



# PRE-K

Access to  
Success in  
Arkansas



**ARKANSAS  
ADVOCATES**  
FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

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## Executive Summary

Research continues to confirm the importance of high-quality early childhood education as a strategy for improving the social, emotional, and intellectual development of children as well as increasing the likelihood of their future academic and economic success. A 2008 study by Jay Barth and Keith Nitta, for example, found that access to quality pre-k in Arkansas has done more than any other intervention to help close the education achievement gap between white and minority children and between middle-class and low-income students. Numerous national campaigns, such as the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign (OTL) led by the Schott Foundation and the Grade Level Reading Campaign (GLR) led by the Annie E. Casey Foundation have made access to quality early childhood education a focal point of their campaigns to improve educational outcomes for all children.

Arkansas has made access to quality early childhood education a major priority over the past two decades. It created the original Arkansas Better Chance Program (our state funded pre-k program) in 1991 with a state appropriation of \$10 million. In 1997, Arkansas established the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (DCCECE) in recognition of the critical role that these programs played in the lives of working families and their children. After more than a decade, the

demand for these programs remains constant as economic realities require more parents to work and the child poverty rate increases. The cost of child care competes with rent, food, and utilities for the limited resources available to Arkansas' many low-wage workers.

In 2003 the Arkansas General Assembly passed landmark legislation creating the Arkansas Better Chance for School Success (ABCSS) program for three and four-year-old children who live in families with incomes less than 200% of the federal poverty line (i.e., \$46,100 for a family of four in 2012).

The ABCSS program built on an earlier Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) program that served a wider range of eligible children and continues to this day. However this 2003 legislation greatly expanded access to quality pre-school programs which required a lower student-to-teacher ratio, well qualified and compensated staff, proven curricula and learning processes, developmental screening and child assessment, meaningful parent and community engagement, and professional development. This report examines the current trends in access to both quality pre-K and regular child care programs available to vulnerable Arkansas families. For the purposes of this report, quality pre-K programs in Arkansas include the original ABC, ABCSS, and Head Start programs.

### Quality Pre-K Works

Children participating in the ABCSS program are assessed for readiness to learn as they enter kindergarten. Since the ABCSS program was implemented in the 2004-05 school year, the percent of children with developed skills in general knowledge, oral communication, written language, math concepts, work habits, and attentive behavior has steadily increased. The Arkansas Better Chance students had raw scores 3.5 percent higher in general knowledge, 2.7 percent higher in oral communication, 6.5 percent higher in written language, 4.6 percent higher in math concepts, 6.9 percent higher in work habits, and 8.1 percent higher in attentive behavior than students who participated in child care voucher programs.

The legislation establishing the ABCSS program requires a longitudinal study of children through completion of fourth grade. Rutgers University, in partnership with UAMS, will be releasing the first summary of this research, taking a look at data from 2005-2011 of Arkansas preschoolers in May 2012. Preliminary findings show that participation in an ABC program yields significant results. ABC students scored higher in language at the end of kindergarten and had better math and early literacy scores at the end of first grade. For example, attending the ABC program at age four yields 31% more growth in children's vocabulary at kindergarten entry, compared to preschool education experiences they would have had without attending ABC. Children who participated in ABC scored higher on a test of their early math skills—with 37% more growth at kindergarten entry. The ABC program also had a positive impact on children's understanding of print concepts, more than doubling growth over the year (116%) in print awareness scores.

The percentage of third-graders with an advanced score on the math benchmark exam increased 37 percent (from 23 percent to 60 percent) between 2005 and 2011.

The positive impacts of quality pre-K also carry into elementary school, as indicated by improved benchmark exam scores for all Arkansas students. Again we see the most significant improvements in benchmark exam scores following the full implementation of the ABCSS in 2007. Most notably, the percentage of third-graders with an advanced score on the math benchmark exam increased 37 percent (from 23 percent to 60 percent) between 2005 and 2011.

## The Rising Demand and Shortage of Quality Programs

ABC and ABCSS programs enroll 29 percent of eligible three-year-olds and 59 percent of eligible four-year-olds in quality programs (those with low child-to-staff ratios, proven curricula and well-educated staff). Head Start enrolls an additional 18 percent of eligible three-year-olds and 21 percent of eligible four-year-olds in quality programs in Arkansas. Together, the state-funded ABC/ABCSS and federally-funded Head Start programs served a total of 47 percent of eligible three-year-old children (11,210) and 80 percent of four-year-old children (19,001) statewide.

High-quality, publicly-funded programs for low-income families are either at full capacity or their funding has remained stagnant for several years, making expansion impossible. This is particularly critical for at-risk three-year-old children. Less than half (47 percent) are enrolled in quality programs. These children cannot wait for learning opportunities to become available. The earlier a child is exposed to enriching learning experiences the more likely they will be to attain educational and economic success in the future.

## The Crisis of Care for Infants and Toddlers

More than 59 percent of Arkansas children (95,464) from birth to age three live below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Only 2,191 of these infants and toddlers (2.23 percent) are enrolled in either publicly funded ABC or Early Head Start quality programs.

There is, however, renewed support for home visiting programs for at-risk infants and toddlers. The Arkansas Department of Health received a Maternal, Infant, Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) grant that will be managed by Arkansas Children's Hospital (ACH) to expand three evidence-based home visiting models in Arkansas: Parent as Teacher (PAT), Healthy Families America (HFA) and Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPI). In addition, ACH plans to establish the Arkansas Home Visiting Training Institute and conduct rigorous program evaluation through the UAMS Department of Family Medicine.

## Continuing Emphasis on Building Quality Programs in Arkansas

In 2010, the state of Arkansas implemented Better Beginnings, a voluntary quality rating and improvement system for all licensed child care providers. In a multi-step certification process, child care providers can obtain tools, guidance and training to conduct self-assessment of services. They receive a one-, two-, or three-star rating to represent their level of certification, which is made public so as to be

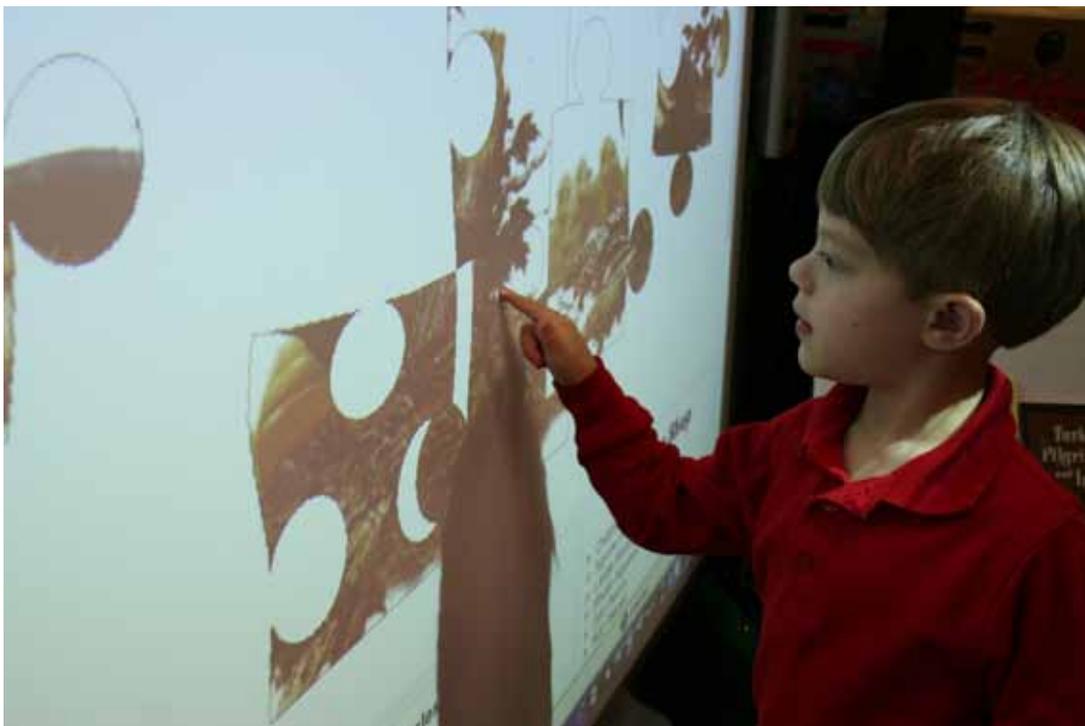
a guide for parents seeking child care. This quality rating system is a very important development that signals Arkansas's increased commitment to standards of care. After one year of operation the program, has engaged only 35 percent of child care centers and only four percent of the child care family homes in the state.

## Looking Forward

Arkansas has a lot to be proud of. It has developed some of the most effective pre-K programs in the country, invested over \$111 million in state funds to expand programs for more low-income children each year, and continues to improve the standards of care. As the state continues to look for ways to improve its educational outcomes and the competitiveness of its workforce, a continued investment in high quality pre-K programs makes sense.

Better Beginnings offers great promise for achieving higher standards of care for all child care programs. All children deserve a strong start in life that high-quality care can provide. For infants and toddlers who are most at risk, we must provide them with safe, stimulating, and valuable learning experiences that enhance the capacity of their developing minds. The implementation and evaluation of model home visiting programs do hold some promise for expanding effective services to this population but it will have to be expanded beyond the 2,200 families currently being served.

All of these early investments are as sound an economic investment as we can make at a time when significant challenges and great change await us all.





# Access to Success in Arkansas

by Paul Kelly, Senior Policy Analyst

## Introduction

Research continues to confirm the importance of high quality early childhood education as a strategy for improving the social, emotional, and intellectual development of children as well as increasing the likelihood of their future academic and economic success.<sup>1,2,3</sup> A 2008 study in Arkansas by Jay Barth and Keith Nitta, for example, found that access to quality pre-k has done more than any other intervention to help close the education achievement gap between white and minority children and low income and middle class students.<sup>4</sup> Numerous national campaigns, such as the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign (OTL) led by the Schott Foundation and the Grade Level Reading (GLR) Campaign led by the Annie E. Casey Foundation have made access to quality early childhood education a major focus of their campaigns to improve educational outcomes for all children.

Arkansas has made access to quality early childhood education a major priority over the past two decades. It created the original Arkansas Better Chance Program (our state funded pre-k program) in 1991 with a state appropriation of \$10 million. In 1997, Arkansas established the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (DCCECE) in recognition of the critical role that these programs played in the lives of working families and their children. After more than a decade, the demand for these programs remains constant as economic realities require more parents to work and the child poverty rate increases. While the cost of child care competes with rent, food, and utilities for the limited resources available to Arkansas's many low-wage workers.

Concern for the educational outcomes of Arkansas children led to the largest increase in state funding for these programs since the creation of the DCCECE. In 2003 the Arkansas General Assembly passed landmark legislation greatly expanding access to quality pre-school programs that required a lower student-to-teacher ratio, well qualified and compensated staff, proven curricula and learning processes, developmental screening and child assessment, meaningful parent and community engagement and professional development. Act 49 created the Arkansas Better Chance for School Success Program (ABCSS), a state-funded pre-K program for three- and four-year-olds living in families with an income less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line (i.e., \$46,100 for a family of four in 2012). At the time, an estimated 21,000 eligible children were not being served by any publicly funded preschool program. The allocation of state funds for the ABCSS program increased over a five year period to reach \$100 million annually in 2008.

The ABCSS program was modeled after the already existing Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) program, which was established in 1991 and was the state's first premiere pre-K program to address the needs of educationally deprived infants, toddlers and pre-school children. To be eligible for the original ABC program a child had to exhibit at least one risk factor of being educationally deprived. Risk factors included low birth weight (below five pounds, nine ounces), a demonstrable developmental delay as identified through screening, parents without a high school diploma or GED, a parent under 18 years of age at child's birth, an immediate family member with a history of substance abuse or addiction, a parent with a history of abuse of neglect or is a victim of abuse or neglect, a family with gross income not exceeding 200 percent of the federal poverty level or limited English proficiency. This original ABC program currently receives \$11 million in state funds each year.

The new ABCSS program is more limited in scope, serving the educationally-deprived needs only of three- and four-year-olds living in families with a gross income not exceeding 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Another provision of the ABCSS program is that it gives special priority to those eligible children who live in school districts where more than 75 percent of fourth-graders fall below proficiency on the state literacy and math benchmark exams. These programs offer both center- and home-based options through a diverse delivery system.

The ABCSS programs also required providers to raise a local match of 40 percent of total program cost to be eligible for state funding. For example, the total cost for family-care or center-based programs is \$8,100 per child per year. This includes a \$4,860 state reimbursement and \$3,240 in local match per child. The Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) or Parent as

**The cost of child care competes with rent, food, and utilities for the limited resources available to Arkansas's many low-wage workers**

Teacher (PAT) programs cost a total of \$2,917 per child per year with \$1,750 in state reimbursement and a local match of \$1,167. Head Start programs, private pre-school programs, universities, educational cooperatives, HIPPY, family care homes, and developmental disability centers are eligible to receive ABCSS funding as long as they met established standards and provide the required match. The following is a breakdown of the type of ABC/ABCSS programs currently operating in Arkansas:<sup>5</sup>

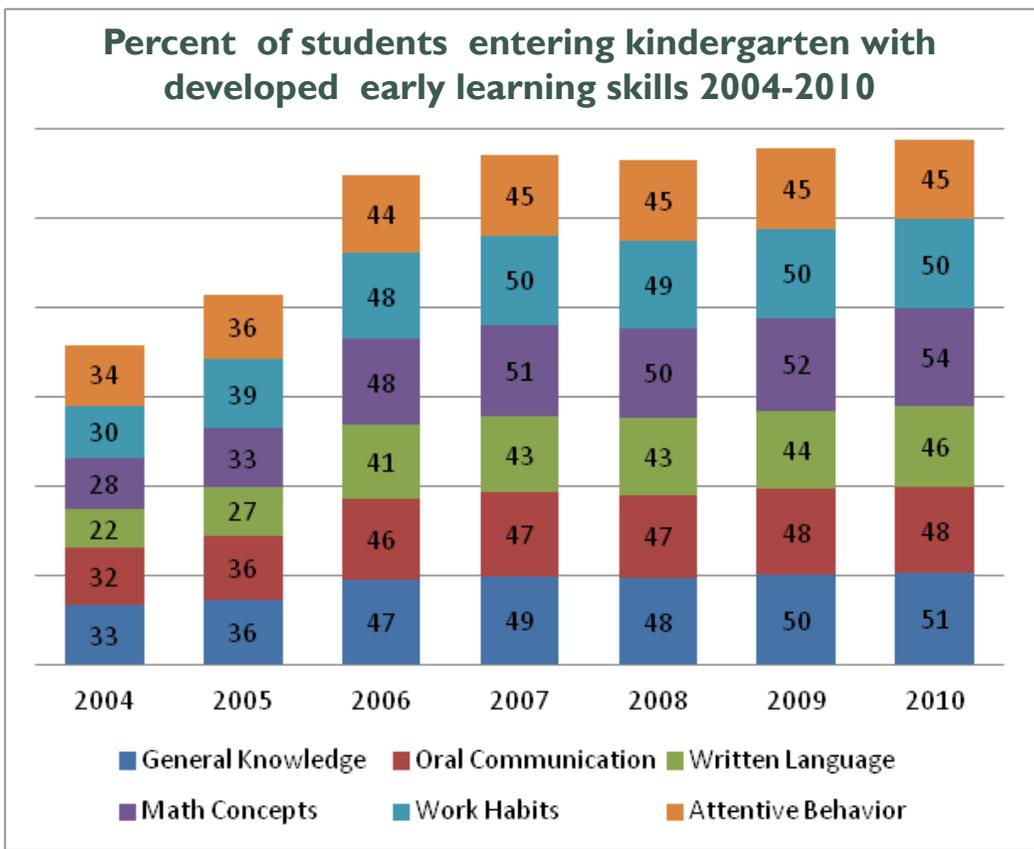
Program Type	Number of Programs
School Districts	120
Centers*	118
<b>Total Center-Based</b>	<b>238</b>
Home Instruction Program for Parents of Youngsters (HIPPY)	32
Parents As Teachers (PAT)	8
<b>Total Parent Home-Based Services</b>	<b>40</b>
Family Childcare Homes	18
<b>Total Family Homes</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Total ABC Agencies</b>	<b>296</b>
*ASU Childhood Services is an agency with 12 centers and six family homes. For the purposes of this table, ASU is counted as a "center."	
Source: DHS Division of Childcare and Early Childhood Education	

Due to the leadership of legislators and the governor, Arkansas created a system of high-quality pre-K programs that placed the state among the top-tier programs in the nation in terms of standards, the number of eligible children served and the amount of state funding available.<sup>6</sup>

The return on investment in pre-K was quickly evident, as more youngsters entered school with improved readiness and better performance on benchmark exams. However, too many families still struggle to gain access to these programs. The unmet needs of at-risk infants and toddlers, who could greatly benefit from similar high quality early learning programs remains a persistent, critical problem across the state.

Significant numbers of Arkansas children are considered to be educationally at risk because their family's income is less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Based on recent census data 59.6 percent of children ages zero to three (95,464) and 57.4 percent of three- and four-year-olds (45,650) live in families at this income level and are eligible for publicly-funded child care and early education programs.<sup>7</sup>

This report will examine the current trends in access to both quality pre-K and regular child care programs available to vulnerable Arkansas families. These programs enable many low-wage workers to not only meet the obligations of work and family but also provide a safe, structured, and enriching experience that prepare their children to learn and excel in school.



## Quality Pre-K Works

The legislation establishing the ABCSS program requires that participating children are assessed for readiness to learn as they enter kindergarten. The Iowa Early Learning Inventory (IELI) and the Qualls Early Learning Inventory (QELI) are used to measure the general knowledge, oral communication, written language skills, math concepts, work habits and attentive behavior of the 37,000 to 38,000 new children entering Arkansas kindergartens every fall. A child's scores are categorized as either delayed, developing or developed.<sup>8</sup> Since the ABCSS program was implemented in the 2004-05 school year, the percent of children with developed skills has steadily increased.

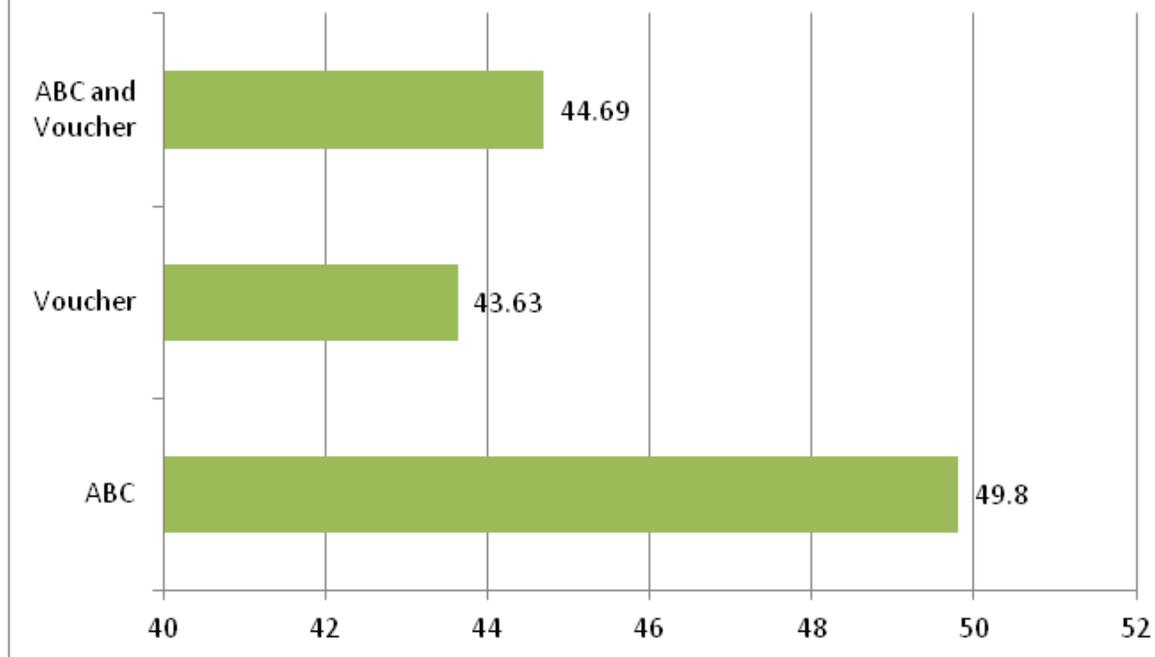
Although there was significant improvement in all skill areas, the most dramatic improvement was in math concepts – a 26 percent gain (from 28 percent to 54 percent) between 2004 and 2010. Attentive behavior scores improved the least (by 11 percent). Most of the improvement occurred in the first four years of testing and has held steady since 2007. Until more money is made available to expand these quality programs, the percent of students entering kindergarten with developed early learning skills is not likely to increase.

In addition, the Arkansas Research Center gathered data on 76,674 students that participated in a variety of early child care and pre-k programs during the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 academic years. Of those original 76,674 students, 33,000 were identified as participants in the ABC program, the child care voucher program, or a combination of both ABC and voucher programs and had test scores for QELI and/or the Metropolitan Achievement Test 8th edition (MAT8). The Research Center found that ABC students had raw scores 3.5 percent higher in general knowledge, 2.7 percent higher in oral communication, 6.5 percent higher in written language, 4.6 percent higher in math concepts, 6.9 percent higher in work habits and 8.1 percent higher in attentive behavior on the QELI test.<sup>9</sup>

On the MAT8 test, which measures student development characteristics in the areas of sound and print media and mathematics, the ABC student's raw scores were consistently higher. The Research Center noted that: "While there may still be gaps in the achievement of whites versus non-whites and free/reduced lunch students versus private pay students, one thing is certain, those students that made use of ABC in some way either exclusively or in combination with the voucher program scored consistently and higher on both the QELI and the MAT8."<sup>10</sup>

In a separate multi-year study, the Arkansas Research Center followed 2,935 students enrolled in kindergarten during 2006 and another 3,860 kindergarten student enrolled in 2007. It tracked these student's national percentile scores on the Iowa Test of Basics Skills (ITBS) over the course of five consecutive years 2006-2011. Kindergarten students who attended ABC or Head Start Pre-K programs had consistently higher national percentile scores than those enrolled in voucher programs during each year of the five year period.<sup>11</sup>

## Average Raw Scores for Children in ABC, Voucher or ABC and Voucher Programs on Basic Battery Skills in the MAT8 Test

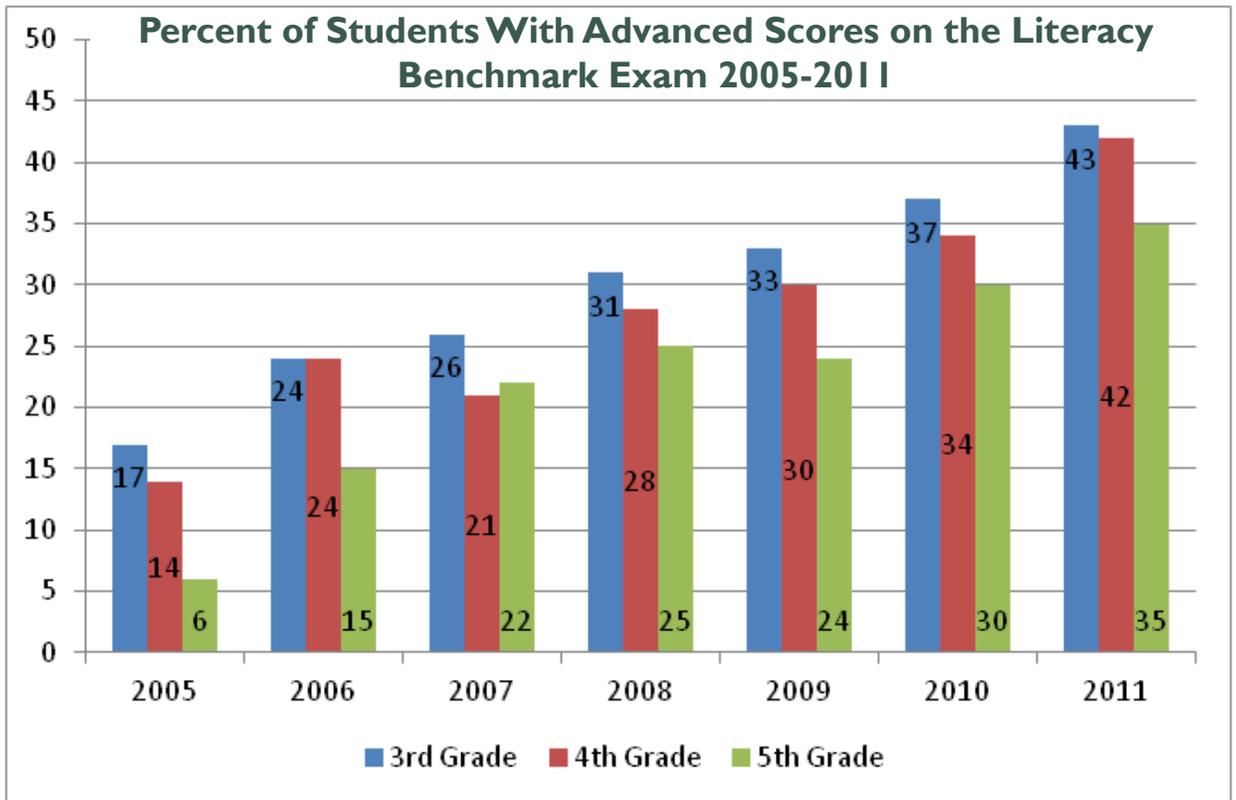
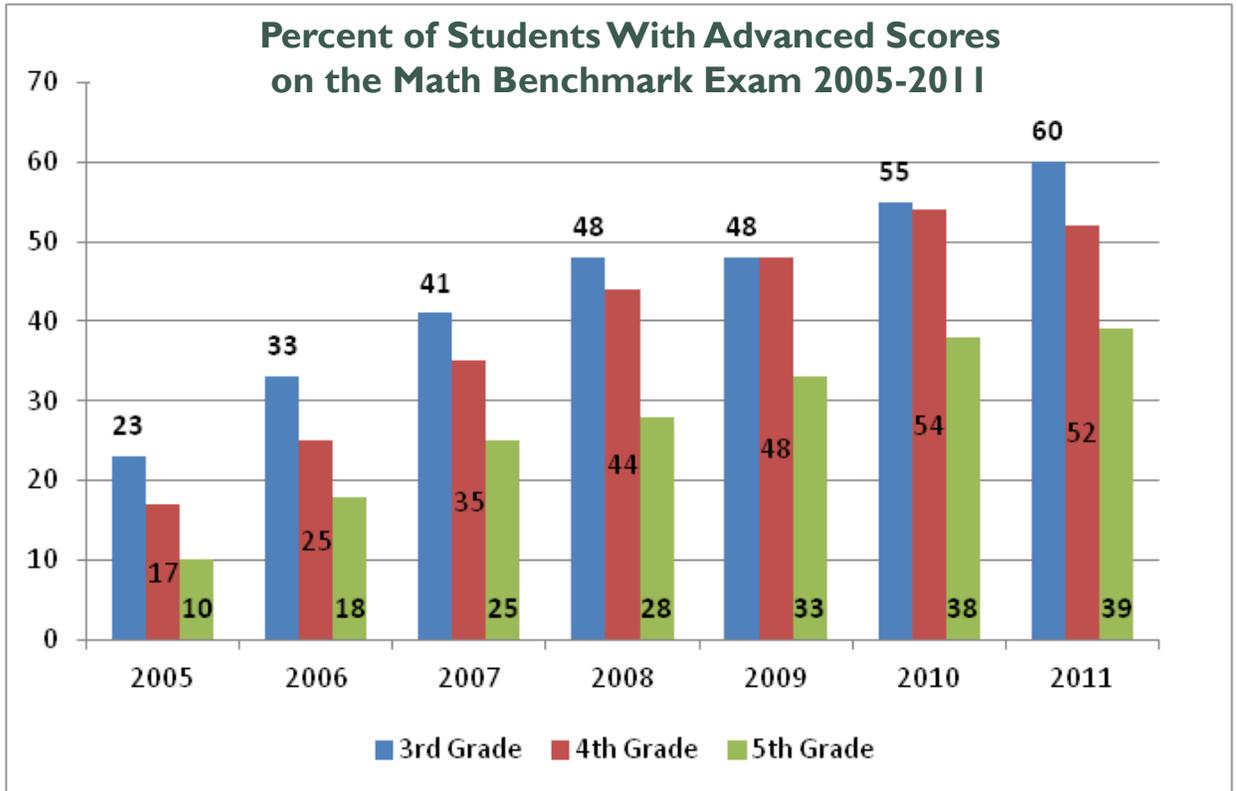


The legislation establishing the ABCSS program requires a longitudinal study of children through completion of fourth grade. Rutgers University, in partnership with UAMS, will be releasing the first breakdown of this research, taking a look at data from 2005-2011 of Arkansas preschoolers in May 2012. The goal of this study is to estimate the effects of the ABC program, including the extent to which initial benefits result in persistent educational advantages. Preliminary findings have shown statistically significant effects for the language measure at the end of the kindergarten year, and for measures of math and early literacy at the end of first grade. For example, attending the ABC program at age four yields 31% more growth in children's vocabulary at kindergarten entry, compared to pre-school education experiences they would have had without attending ABC. Children who participated in ABC scored higher on a test of their early math skills—with 37% more growth at kindergarten entry. The ABC program also had large effects on children's understanding of print concepts, more than doubling growth over the year (116%) in print awareness scores.<sup>12</sup>

The positive impacts of quality pre-K also carry into elementary school, as indicated by improved benchmark exam scores for all Arkansas students. Again we see the most significant improvements in benchmark exam scores following the full implementation of the ABCSS in 2007. Most notably, the percentage of third-graders with an advanced score on the math benchmark exam increased 37 percent (from 23 percent to 60 percent) between 2005 and 2011.<sup>13</sup>

Progress was also made in the percent of advanced benchmark scores on literacy. Although not as dramatic as math scores, the percentage of third-graders with advanced benchmark scores grew from 17 percent in 2005 to 43 percent in 2011.

No doubt, many factors have contributed to improvements on the benchmark exams, but kindergar-



ten readiness data strongly suggest that the ABCSS program is making a big difference. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) Arkansas has consistently been in the top tier of states with quality pre-K programs, meeting nine out of ten quality benchmarks established to measure pre-K programs.<sup>14</sup>

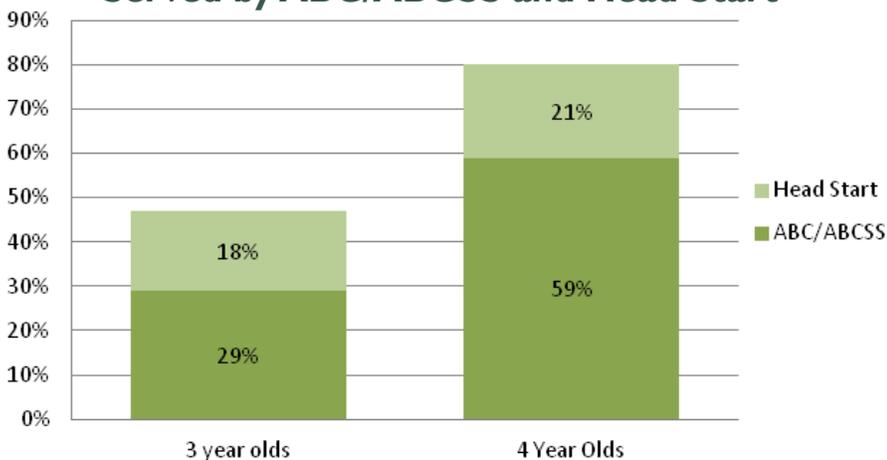
The long-term impacts of quality pre-K are becoming more and more evident as research continues to confirm that participation in these programs not only improves kindergarten readiness but is also associated with later academic performance in the primary grades and beyond.<sup>15</sup>

### The Rising Demand and Shortage of Quality Programs

Child care and early childhood education is a big issue for working parents of young children. Because many parents are young themselves, they are just starting out in a career or occupation at their lowest earning level. For those without family members to help with care, finding affordable child care is a challenge. The reality is that high quality programs – those that provide safe, nurturing and stimulating environments for young children – are expensive. The good news is that the high quality ABC, ABCSS, and Head Start programs specifically target children in families with incomes under 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Because of limited state and federal dollars, and with more than half (57.4 percent) of three- and four-year-olds living in families at this income level, many are not able to enroll in high quality programs.<sup>16</sup>

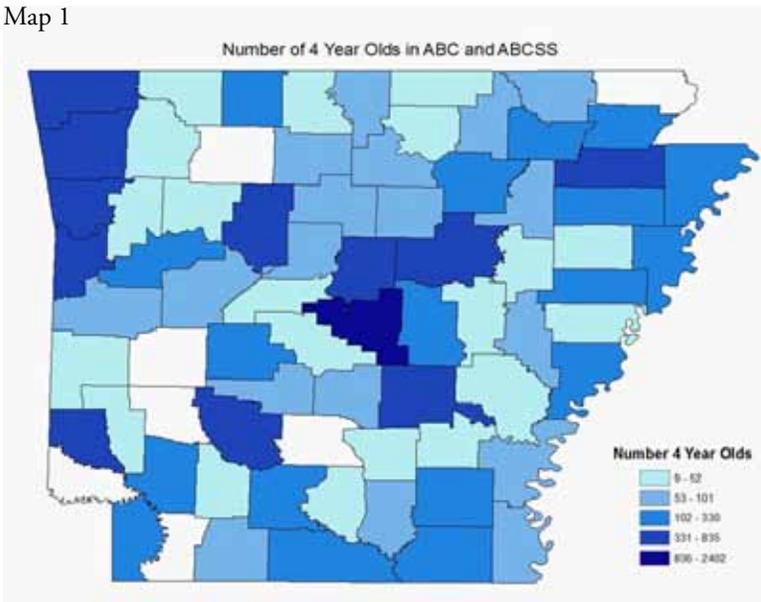
ABC and ABCSS programs enroll 29 percent of eligible three-year-olds and 59 percent of eligible four-year-olds in quality programs. Head Start enrolls an additional 18 percent of eligible three-year-olds and 21 percent of eligible four-year-olds served in quality programs in Arkansas. Together, the state-funded ABC/ABCSS and federally-funded Head Start programs served a total of 47 percent of eligible three-year-old children (11,210) and 80 percent of four-year-old children (19,001) to attend these publicly-funded quality programs statewide.<sup>17</sup> Even though the percent of four-year-old children served statewide in quality programs looks very promising, children in small rural and sparsely populated communities across Arkansas have limited access to quality programs due to a lack of transportation.

**Percent of Eligible At-Risk 3 and 4 Year-Olds Served by ABC/ABCSS and Head Start**

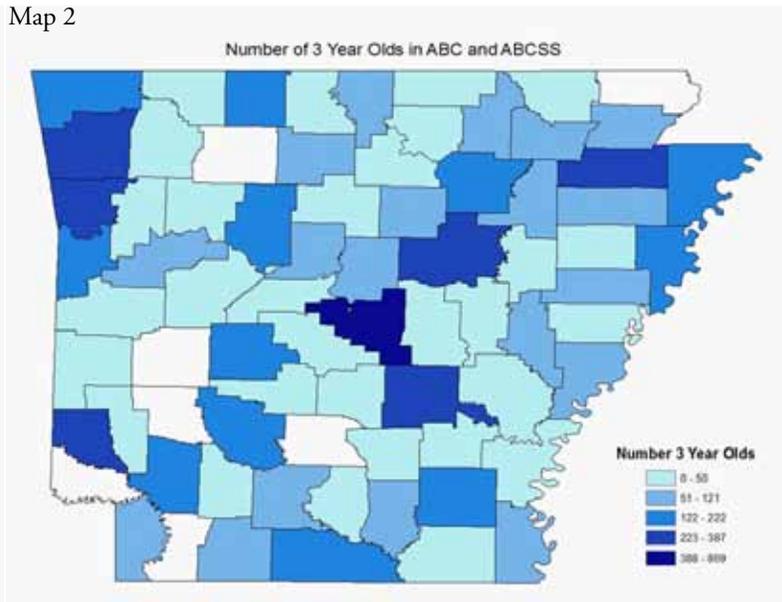


The number of three- and four-year-olds enrolled in Head Start is currently unavailable on a county level. However, the following maps illustrate the number of eligible three- and four-year-olds currently enrolled in the ABC and ABCSS programs by county.<sup>18</sup>

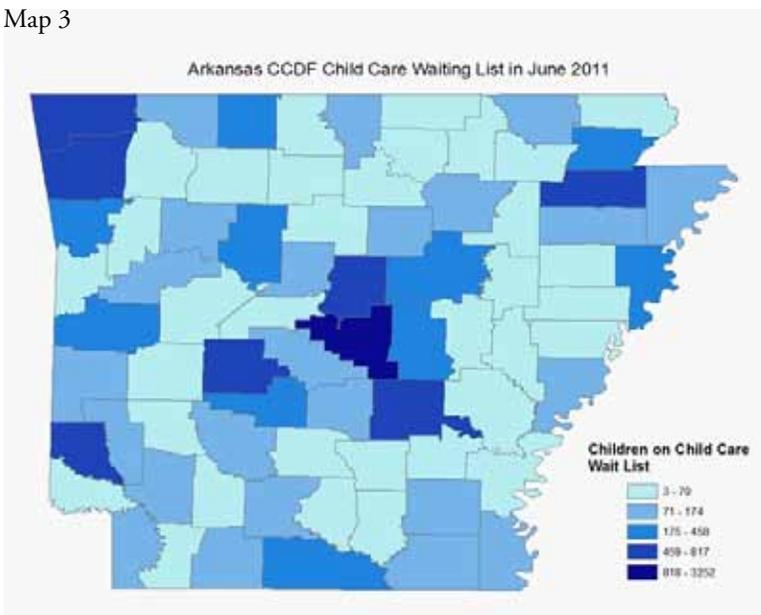
Map 1



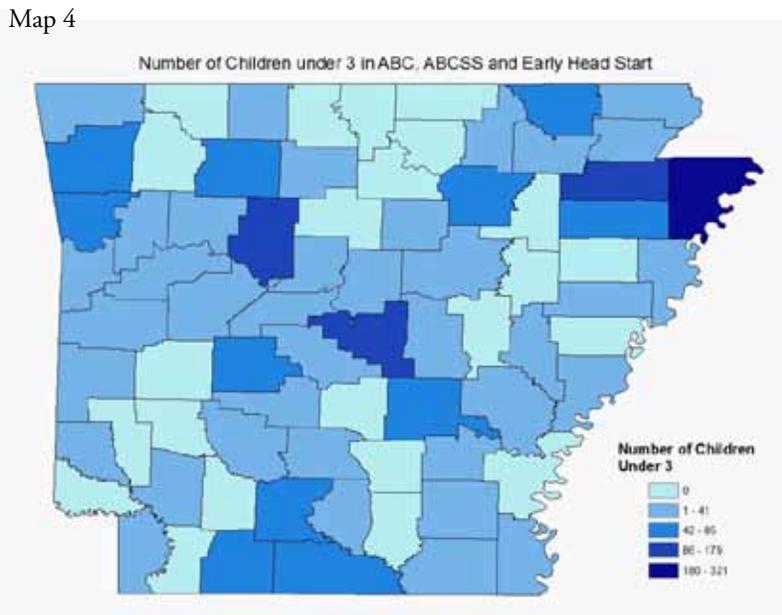
Map 2



Map 3



Map 4



Source: AACF analysis of data provided by the Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education.

\*The counties shown in the maps above indicating that no services are provided for children through ABC and ABCSS (those denoted in white) may in fact serve some children. In some cases, providers who have locations in multiple counties are only recorded to serve children in the county where they have their central office.

High-quality, publicly-funded programs for low-income families are either at full capacity or their funding has remained stagnant for several years, making expansion impossible. This is particularly critical for at-risk three-year-old children. Less than half (47 percent) are enrolled in quality programs. These children cannot wait for learning opportunities to become available. The earlier a child is exposed to enriching learning experiences the more likely they will have educational and economic success in the future.

Basic child care for this age group is partially addressed through the federally-financed Child Care Development Fund's (CCDF) child care voucher system. These programs are licensed but do not meet quality standards and children attending these programs do not perform as well on measures of school readiness.<sup>19</sup> At-risk children need exposure to quality programs to have the skills necessary to match those of other children entering kindergarten.

These subsidized child care programs offer critical support for low-income working parents who rely on child care to retain employment. They also enable struggling families to extend their earnings to cover other necessities such as food and shelter. At the end of the most recent state fiscal year, June 2011, there were 14,558 children on the waiting list for these CCDF subsidized child care programs. The number on the waiting list varied from a low of three children in Searcy County to 3,252 children in Pulaski County. These numbers do not necessarily represent the full extent of the demand for subsidized child care in Arkansas.

## The Crisis of Care for Infants and Toddlers

More than 59 percent of Arkansas children (95,464) from birth to age three live below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Only 2,191 of these infants and toddlers (2.23 percent) are enrolled in either publicly-funded ABC or Early Head Start quality programs.

Map 4, on the opposite page, illustrates that there are no publicly funded quality pre-K programs for children, birth to age three, in 23 counties in Arkansas. This does not bode well for Arkansas's most vulnerable infants and toddlers.

Voter support for expansion of quality child care for very young children has been low.<sup>20</sup> This may be due in part to resistance to the idea of taking any aspect of the care of very young children out of the hands of parents, despite the fact that 68 percent of Arkansas children ages birth to three (99,900

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children) already have all available parents in the labor force.<sup>21</sup> Early intervention programs to assist parents in caring for and teaching their children, such as HIPPI and PAT, have a record of success in preparing children to learn and thrive as infants and toddlers.

Infants and toddlers most at risk of school failure - those from the poorest families in the state - are the ones most in need of a safe, nurturing and stimulating learning environments early in life. Studies have found that newborns spend close to 90 percent of their calories, or metabolic energy, on brain development and function (as adults, our brains consume as much as a quarter of our energy).<sup>22</sup> In these first few years 700 new neural connections are formed every second. These are the connections that build brain architecture – the foundation upon which all later learning, behavior, and health depend.<sup>23</sup> During the critical growth period of early childhood, stresses (e.g., malnutrition, disease, unmet physical or emotional needs) can limit available energy and the brain's development will suffer. Newborns from impoverished families are more likely to face multiple environmental factors that can deplete energy needed for brain growth. Ignoring the physiological needs of this vulnerable population will not only have long-term impacts on their success, but will exacerbate economic and social costs the state will have to pay down the road.

Fifty-five percent of the children on the waiting list for the CCDF child care vouchers (8,007 children) were between the ages of birth and two years. The reimbursement rate for these voucher pro-



grams is not sufficient to cover the cost of quality care, due to the high staff-to-child ratio needed to properly care for infants and toddlers. There is, however, renewed support for home visiting programs for at-risk infants and toddlers. The Arkansas Department of Health received a Maternal, Infant, Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) grant that will be managed by Arkansas Children's Hospital (ACH) to expand three evidence-based home visiting models in Arkansas: PAT, Healthy Families America (HFA) and HIPPIY. In addition, ACH plans to establish the Arkansas Home Visiting Training Institute and conduct rigorous program evaluation through the UAMS Department of Family Medicine. This new MIECHV expansion program is expected to provide model home visiting programs to over 2,200 more families during the first year.<sup>24</sup> Although this is a promising development, we must remember that more than 59 percent of Arkansas children (95,464) from birth to age three live below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Only 1,181 of these infants and toddlers (1.23 percent) are enrolled in publicly-funded ABC or Early Head Start quality programs. Arkansas has a long way to go in reaching this vulnerable population in their early years when brain development is so critical.

## Continuing an Emphasis on Building Quality Programs in Arkansas

In 2010, the state of Arkansas implemented Better Beginnings, a voluntary quality rating and improvement system for all licensed child care providers. In a multi-step certification process, child care providers can obtain tools, guidance and training to conduct self-assessment of services. They receive a one-, two-, or three-star rating to represent their level of certification; that information is public and is meant to be a guide for parents seeking child care.

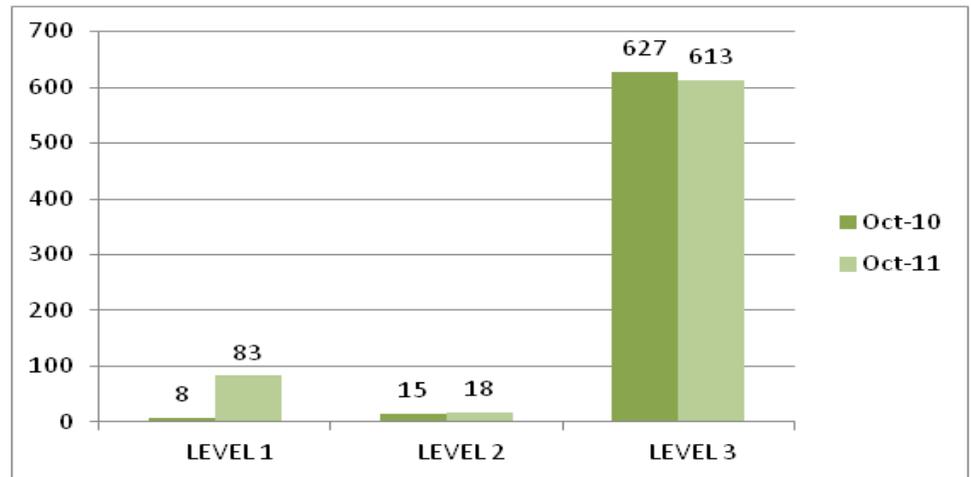
In the first year of the program, the DCCECE has provided more than 5,800 hours of training and support to more than 4,000 child care professionals.<sup>25</sup> In October 2011, 714 child care centers and 37 child care family homes were approved under the Better Beginnings system. These programs agree to an assessment of their quality of care and standards of practice. By participating in this process, programs are eligible for incentive grants for program supplies, materials, and equipment. This quality rating system is a very important development that signals Arkansas's increased commitment to standards of care. After one year of operation the program, has engaged only 35 percent of child care centers and only 4 percent of the child care family homes in the state.<sup>26</sup>

The number of three-star rated center-based and family-home programs declined between October 2010 and 2011, due in part to the closure of 34 programs (See graphs on pg. 20). This has been offset somewhat by the increased numbers of child care providers who have been approved at the one- or two-star levels, for an overall increase from 679 providers in October 2010 to 751 providers in October 2011. Currently 782 facilities (30 percent) meet level one, two, or three of the Better Beginnings Quality Rating Improvement System. All but 134 are either ABC/ABCSS or Head Start programs.<sup>27</sup> Since the implementation of Better Beginnings the most significant progress is the increased number of pre-K providers who understand the importance of quality certification and have engaged in self-evaluation, assessment and improvement.

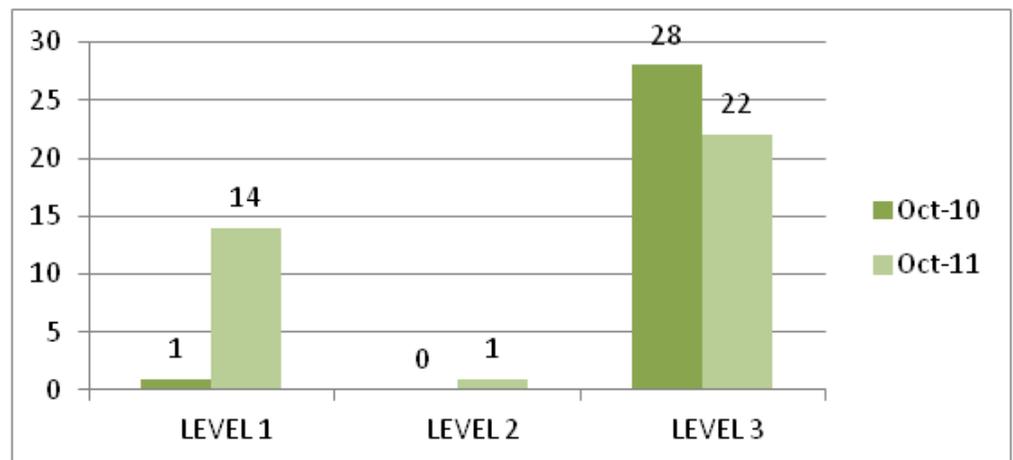
“During the past decade, our national understanding of pre-k has changed considerably. While previously associated it with child care and support for working parents, it has been recast, more accurately, as a valuable educational opportunity and a critical part of sustainable, long-term economic development.”

From: *Transforming Public Education: Pathway to a Pre-K-12 Future*,  
The PEW Center for the States, September 2011

### Number of Child Care Centers Approved Under the Better Beginnings Quality Rating System



### Number of Child Care Family Homes Approved Under the Better Beginnings Quality Rating System



Source: AACF analysis of data provided by the Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education

## Looking Forward

Arkansas has a lot to be proud of. It has developed some of the most effective pre-K programs in the country, invested over \$111 million in state funds to expand programs for more low-income children each year, and continues to improve the state standards of care. As Arkansas continues to look for ways to improve its educational outcomes and the competitiveness of its workforce, a continued investment in high-quality pre-K programs makes sense.

The state must increase investment in quality programs to reach more children, especially those that are under the age of three when their brain development is so critical. Consideration should be given to making these quality programs accessible beyond those most at risk, so that every child benefits and statewide educational progress continues.

While Arkansas is doing a good job of reaching four-year-olds with quality pre-K programs, more can be done to ensure that all eligible four-year-olds are offered a chance to attend. Efforts should also be made to reach children with incomes above the 200 percent of federal poverty. To that end, some school districts have paid the additional cost of non-eligible students' enrolling in an ABCSS program. These programs are operated by the school district as a way to improve educational outcomes and encourage parents to choose public schools for their children.

The lack of quality programs for eligible three-year-old children is also a cause for concern. Again, the children most in need of enriching learning experiences benefit the most when exposed to quality programs as early as possible. For many school-based or center-based care programs addressing the needs of three-year-old children seems very different than from the needs of four-year-olds, but for those children most in need waiting another year to begin learning has long term implications. Better Beginnings offers great promise for achieving higher standards of care for all child care programs. All children deserve a strong start in life that high quality care can provide. For infants and toddlers who are most at risk, we must provide them with safe, stimulating, and valuable learning experiences that enhance the capacity of their developing brains. The implementation and evaluation of model home visiting programs do hold some promise for expanding effective services to this population but it will have to be expanded beyond the 2,200 families estimated to be served currently. All of these early investments are as sound an economic investment as we can make at a time when significant challenges and great change await us all.

## Endnotes

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## Appendix

County	ABC/ABCSS/EHS Under 3	ABC/ABCSS 3 Year Olds	ABC/ABCSS 4 Year Olds	CCDF Wait List
Arkansas	20	5	38	38
Ashley	2	27	157	113
Baxter	0	59	77	145
Benton	15	148	749	799
Boone	34	211	196	234
Bradley	0	83	101	62
Calhoun	16	5	12	5
Carroll	0	32	40	82
Chicot	1	64	83	76
Clark	10	150	474	128
Clay	32	NA	NA	12
Cleburne	34	57	80	75
Cleveland	0	13	14	8
Columbia	67	56	75	80
Conway	28	56	93	94
Craighead	146	368	644	535
Crawford	65	270	380	212
Crittenden	19	138	268	312
Cross	0	21	13	68
Dallas	26	NA	NA	23
Desha	0	21	75	61
Drew	12	200	265	101
Faulkner	21	121	398	497
Franklin	12	18	21	63
Fulton	0	35	39	51
Garland	71	146	267	817
Grant	0	0	73	95
Greene	17	76	192	245
Hempstead	34	129	197	131
Hot Springs	18	32	88	227
Howard	0	16	28	112
Independence	52	190	270	174
Izard	0	31	38	28
Jackson	0	66	97	69
Jefferson	83	328	414	618
Johnson	40	19	35	82
Lafayette	0	NA	NA	26

County	ABC/ABCSS/EHS Under 3	ABC/ABCSS 3 Year Olds	ABC/ABCSS 4 Year Olds	CCDF Wait List
Lawrence	38	117	177	60
Lee	0	45	52	24
Lincoln	8	26	43	20
Little River	0	NA	NA	26
Logan	28	80	188	74
Lonoke	24	21	191	377
Madison	0	0	18	54
Marion	0	15	45	27
Miller	4	93	207	167
Mississippi	321	178	330	158
Monroe	28	73	86	6
Montgomery	0	NA	NA	24
Nevada	0	17	27	27
Newton	52	NA	NA	11
Ouachita	58	105	241	122
Perry	4	11	28	37
Phillips	10	111	156	110
Pike	0	NA	NA	42
Poinsett	54	114	214	91
Polk	20	11	9	122
Pope	125	222	377	458
Prairie	0	1	42	13
Pulaski	179	869	2,402	3,252
Randolph	64	19	57	74
Saline	9	27	38	99
Scott	13	31	66	411
Searcy	17	63	67	39
Sebastian	41	190	438	3
Sevier	15	252	525	577
Sharp	6	61	92	40
St. Francis	7	111	162	65
Stone	0	5	59	45
Union	80	151	178	297
Van Buren	0	44	69	24
Washington	85	271	835	797
White	2	387	518	209
Woodruff	0	23	46	8
Yell	24	50	79	70
State Total	2,191	6,985	14,053	14,558

For more information on this and other issues that affect children and families in Arkansas, visit [www.aradvocates.org](http://www.aradvocates.org)

The mission of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families is to ensure that all children and their families have the resources and opportunities to lead healthy and productive lives and to realize their full potential. We serve as a voice for children at the Arkansas State Capitol and in Washington, D.C., gather and analyze data to support public policy that serves all children and families, and organize coalitions of diverse groups to drive change.



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