COUNCIL FOR A
STRONG AMERICA

REPORT

# Facing the Educational Challenges Ahead in Arkansas

Developing long-term solutions to key challenges will strengthen our future public safety, workforce, and national security.



# Acknowledgements

**Council for a Strong America** is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites membership organizations, including law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, and business executives, that promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

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## Summary

**The COVID-19 pandemic revealed, created, and exacerbated a number of obstacles to preparing the children of Arkansas for lifelong success.** The necessity of social distancing upended classroom instruction. Consequences of unreliable internet access grew larger and fell unevenly on rural and lower-income communities. An already-weak support system for child mental health faced new strains. Developing long-term solutions to these challenges will strengthen the future of our public safety, workforce, and national security.

Arkansan business leaders, law enforcement, and military leaders call on state policymakers to provide communities, students, and schools with the resources to fully recover from the pandemic and work toward a safer and more prosperous future. This includes resources to help students catch up on missed instruction, to help communities provide reliable high-speed internet access, and to help schools support child mental health.

## Unfinished learning

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Arkansas schools made the switch from in-person to remote learning virtually overnight. While Arkansan educators should be commended for their work to ensure that instruction continued under these suboptimal circumstances, we must also acknowledge that many students did not learn as much remotely as they would have in a traditional classroom setting.

In Spring 2021, the Arkansas ASPIRE standardized test results revealed startling declines in student performance. **Compared to 2019, scores fell in every subject and every grade level, with some scores falling by as much as 15 percent.** The greatest declines were in math.[1]

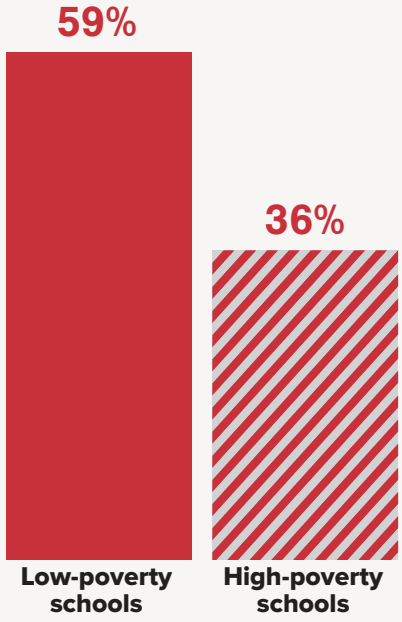
Learning declines on this scale may affect individuals in a way that impacts the national economy. One analysis found that, nationally, an additional 1.1 million students could drop out of high school in the coming years, which could drive an increase in criminality and threaten the stability of the workforce.[2] Reduced educational attainment would also impact earnings: students could lose an average of $49,000-$61,000 in lifetime income,[3] which amounts to over two years of earnings for the average Arkansan.[4] A third analysis, which drew similar conclusions about the potential loss of individual income, concluded that the impact of this lost income could lower the national GDP by 1.5 percent through the remainder of the century.[5]

For many students, the loss of learning time that has occurred since the start of the pandemic builds on years of weak school attendance. Pre-pandemic, over 10 percent of Arkansas students were absent for a tenth of the school year or more.[6] These chronically absent students were already at greater risk of falling behind academically and suffering long-term consequences, including dropping out of high school, poor career prospects, and involvement with the criminal justice system.[7]

The pandemic's impact on learning is not limited to K-12 settings. At the postsecondary level, COVID-19 led many students to delay or pause their education. In fall 2020, enrollment at two-year institutions in Arkansas fell dramatically—dropping by over 18 percent compared to 2019.[8] These educational pauses make it less likely that a student will earn a postsecondary credential, and the delays to completion can decrease post-college earnings by as much as 15 percent.[9]

## Missed learning opportunities due to lack of internet access

**Percentage of teachers who assign technology-based homework**




Source: https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020048.pdf

It is critical that Arkansas identify and support students of all ages who may have fallen off track academically over the last two years.

## Digital Divide

For many students, poor access to the internet and digital devices was a primary barrier to learning during the pandemic. As schools began the transition to remote instruction, nearly half of children in Arkansas lived in homes without an adequate internet connection and nearly a third lived in homes without an adequate device for accessing the internet.[10]

Increasing access to high-speed internet can lead to major improvements with regard to work, health, and quality of life, including:

- Accessing virtual doctor visits, which could improve health care in areas with fewer medical professionals[11]
- Supporting small businesses to reach a larger customer base and increase their odds of survival[12]
- Enabling rural farms to take advantage of advances in food production technology[13]
- Developing a workforce with the foundational digital skills required for a growing number of occupations[14]

Reliable high-speed internet access can also meaningfully improve education opportunities. Students with high-speed internet at home are more likely to complete assignments, earn higher grades, and score higher on college admissions tests, even after accounting for other differences between students with and without home internet access.[15] Often, teachers in high-poverty schools (where students are less likely to have home internet access) give up on homework assignments that require the internet, costing students valuable learning opportunities.[16]

In practical terms, lack of internet access also makes it harder for young adults preparing for life after high school. Finding and applying for jobs, applying to college, and seeking financial aid are all made easier and more secure with a reliable home internet connection.[17]

In 2021, Governor Asa Hutchinson commissioned a report by Heartland Forward that examined the state's barriers to digital access and made recommendations for the path forward. These recommendations included efforts to decrease costs, experiment with alternative approaches to internet delivery, and expand public-private partnerships.[18]

## Afterschool programs are a proven strategy for improving student learning and well-being

Since long before the pandemic, afterschool programs have played a crucial role in providing the children of Arkansas with the opportunity to learn and grow in a safe environment. High-quality programs provide youth with a stable environment that can help keep them from engaging in dangerous behavior or becoming the victim of a crime, and contribute to positive outcomes such as better attendance, improved classroom behavior, better academic outcomes, increased physical activity, and increased graduation rates. Afterschool sites can also provide students with access to computers and the internet for doing homework and engaging in other learning activities.

Source: Council for a Strong America, Afterschool Alliance

## Mental health and well-being

Mental and emotional health have always been a critical component of student success. In the words of experts at the Learning Policy Institute, "learning is social, emotional, and academic."[19] Each student's ability to learn depends on both the quality of instruction available to them and also their ability to navigate the school environment, form positive relationships with adults and peers, and manage the stressors that may exist in their homes.[20]



Unfortunately, poor mental health affects an overwhelming number of children and youth in Arkansas. The most recently available data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration shows that, annually, over 15 percent of Arkansas youths experience a major depressive episode, but fewer than half of those affected receive treatment for depression.[21] Child and youth mental health may have declined even more since the onset of the pandemic, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reporting a national increase in the number of children ages 5-17 visiting hospital emergency rooms for mental health-related reasons.[22]

In addition to promoting learning, good mental health also influences behavior and, ultimately, public safety. Experts estimate that between 50 and 75 percent of juveniles involved in the criminal justice system have a mental health disorder.[23]

## Conclusion

Advancing student learning, improving internet access, and supporting child mental health can help ensure a safe and prosperous Arkansas.

Business leaders know that these efforts can increase the number of workers with a high school diploma and postsecondary education and training—workers needed to fill increasingly demanding jobs.[24] Law enforcement leaders prize the potential for a positive impact on high school graduation rates, particularly given that six in 10 incarcerated individuals nationwide do not have a high school diploma. Military leaders, likewise, recognize that the strength of the military depends on our ability to recruit healthy high school graduates into the armed forces. In Arkansas, however, 74 percent of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 cannot serve in the military due to issues such as lack of education, a record of crime, substance use disorder, or lack of physical fitness.[25]

These are solvable barriers that we can address through programs that support student learning and well-being. In the end, these efforts can make for a safer society, and also result in more young people graduating from high school ready to embrace the next stage of their life, whether that path includes higher education, a skilled trade, or a military career.

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