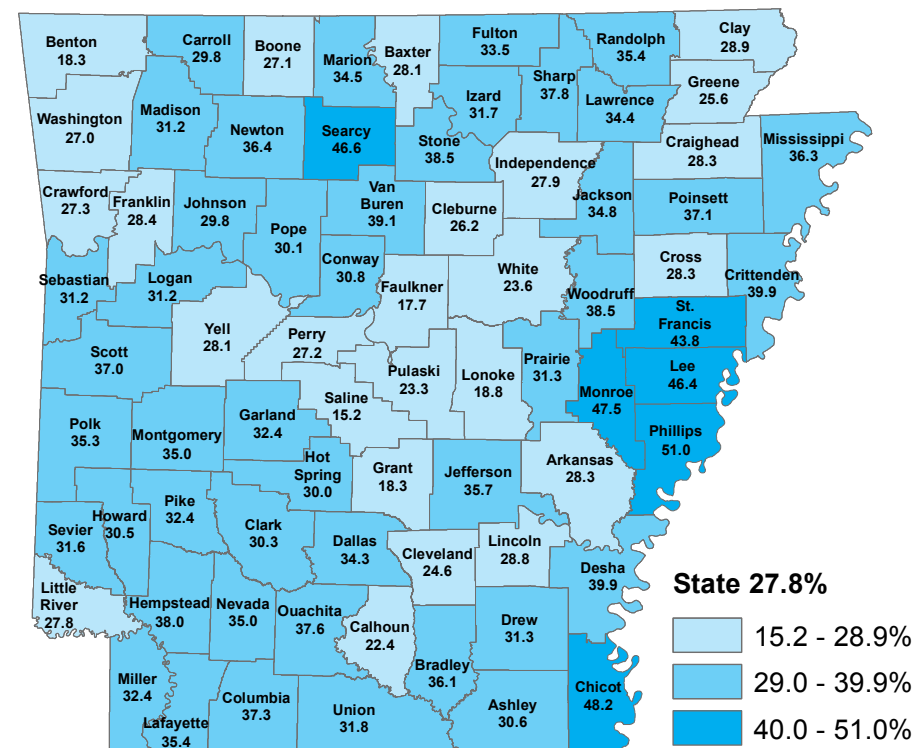
In Arkansas Community Foundation's *Aspire Arkansas, Second Edition* report, released in October, we identified four goals for Arkansas's communities and looked for data that show how each of our communities are faring with regard to each goal. Below are maps from the report addressing early childhood outcomes.

Use these maps to help compare your county to others across your region and the whole state so you can start the conversation in your community about how to move the numbers in the right direction.



children living in poverty

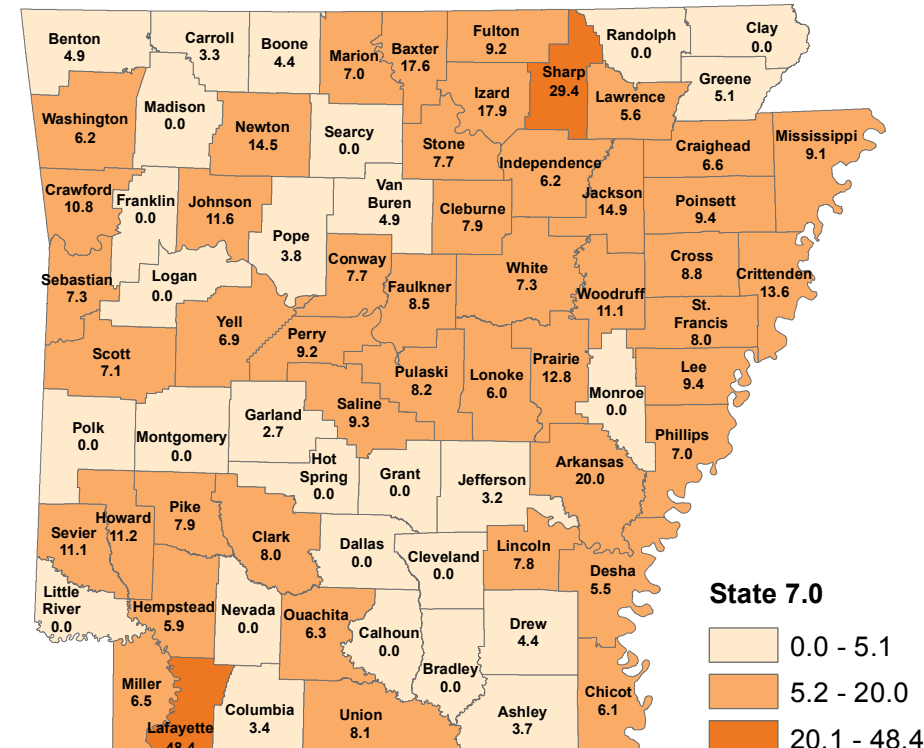
Percent of population under age 18
Arkansas by County, 2011



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates

infant mortality

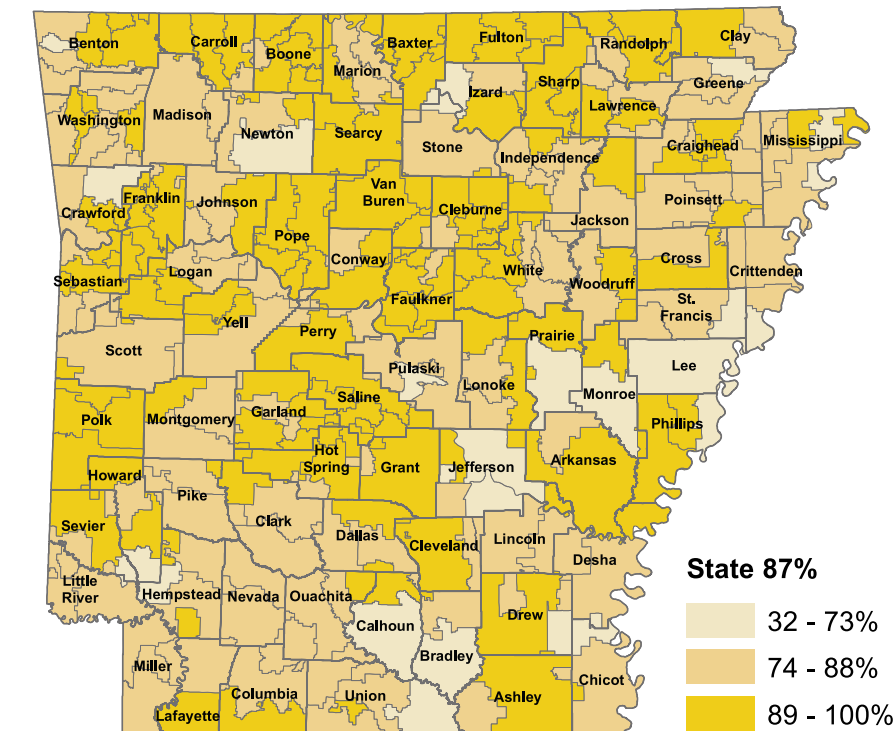
Rate per 1000 live births
Arkansas by County, 2011



Source: Arkansas Department of Health, Center for Health Statistics

grade 3 math

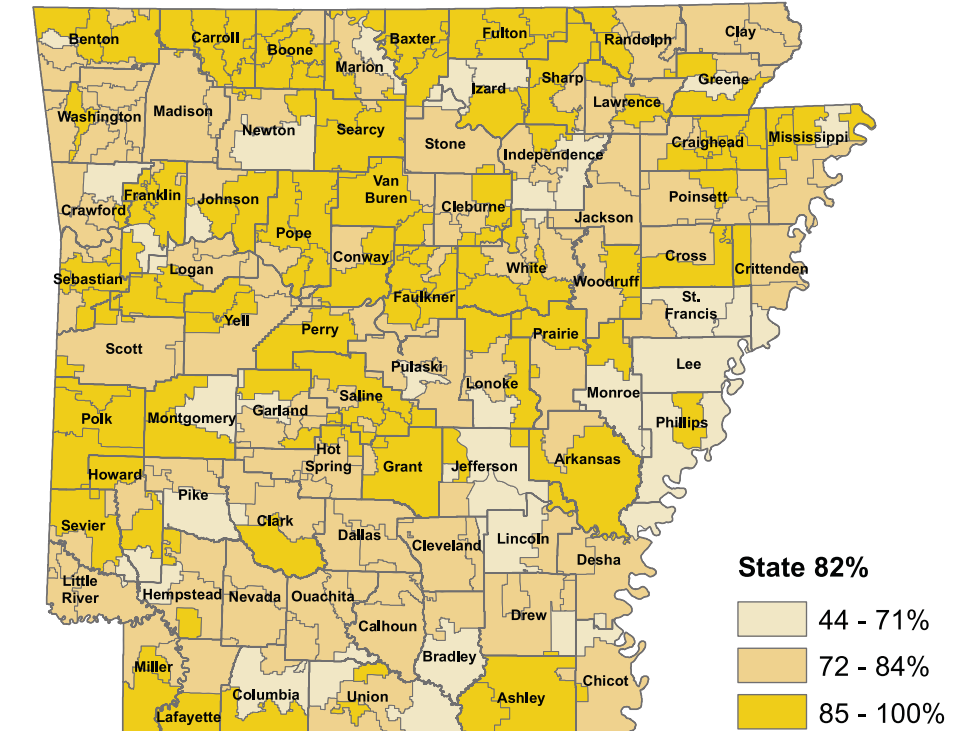
Percent Proficient or Advanced;
Arkansas by School District, 2012



Source: Arkansas Department of Education,
<http://www.arkansased.org/divisions/learning-services/student-assessment/test-scores>

grade 3 literacy

Percent Proficient or Advanced;
Arkansas by School District, 2012



Source: Arkansas Department of Education,
<http://www.arkansased.org/divisions/learning-services/student-assessment/test-scores>



Things as simple as singing songs, repeating nursery rhymes and reading every day encourage early literacy in children. Children are more likely to become enthusiastic readers when they are exposed to printed letters and words at an early age.

Source: American Library Association



The second edition of *Aspire Arkansas* is available online now. Download the full report, along with historical data for your county, at www.arcf.org/AspireArkansas.



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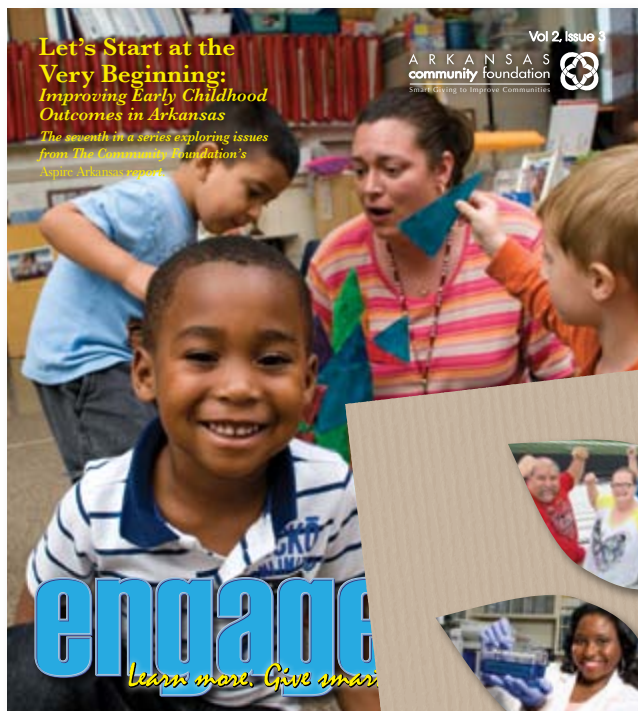
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See the FY2013 *Annual Report* – Arkansas Community Foundation is helping Conway County residents reach new fitness goals, partnering with the Arkansas Black Hall of Fame Foundation to reach the next generation of scientists and reaching a growing network of school and community gardeners. Check out the enclosed annual report, *Reach*, for these stories and a look at our 2013 financials.

ENGAGE in Early Childhood Development — This quarter we're focusing on early childhood outcomes in **ENGAGE** magazine. Read how Arkansas's preschool efforts are preparing youngsters for future academic success on page 1. Learn about an in-home instruction program that is helping parents reinforce early literacy skills on page 7. In our Arkansas Viewpoints column on page 4, two Arkansans weigh in on how we can help our state's children get a healthy start in life. These stories and more inside **ENGAGE**.

