

Innovative Regional Support for Community Schools in Rural Arkansas:
A Solution For Students' Home Communities and Schools

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ForwARd Arkansas is a public-private partnership established in 2014 by the Arkansas State Board of Education, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation to increase equity and accelerate student achievement and economic prosperity across Arkansas. ForwARd works in partnership with education, philanthropy, government, and the private sector to advance public policy to provide greater equity and opportunity while also accelerating progress by leveraging state, federal, and private resources to pilot innovative new approaches that can potentially be replicated statewide. ForwARd is designed as a network platform forming the backbone of a statewide ecosystem supporting innovation and the transfer of ideas within and across communities.

Executive Summary

The National Center for Education Statistics defines rural schools in terms of their distance from urbanized areas. Southwest Regional Education Labs (REL) notes that about half of Arkansas's schools are rural with more than one-third of the state's students attending a rural school. Because the unique needs of rural schools have not been evaluated in depth separate from districts as a whole, the state is in jeopardy of failing to provide equity for these schools and students.

The Arkansas Legislature has focused its determination of equity based on a study of statistical measures that its staff conducts. They note in their report that vertical equity is achieved except for the smallest 20 percent of districts. The context of this inequity is lost in the overall compilation across all districts. The smallest districts spend more per student, but the funds are needed for higher per-student costs.

The smallest school districts have varied academic achievement outcomes; however, correlation data indicate that as school enrollment size increases, the increase is associated with increased academic achievement. The percentage of Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) students and the percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards (grade level) correlates negatively for each selected grade and subject level. Third grade literacy and math have a moderate relationship with the percent of FRL students. Tenth grade math and literacy have a strong relationship. The negative correlation means districts with higher percentages of FRL students observe a lower percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards on the selected ACT Aspire achievement points. Finally, a correlation between district enrollment and district poverty indicates that smaller schools are moderately associated with a higher percentage of FRL students.

Student poverty is a critical factor in achievement. Failing to address that poverty over the years has resulted in a lack of change in outcomes for low-income children. The state has provided additional funding for low-income districts then failed to ensure that it was used to improve achievement. Small schools have at times had to make choices between student supports and keeping the doors open. Students in some small and rural schools have fewer course options and lower odds for fulfilling careers and futures.

Community schools are a viable solution to meeting the unique needs of rural schools. Providing students with equitable resources for health and out-of-school time enrichments would level the playing field. Bringing families and the community together can bridge the limited resources many rural communities experience.

Regional support through Arkansas's Education Service Cooperatives can help sustain the increased levels of assistance needed to address high concentrations of low-income students. Regional support can also provide access to equitable career opportunities in an efficient and effective way. Equipment and experienced instructors may be too costly and difficult to recruit for individual small, rural districts. Sharing these opportunities among many districts can help.

Arkansas has entire subpopulations of students that are performing below the level of other subpopulations. This means that equity has not been provided. No true assessment has been made of how much it costs to establish equity in a district with a high concentration of poverty. The current state poverty funding was originally based on a computation related to the cost of one or more additional teachers. Over the years there have been funding increases related to the cost of living. But

analysesⁱ have shown that poverty funding isn't improving achievement significantly. The legislature has concluded that adequate funding has been provided based on a model that determines need derived from state accreditation requirements such as staffing levels. Student outcomes have not validated that judgment. There are some high-achieving small, rural schools, but they are the exception, not the rule. A deeper look is needed into what it will take for rural students to have equitable access to a wide variety of family and student support resources, course offerings, and state-of-the-art career opportunities.

Introduction

ForwARd Arkansas is working with partners to develop a unique model for community schools and other needs of rural communities that includes a regional approach to provide critical support for small, rural districts. Small communities served by these rural districts have limited access to service providers, which often exist at county or regional levels. In many cases, rural schools are not able to offer a wide variety of academic classes or career opportunities because of the small numbers of students. The expense of some career facilities and equipment is also a challenge.

Rural schools vary in size and levels of poverty, but generally they are smaller and poorer than districts in urban areas or metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs.) Arkansas's MSAs are 1) Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers, 2) Fort Smith, 3) Hot Springs, 4) Jonesboro, 5) Little Rock-North Little Rock-Conway, 6) Memphis (Crittenden County), 7) Pine Bluff, and 8) Texarkana.ⁱⁱ

Defining Rural Schools

The National Center for Education Statistics defines rural schools in three categories:

- Fringe: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster
- Distant: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster
- Remote: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban clusterⁱⁱⁱ

The categories are based on an area's distance from urban areas. REL Southwest notes that the definition impacts consequences for equitable distribution of services and education funding. They add that almost half (49 percent) of public schools in Arkansas are in rural areas, and more than one-third (35.1 percent) of the state's students are enrolled in these schools.^{iv} Failing to acknowledge the unique needs and circumstances of rural schools denies equity to one-third of Arkansas's students.

Assessing Equity

What does equitable opportunity look like? Equality means everyone has the same opportunity. Equity means that some students or groups of students will need more resources to achieve equality. A broad

look at equity in educational opportunity includes providing resources needed for the success of all students and making services available to schools in low-income areas such as health clinics and after-school programs.

Efforts to assess equity at the state level have focused on expenditures at the district level. The Bureau of Legislative Research (BLR) assesses equity between districts in the state as part of the Lake View adequacy review process each biennium. The 2017 report states, “The court acknowledged that equity is not simply a matter of equal distribution of dollars for each child, but rather the State must take into account disparities that impact a child's ability to receive an equal opportunity for an adequate education.”^v

As part of those efforts, BLR computes several types of statistical measures of equity:

- Horizontal equity measures equal treatment of students without considering needs;
- Vertical equity also measures additional funding for disadvantaged students;
- Neutrality measures consider the impact of district wealth and geographic location;
- Federal range ratio is used for expenditures on a per-student basis.

Below is a quote from the BLR on vertical equity analysis based on district average daily membership (ADM), which is the number of students:

The first vertical equity analysis (Chart 1) examines the relationship between “expenditures from select state-funding” and ADM. The two most prominent observations are the similarity in levels of expenditures across the three years shown and the *slightly higher per-student expenses* [italics added] in the lower two ADM deciles. These findings indicate that there is virtually no relationship (or inequity) between district size (or ADM) and per-student spending, *with the exception of observable higher expenditures in smaller districts* [italics added].^{vi}

The context of this inequity is lost in the overall compilation across all districts. The smallest districts spend more per student, but the funds are needed for higher per-student costs rather than supports for students from low-income families as intended. Small districts cannot operate as efficiently as larger districts. Arkansas consolidated its smallest districts when adequacy was first addressed. This becomes impractical when there are no nearby districts to join. The difference in average per-student expenditures for the smallest 10 percent of districts (\$8,947) and average size districts (\$7,543 using the fifth decile) is \$1,404 per student.^{vii} In the smallest districts of about 350 students, that difference is nearly \$500,000.

No true assessment has been made of how much it costs to establish equity in a small, rural district with a high concentration of poverty. The current state poverty funding was originally based on a computation related to the cost of one or more additional teachers. Districts receive poverty funding in one of three levels determined by the concentration or percentage of Free and Reduced Lunch students. Over the years there have been funding increases related to the cost of living, but analyses^{viii} have shown that poverty funding isn't improving achievement significantly. The legislature has concluded that adequate funding has been provided based on a model that determines need derived from state accreditation requirements such as staffing levels. Student outcomes have not validated that judgment.

Rural Outcomes

This study used the Arkansas Department of Education's MySchoolInfo software to obtain 2017-18 data for 242 districts and charter schools. Charter schools not serving all grades, special schools such as Arkansas School for the Deaf, and two virtual schools were excluded for these analyses.

Our methodology was to use the following six 2017-2018 school-year data points:

- Final Enrollment
- Percent Students Eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch (Final)
- ACT Aspire Testing Pre-Appeals Percent Meeting or Exceeding Standards
 - 3rd Grade Literacy
 - 3rd Grade Math
 - 10th Grade Literacy
 - 10th Grade Math

School District Enrollment

The following correlation represents the relationship between district enrollment size and student achievement, measured by ACT Aspire performance.

The results are shown in this table:

Enrollment to Achievement	3 rd Grade Literacy	3 rd Grade Math	10 th Grade Literacy	10 th Grade Math
Correlation Coefficient	0.21	0.18	0.15	0.19

As observed, district size and the percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards (at grade level) have a weak positive correlation between one another. Meaning, as school enrollment size increases, the increase is associated with increased academic achievement.

School District Poverty as Indicated by Percent Free and Reduced Lunch

Correlations were run for the percent of Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) students of each district in comparison with each of the four ACT Aspire data points.

The results are shown in this table:

Percent FRL to Achievement	3 rd Grade Literacy	3 rd Grade Math	10 th Grade Literacy	10 th Grade Math
Correlation Coefficient	-0.55	-0.41	-0.73	-0.65

The percentage of FRL students and the percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards (at grade level) correlates negatively for each selected grade and subject level. These correlations are stronger than the enrollment correlations. Third grade literacy and math have a moderate relationship with the percent of FRL students. Tenth grade math and literacy have a strong relationship.

The negative correlation means districts with higher percentages of FRL students observe a lower percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards on the selected ACT Aspire achievement points.

Small and Low-Income School Districts

Finally, a simple correlation between district enrollment and district poverty was run. The correlation was -0.33, meaning smaller schools are moderately associated with a higher percentage of FRL students.

NAEP

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) confirms that Arkansas is not making significant gains related to other states; however, its data do not provide district-to-district comparisons. In a recent statement on the 2017 NAEP scores, the Arkansas Department of Education noted, “While still lower than the national public school scores, Arkansas’s scores held steady, with no statistically significant increases or decreases compared to 2015 scores.”^{ix}

Addressing Poverty

Poverty impacts achievement. Size and challenges related to economies of scale impact a district’s ability to support students living in poverty. Arkansas has invested considerable resources to improve academic outcomes in the state. Large investments of state general revenue funding were used to meet educational adequacy including district funding for programs to serve low income students. State dollars were also used for a large expansion of access to pre-K beginning in 2003. Federal education funding passed through to the state has financed an onslaught of school improvement specialists and targeted programming in low performing schools. At the same time, philanthropy invested heavily in new education strategies. Perhaps the most well-known are the Arkansas Campaign for Grade Level Reading supported by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation and the charter school movement supported by the Walton Family Foundation. During this era of expanded resources, there have been a few short-term success stories, but across the board, little has changed for children of low-income families, particularly low-income children in small schools. An example of the failure of the strategies undertaken to date can be seen in this computation by the Bureau of Legislative Research showing results on the ACT Aspire in 2015-16.^x

	% Ready or Exceeding		Percentage Point Gap
	FRPL (low income)	Non-FRPL (more affluent)	
ELA	37.3%	65.7%	28.4
Math	34.4%	58.3%	23.9
Science	27.9%	55.0%	27.1

To move ahead, the state must consider and address student poverty in areas where poverty is highly concentrated. One solution that empowers local communities and brings needed resources to low-income students and their families is community schools. Community schools provide both the K-12 curriculum and a much broader range of supports to students and families — high-quality academic instruction as well as mentoring, health care, college and career counseling, financial advising, and much more. In many cases, the community school serves as a neighborhood hub, bringing together educators, families, business leaders, elected officials, and many other local partners to ensure that students have real opportunities to succeed in school and in life.^{xi}

There is a strong evidence base supporting the community school model. The National Education Policy Center and The Learning Policy Institute published a comprehensive resource on the evidence base

consisting of a report^{xii} and a research compendium^{xiii}. The research compendium summarizes 143 studies. The report examines each of four pillars, or common structures, and the community school model overall, finding that the use of community schools to improve student outcomes is strongly supported by research evidence, as required by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. The U.S. Department of Education cited this study as the evidence base for the Full-Service Community School Grant Program in the *Federal Register*, Volume 83 Issue 114.

Arkansas has not fully implemented community schools addressing poverty and its concomitant issues. There have been school districts, such as the Schools of the 21st Century, that provided a strong array of supporting services to students, but they did not have a Community School Coordinator who was connecting the resources of the community in a structured way to provide ongoing support to school districts. Staff at schools in the Schools of the 21st Century program worked in teams to address needs as they arose.

Challenges of starting community schools in rural areas of the state include that the number of students served on any one campus is small, with some serving less than two hundred students in a K-6 building. Many district level administrators serve in multiple roles to meet state and federal requirements. For that reason, they are reluctant to take on administration of any additional programming such as community schools, even while acknowledging that such student and family support would provide great benefits. See an example on one district below.

Staff Initials and Job Titles for actual staff members in one district	
A.P.	Treasurer
	SIS eFinancePlus Coordinator for Cycles 1,8,9
	General Business Manager
	Bookkeeper
D.W.	Test Coordinator
	Curriculum Coordinator
J.C.	Compliance Coordinator
	Superintendent
Z.S.	Federal Program Coordinator
	Equity-Disability Coordinator
	ALE Contact Person
	Safe & Drug Free Schools Coord.
	Equity-Race Coord.
	Foster Care Liaison Coord.
	Equity-Gender Coord.
	Equity – National Origin Coord.
	Title III Federal Grant Coord.
	English for Speakers of Other Languages Coord.

Source: Arkansas Department of Education Website: District Contacts

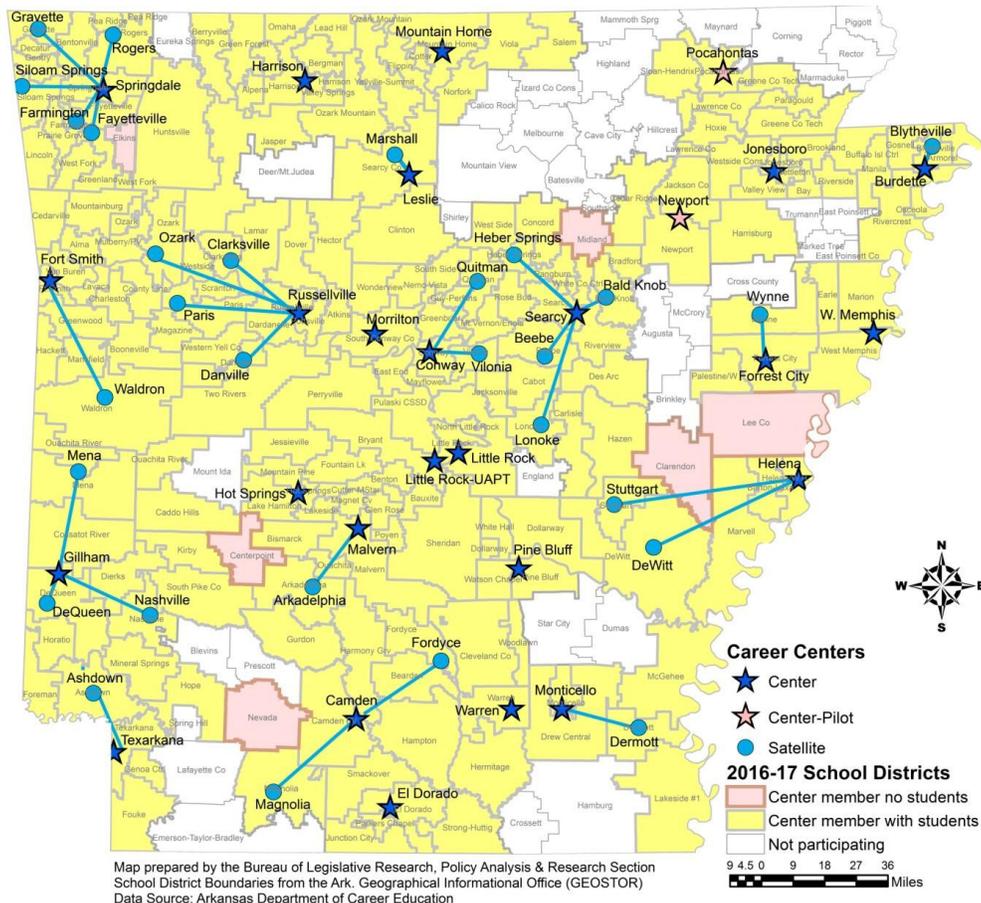
Small schools have at times had to make choices between student supports and keeping the doors open. In an anecdotal report, one district urged community members not to press for better use of the state’s poverty funding, because the district would not be able to stay out of fiscal distress. Fiscal distress is a state designation meaning the district is projected to operate at a deficit that fiscal year. This designation means the state is likely to assume control of the district.

Addressing Enrichment and Opportunity

One outcome of being educated in smaller districts with high concentrations of poverty is less opportunity for a variety of career training and up-to-date technology. Large districts in the state may offer as many as 100 electives to their students or even a state-of-the-art school of innovation as an option, while smaller districts offer the minimum courses required for accreditation, and some are seeking to offer less than that through recent state legislation.

State-of-the-art career and technical equipment include items such as virtual reality programs and robotic machines for manufacturing. The faculty could include professionals from the targeted fields of work who become second career teachers with real world experience. The expense to make these options available would be unaffordable for smaller districts on their own.

Arkansas’s twenty-five secondary area career centers and 27 satellite locations do not provide access for all students. The BLR produced this map showing access and participation in existing career centers.^{xiv}



Career Center member districts with no students participating are located in rural areas of the state. Additional regional supports are needed to provide the equity needed for rural students. Access to up-to-date career training can also help reduce the outmigration of students who are leaving small districts for expanded opportunities and services in other districts.

Regional Solutions

The regional model proposed by ForwARd Arkansas is founded in a theory of change designed to reduce opportunity deficits and to increase equity. To improve the achievement and outcomes for low-income students, educators and local leaders must rethink school as it now exists in high-poverty and low-performing schools throughout Arkansas, embracing proven models of community schools and relevant up-to-date career training. The regional concept is a possible solution. Arkansas has an existing regional structure, in which a group of districts is a member of an Education Service Cooperative (ESC). This would be a logical choice for adding programming and services. These organizations are already structured to provide supporting services, such as professional development, to their member districts. They also have relationships with their districts. This existing framework can be expanded to provide other centralized supports if properly funded. Done well, these amped-up ESCs would become regional laboratories for innovation in support of local districts.

There are fifteen ESCs in the state, so it would be necessary to add additional locations or perhaps satellite service areas that would make the resources housed at the ESC more accessible. The ESCs would need additional funding to manage community school coordinators and related data and evaluation efforts for coordinators housed on the school campus they serve. Further, ESCs could expand services to include developing career opportunity partnerships and housing maker spaces and STEM learning centers where equipment may be cost prohibitive for small districts. Funding these programs once for multiple districts will be more efficient and effective than providing them at every district and more equitable than the inconsistent access that is available now in some districts but not in others. The regional approach will allow rural districts to remain viable, keeping their students and providing equity with options that students in larger districts are able to access.

There are examples of providing regionalized resources supporting and maintaining the local schools rather than competing with them. One such model is Kent ISD Model in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In the regional campus concept, students attend the regional campus only part of the day while remaining enrolled at their home school. "Home school" means the public school closest to where the student lives. Students take afternoon classes at their home school, participate in athletics through their home school, and graduate from their home high school. Kent ISD serves 20 urban public districts, as well as charter schools and parochial schools. Kent ISD offers part-day programs for juniors and seniors, allowing students to move between schools and programs to meet their personal learning goals, while remaining connected to their home schools. Students are transported by buses from their home schools.

The home school benefits by having enrolled students that cost them substantially less, because about two-thirds of the classes the students take are paid for by the regional programs. Two of the regional programs are provided at no cost to the home school. The home school pays a fee for the online learning program, but it is less than the state foundation-level funding per student. The home school transports students to and from the regional campus.

The regional program supports and protects the student's home community. In many cases, participating students are those the home school would have lost: They are disengaged, about to drop out, or planning to attend another school through choice. The regional program allows students to connect with real-world, state-of-the-art learning in a way not possible in most local high schools. It also allows students to remain connected to their community and their home school classmates. Kent ISD also participates in a regional community school program that serves all local districts, providing students and families with resources and opportunities not otherwise feasible for the individual districts.

At Kent ISD, additional funding for the regional resource is provided through a local tax. Local businesses supported the tax for a facility in their service areas, in part because of their need for students graduating with skills needed by those businesses. Some businesses also donated state-of-the-art equipment, so students can learn on the equipment currently being used in the business.^{xv}

Conclusions

The unique needs of rural schools in Arkansas have not been studied and addressed in enough depth to determine adequacy or equity. The state has provided additional funding for low-income districts then failed to ensure that it was used to improve achievement. Students in some small and rural schools have fewer options and less hope for fulfilling careers and futures.

Believing this to be true, ForwARd has been proactive in applying for grants and working in this space to rethink how Arkansas does education. In addition to this funding effort, ForwARd is actively engaged in the ADE Family and Community Engagement effort in compliance with the state's ESSA plan. ADE is to be commended for its extensive public outreach efforts and expertise in moving these issues to the forefront. Perhaps most importantly, ForwARd and its partners, including ADE and the Rural Community Alliance, are working together to examine the possibilities and forge new partnerships with ESCs and others to bring equity to all students.

Data made available through this report can inform discussions and indicate areas to explore further. However, statistics or lists of programs will not determine if a district has the resources to provide equity. Measures exist to determine the existing level of equity, but they cannot determine what more is needed to remove achievement gaps. Research identifies programs that reduce inequities and help more low-income and minority children achieve at higher levels. Research does not tell us how much we should spend for those programs or even exactly which combination of programs is needed in each district. Statistics and research can tell us what inputs a district has in funding and in student demographics and what the outputs are in achievement data. Equity equations cannot determine whether funding and resources are used wisely and implemented successfully. Spending dollars does not mean they are used in effective ways that meet the needs of students. The existence of a program does not mean it is well administered.

The data support a hypothesis that rural, small and low-income schools do not have the resources needed to ensure their students succeed. There will always be students who perform at higher levels than other students. Assessing equity among districts is a difficult task. But when whole subgroups of students or entire areas of the state perform at significantly lower levels than the state as a whole, we can be sure that equity has not been reached.

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- ⁱ Bureau of Legislative Research. (2017, September 19). *National School Lunch State Categorical Funding and Expenditures*. September 19, 2017. [Dates should go after the author listing, in parentheses] http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/education/K12/AdequacyReports/2018/2017-09-19/NSLStateCategoricalFundingAndExpendituresReport_BLR2.pdf [If these are their own independent reports, they should be in italics. If they are articles in a larger report or publication, they should be in normal font but without quotation marks around them (if using APA style), and the name of the larger report or publication should be given in italics afterwards.]
- ⁱⁱ Pakko, Mike. *Arkansas Economist*. September 28, 2017. <https://www.arkansaseconomist.com/?tag=arkansas-metro-areas-msas>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp> [Should list the author or the organization as author, and the title of the resource before giving the web address]
- ^{iv} REL Southwest. date *Definitions of Rural: Implications for Educational Policies and Practices*. http://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Policy_and_Advocacy/NREAC/Rural%20Definition%20Overview.pdf
- ^v Bureau of Legislative Research. *Equity of Revenues and Expenditures in Arkansas School Districts*. September 19, 2017.
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} Ibid.
- ^{viii} Bureau of Legislative Research. *National School Lunch State Categorical Funding and Expenditures*. September 19, 2017. http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/education/K12/AdequacyReports/2018/2017-09-19/NSLStateCategoricalFundingAndExpendituresReport_BLR2.pdf
- ^{ix} Arkansas Department of Education. [More info needed]
- ^x Bureau of Legislative Research. "National School Lunch State Categorical Funding and Expenditures." September 19, 2017. http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/education/K12/AdequacyReports/2018/2017-09-19/NSLStateCategoricalFundingAndExpendituresReport_BLR2.pdf
- ^{xi} Jacobson, Reuben. Villarreal, Lisa. Munoz, Jose. Mahaffery, Robert. It takes a community: Community schools provide opportunities for all. February 2018. *Phi Delta Kappan* 99(5), 8-14.
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- ^{xiii} Online Research Compendium. "Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy for Equitable School Improvement." Learning Policy Institute. National Education Policy Center. June 2017. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/online-research-compendium>
- ^{xiv} Bureau of Legislative Research. "Career and Technical Education in Arkansas's K-12 Schools." January 23, 2018. http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/education/K12/AdequacyReports/2018/2018-01-23/CareerandTechnicalEducationCTE_Report_BLR_14.pdf
- ^{xv} Derlikowski, Jerri. "The Best of All Worlds for Students." Community Resource Innovations. [date?] <http://communityresourceinnovations.com/the-best-of-all-worlds-for-students/>