



Status Update on Local Early Childhood Lead Organizations and the Unification of the Unified Early Childhood Care and Education System

March 2024



The LEARNS Act calls for a unified Office of Early Childhood under the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) and a local early childhood lead organization in every community of the state to support early childhood efforts at the local level. The LEARNS Act requires these organizations to (1) support access to early childhood programs, (2) identify gaps in services, (3) foster local partnerships, (4) create alignment among public and private providers and agencies within the community, and (5) establish a comprehensive, locally supported plan for providing early childhood programs and services.

LEARNS requires an update on the status of the local early childhood lead organizations and the unification of the unified early childhood care and education system by March 2024. Arkansas has made significant progress on the implementation of the early learning portion of LEARNS:

- ✓ The Office of Early Childhood is now leading the vision for early care and education in the state of Arkansas. Early childhood programs have been consolidated into a unified Office of Early Childhood under the ADE.
- ✓ ADE selected 12 organizations, covering one third of the state geographically and approximately 44% of the birth to five population, for Cohort 1 in the pilot year of local leads.
- ✓ For the first time ever, local leads are conducting counts of all children served in early childhood settings through public funding so that they can begin to understand how many kids still need early childhood care and make a plan to address it.
- ✓ ADE will expand to a second cohort of local leads this spring, with complete state coverage of local leads by October 2024 in compliance with LEARNS.

Through LEARNS, Governor Sanders took the first step to address the fragmentation by consolidating early childhood programs into one agency. ADE and the OEC committed to:

- **Partner with those closest to children and classrooms:** Create a system of strong state-local partnerships to improve access to quality early care and education options in all communities in Arkansas.
- **Know how many kids already have a seat:** Collect an accurate count of all children served by publicly funded early care and education in partnership with local leads to provide leaders with information to guide decision making.
- **Define excellence:** Establish a single vision for quality early care and education that is tied to kindergarten readiness and drives improvement for all sites, in partnership with local leads.

To partner with those closest to children and classrooms, LEARNS called for **local early childhood leads** for each locality in Arkansas. These local leads are funded to create and execute the plan for their area on how to use available resources to best prepare Arkansas children for Kindergarten and act as a partner with the state to see through Arkansas's vision for the future of early childhood education. These organizations are charged to:

- **Support access** to early childhood programs
- **Identify gaps** in services
- **Foster local partnerships**
- **Create alignment** among public and private providers and agencies within the community
- Establish a **comprehensive, locally supported plan** for providing early childhood programs and services.

Establishing a state-local partnership with organizations in every corner of the state is one of the greatest levers for change in early childhood. The LEARNS Act makes that possible by establishing a local early childhood lead organization model. A true state-local partnership model means:

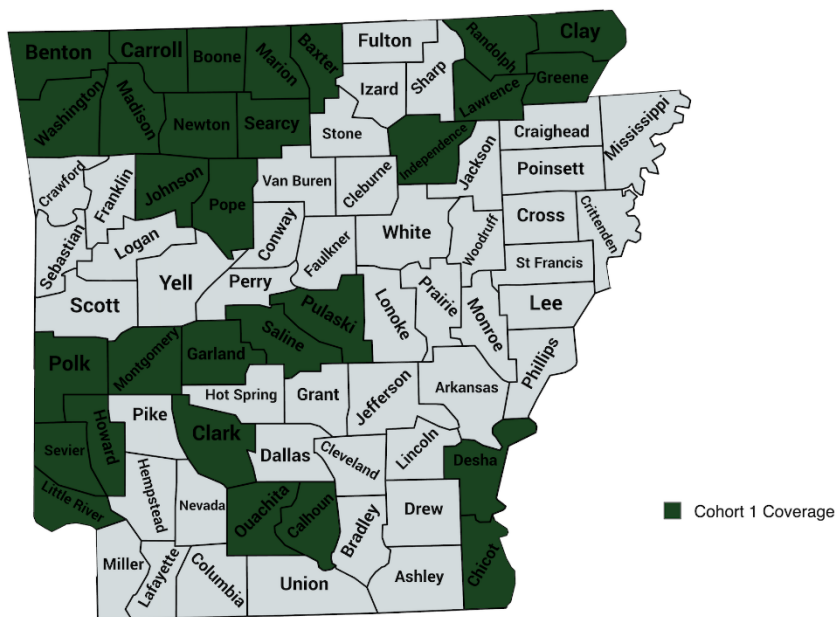
- **State Sets Vision:** The state’s early childhood captain (ADE) sets the early childhood vision
- **Locals Support Implementation:** The state empowers (e.g., through funding, TA, flexibility, accountability) a single local partner in every community to solve existing challenges in their local context
- **Open & Clear Feedback Loops:** The state works in service of early childhood providers and families. There is clear communication and feedback loops about how to best serve children and families.
- **Streamlined Experience for Children & Families:** Families are given a trusted, one-stop-shop to learn about and apply for early childhood programs and services in their community
- **Connected Data:** Locals collect data about how many kids served, at what quality, and where the gaps remain in real time, and this data can be rolled up to the state level to drive decision-making



Cohort 1: Local Early Childhood Lead Organizations

The Arkansas Department of Education received 34 applications from public agencies, school systems, Arkansas-based nonprofits, education-focused organizations or business, and education cooperatives across Arkansas. Through a competitive process, ADE selected 12 organizations for Cohort 1 in the pilot year:

Local Early Childhood Lead Organization	Counties Served
Arkansas State University, Child Care Aware	Chicot, Desha
Child Care Aware of Northwest Arkansas	Benton
City of Little Rock, Excel by Eight	City of Little Rock
Dawson Education Cooperative	Clark
DeQueen Mena Education Cooperative	Montgomery, Polk, Sevier, Howard, Little River
IMPACT Independence County Foundation's Excel by Eight Collaborative	Independence
National Park College, Child Care Aware of West Central Arkansas	Garland, Saline
Northeast Arkansas Education Cooperative	Lawrence, Randolph, Clay, Greene
Ozarks Unlimited Resources Education Cooperative	Baxter, Boone, Carroll, Madison, Marion, Johnson, Newton, Searcy
Russellville School District	Pope
South Central Service Cooperative	Ouachita, Calhoun
Springdale School District	Washington



Cohort 1 Work Done to Date

Thus far, Cohort 1 has completed the following activities:

1. Provider Outreach: Local leads are engaging with providers of all site types via in-person site visits, emails, phone calls, postcards, video messaging etc.
2. Initial Provider Meetings: All local leads have held initial in-person provider meetings where they gathered providers of all site types (i.e., child care centers, family child care, public school preKs, and Head Starts) in their region to engage in vision setting activities for their community, share key information from the state, and listen to the experiences and challenges providers in their region are facing. This was the first time providers of *all* site types came together with others in their community to align on a plan for improving early childhood access and quality in their region.
3. Provider Collaboration Plan: The local leads submitted a plan to ADE for initial and sustained engagement with providers in their designated counties.
4. Child Count: Local leads collected a count of all publicly-funded children enrolled in their area in service of an unduplicated count. The count is organized by funding stream and age and will be used to help the state better understand and solve the current gaps in access to early childhood care and education.

ADE supports local leads by hosting webinars, in-person meetings, office hours, phone calls, and updates from the state. ADE and OEC are committed to supporting the local lead model, connecting them with one another, and highlighting best practices.

Upcoming Work

- In the spring of 2024, Cohort 1 will continue to meet with and support their child care providers, Head Starts, and pre-Ks on the ground. They will submit a Needs Assessment, a data-driven identification of the greatest needs for each of their counties. With the input and help from providers and other stakeholders, local leads in Cohort 1 will create a plan for addressing the early childhood gaps for providers, families, and children in their counties. Local leads will also conduct information campaigns throughout the spring to spread awareness and information about early childhood opportunities to families with young children in their catchment area. In the fall, local leads will participate in ADE's pilot of a research-based quality measurement tool.
- The Request for Application (RFA) for Cohort 2 will be released in March 2024, with Cohort 2 being onboarded in the spring. A statewide RFA will be released in the fall with complete state coverage of local early childhood organizations by October 2024.

LEARNS Early Learning Implementation Update: Each category represents a major requirement of LEARNS along with an update on the current state as of February 2024.

Category	Update
Unifying early childhood	The Office of Early Childhood at ADE now houses all licensed, including both state and federally funded, early childhood programs. This is the first step to ensuring the state of Arkansas has a unified and coherent vision for all of early childhood.
Establishing local lead organizations	12 early childhood organizations around the state have stepped up to pilot the first cohort of local leads. Having local partners on the ground who understand local context will be critical to improve the options and experiences for Arkansas kids and families.
Convening stakeholders	The Early Learning Work Group met 8 times to advise on the transition to ADE and all other aspects of LEARNS that affect early childhood. This group was made up of critical stakeholders from the field representing early childhood educators and health experts.
Establishing uniform accountability system indicative of child outcomes	The ADE will launch a pilot in the fall to measure the quality of experiences kids are having on their pathway to kindergarten using the CLASS tool. This research-based tool provides numerical ratings on classroom interactions that promote school readiness.
Reducing bureaucracy and burdensome licensing regulations	A third party research organization developed a report for the General Assembly on recommendations for updates to licensing requirements to simplify overlap and reduce conflicting requirements where possible.