



# STRENGTHENING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES THROUGH HIGH-QUALITY EARLY EDUCATION IN ARKANSAS

—WHO WE ARE—

**Shepherding the Next Generation**—*Shepherding the Next Generation* is a nationwide movement of Shepherd Advocates: evangelical pastors and ministry leaders who are committed to speaking out on behalf of children at risk so that each child will have the opportunity to grow up in a strong, stable and healthy family.

## SUMMARY

As pastors and ministry leaders, we know that the Bible teaches us that the family was created as the primary place for educating a child on how he or she is to live. That's why we support effective services that strengthen families and have the power to transform the lives of at-risk children, such as high-quality pre-kindergarten programs.

Children attending high-quality pre-kindergarten are more likely to succeed in school, go to college, be married and be employed. Fewer babies were later born out-of-wedlock among young women who attended high-quality pre-kindergarten, and young men who attended were less likely later on to have fathered children they are not raising. High-quality early education can help ensure at-risk Arkansas children thrive and strengthen families.

## SUPPORTING ARKANSAS FAMILIES

The Bible teaches us that God created the family to be the primary place for educating a child on how he or she is to live. It is within the context of the family where values are taught and nurtured (Dt. 6:4-9; Ps. 78:5-8; Pro. 1; Eph. 6:4; 2 Tim. 1:5). However, some parents have a more difficult experience in child rearing than others, often lacking the knowledge, the resources or the support of a spouse to raise their children towards lives of health, opportunity and values.

In Arkansas, 38 percent of children live in a single-parent household.<sup>1</sup> This leaves many single mothers struggling with the stresses of single-parenthood and fighting against the economic odds to provide for their children.

As Christian leaders, we try to teach the religious values that will build strong families and offer a helping hand to those in our pews and our communities. But many parents need additional help. Research shows that early education can play a critical role in helping disadvantaged parents raise children who grow up to complete high school and higher education, get married and hold jobs.



*“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.” Proverbs 31:8a (NIV)*

Arkansas's families continue to face tough financial challenges and, as they try to make ends meet, they are often unable to afford high-quality early education programs for their children. The result is that too many at-risk children start school behind their classmates who attended pre-kindergarten. For example, one study found that by age three, children with professional parents already have a larger vocabulary—knowing twice as many words as children of lower-income parents.<sup>2</sup> And, by the time these children reach kindergarten, too many are not only far behind in vocabulary, but also on pre-literacy, pre-math and crucial social skills they will need to follow teachers' directions and work with classmates. These problems can create a pattern of failure lasting a lifetime.

## HIGH-QUALITY PRE-KINDERGARTEN CAN STRENGTHEN ARKANSAS FAMILIES

Research shows that high-quality pre-kindergarten programs can help children get a strong start in life and help them grow up to have strong families of their own:

- A study of the Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) program found meaningful impacts on children's early language, pre-literacy and pre-math skills. Compared to students not in the program, the at-risk four-year-olds participating in ABC were four months ahead in vocabulary, had a 37 percent increase in pre-math scores and answered 23 percent more questions correctly on a literacy test after one year. Researchers are following children for five years to evaluate the longer-term effects of the program.<sup>3</sup>
- An evaluation of New Jersey's pre-k program found that participating children in at-risk districts were three-fourths of a year ahead in math and two-thirds of a year ahead in literacy when they reached the fourth and fifth grades. They were also 31 percent less likely to be in special education, and 40 percent less likely to be held back in school.<sup>4</sup>
- A long-term study showed that women who had attended the Perry Preschool program as children were five times more likely to be married and living with their husbands by age 27 than the women who did not attend. The girls who participated in Perry Preschool also ended up having one-third fewer births out of wedlock.<sup>5</sup>
- Perry Preschool participants were also 44 percent more likely to graduate from high school. In contrast, youth left out were five times more likely to be chronic criminal offenders with five or more arrests, one-third less likely to be employed and 63 percent more likely to have fathered children they did not raise as adults.<sup>6</sup>
- A study of the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina found that, compared to individuals left out, participants were 42 percent less likely to have had babies before the age of 20.<sup>7</sup> They were also four times more likely to have earned a four-year college degree, over 40 percent more likely to have been consistently employed by age 30, and 80 percent less likely to have used public assistance for extended periods of time.<sup>8</sup>

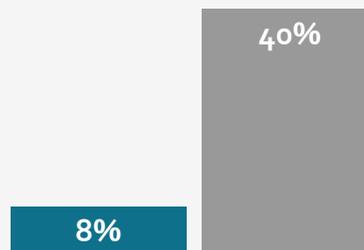
**Arkansas's Preschool Programs:** Arkansas has two state preschool programs, Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) and Arkansas Better Chance for School Success (ABCSS). Together, these programs reach 38 percent of the state's four-year-olds and 13 percent of three-year-olds.<sup>9</sup>

While only eleven states rank ahead of Arkansas in serving four-year-olds, Arkansas spent \$5,500 per child – nearly \$1,900 less than what the National Institute for Early Education Research estimates is necessary for high-quality early education and care in the state.<sup>10</sup> Arkansas can make a tremendous difference for children and families by investing in quality and reaching more at-risk children.

## High-quality preschool program proves successful in strengthening families in at-risk communities

### % of Women Married and Living with their Partners by Age 27

- Did not attend Perry Preschool
- Attended Perry Preschool



*Girls attending the Perry Preschool program were five times more likely by age 27 to be married and living with their husband.*

Source: Schweinhart, 1993

**Savings:** This investment in early learning for our children will pay off, and not just in terms of strengthening families. A well-respected and independent cost-benefit analysis of 49 rigorous studies of state- and district-funded preschool programs showed that preschool can return, on average, a net return to society of \$26,000 for every child served.<sup>11</sup>

**Bipartisan support:** More than 25 states with both Republican and Democratic governors expanded or made new investments in high-quality early education in 2013. This trend continued in 2014, with increases for preschool funding passed in at least 24 states, with both Republican and Democratic leadership, including: Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, Utah, Vermont, and Virginia, among other states.<sup>12</sup>

## OUR CALL

Pastors and ministry leaders are already working in a variety of ways to strengthen families and help children at risk in their own communities. But they need help from state and local policymakers to ensure vulnerable Arkansas children have access to pre-kindergarten programs. Maintaining and increasing investments in proven programs like high-quality pre-kindergarten are necessary to help at-risk children live up to their God-given potential; make positive contributions to society; and someday, raise strong, healthy families of their own.

## ENDNOTES

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