

Senate Bill 294: The “LEARNS” Act

The LEARNS Act, proposed by Republican Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders, and sponsored by Republican legislators, makes changes to Arkansas Education Policy in 7 key areas:

- **Vouchers, Charter Schools, and Privatization of Public Education**
- **Teacher Pay & Benefits, Merit Pay, and Educator Hiring & Firing**
- **Literacy & Numeracy (Math)**
- **Requirements & Prohibitions of Curriculum Topics**
- **Graduation Requirements & Career-Ready Diploma Pathways**
- **School Safety**
- **Early Childhood Care & Education**

The 144-page bill, [Senate Bill 294](#), was filed around 5:00 p.m. on Monday, February 20 and will go to the Senate Education Committee for a hearing and vote at 9:00 a.m. on Wednesday, February 22.

There are too many unknowns about this bill. What is the fiscal impact? Which components of the bill are funded, and which are not? What is the proposed increase to foundation (matrix) funding for the upcoming school year, which will impact many of the provisions in this bill? Why are so many of the specifics not spelled out in the bill and instead given to ADE for rulemaking before the next school year? Why the emergency clause, when so many details are still unknown? After reading the bill, we have more questions than answers.

Arkansas deserves a full and transparent discussion about LEARNS. Tell the members of the Senate Education Committee and the president pro tempore of the Senate to give us **more time** and **more information** before the committee takes a vote.

LEARNS at a Glance – What does the bill do?

Topic 1: Vouchers, Charter Schools, and Privatization of Public Education

Big Idea: LEARNS incentivizes private entities to take over public education for **students** and **school districts** through vouchers (“Educational Freedom Accounts”) and financial incentives for “transformation campuses.”

In regards to vouchers, charter schools, and privatization of public education, LEARNS...

- Establishes the Biggest Voucher Scheme in the Country (“Education Freedom Accounts”)
- Incentivizes Charter Schools and Private Entities to Take over “D” and “F” Districts
- Allows Looser Rules & New Funding for Charter Schools
- Gives 300% More State Revenue to Voucher Tax Credits

Topic 2: Teacher Pay & Benefits, Merit Pay, & Educator Hiring & Firing

Big Idea: The minimum salary for teachers is raised to \$50,000, but there are strings attached for teachers, superintendents, and school districts.

In regards to teacher pay & benefits, merit pay, & educator hiring and firing, LEARNS...

- Raises Minimum Teacher Salaries, Eliminates the Salary Schedule, and Establishes Merit Bonuses
- Repeals the Teacher Fair Dismissal Act
- Establishes Teacher Recruitment & Retention Benefits without Guaranteed Funding
- Makes Changes to Educator Hiring & Firing Practices & Requirements

Topic 3: Literacy & Numeracy

Big Idea: A new, unidentified literacy screener test will be used for all students K-3 multiple times a year. The results will determine teacher effectiveness, student eligibility for tutoring grants, and whether or not the student can be promoted to 4th grade.

In regards to literacy and numeracy, LEARNS...

- Establishes a New K-3 Literacy "Screener" Assessment
- Requires K-3 Literacy Plans & Holds Struggling Readers Back in 3rd Grade
- Establishes Literacy Coaches & Tutoring Grants to Support Struggling Readers
- Enforces Curriculum Oversight & Micromanagement
- Requires 3-8 Math Intervention Plans

Topic 4: Requirements & Prohibitions of Certain Curriculum Topics

Big Idea: "Indoctrination" and "CRT" must not be taught at all, "purposely or otherwise," and sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation must not be taught before grade 5. Schools must teach about child sexual abuse and human trafficking in all grades K-12, even though K-4 students aren't allowed to learn about sex.

In regards to the requirements and prohibitions of curriculum topics, including CRT, sexual orientation & gender identity, and child sexual abuse and human trafficking, LEARNS...

- Bans "Indoctrination" and "Critical Race Theory" – "Purposely or Otherwise"
- Bans Instruction about Sex, Sexual Orientation, or Gender Identity for Grades K-5
- Requires K-12 Instruction on Child Sexual Abuse & Human Trafficking

Topic 5: Graduation Requirements & Career-Ready Diploma Pathways

Big Idea: Students now have the option to choose a career diploma pathway, rather than a traditional high school diploma course pathway, and it must be treated the same as the traditional diploma.

In regards to graduation requirements and career-ready diploma pathways, LEARNS...

- Changes Existing 8th Student Success Plans to Include New Career Diploma Pathway
- Establishes New Guidelines for the Existing 75-hour Community Service Graduation Requirement

Topic 6: School Safety

Big Idea: Many of the recommendations from the School Safety commission are included verbatim, yet there is no mention of accompanying funding to support the recommendations.

In regards to school safety, LEARNS...

- Makes Changes to Required Mental Health & Safety Trainings
- Requires, But Does Not Fund, School Safety Assessments & Other Physical Safety Improvements
- Encourages, But Does Not Fund, Increased Armed Presence at Schools & Partnership with LEOs

Topic 7: Early Childhood Care & Education

Big Ideas: The newly established "Office of Early Childhood" moves early childhood care and education from DHS to ADE with requirements to pilot some things that already exist, and to create a "unified" system of early care and education, without increasing funding or access.

In regards to early childhood care and education, LEARNS...

- Moves Early Childhood Care and Education to ADE from DHS
- Establishes a Unified Early Childhood Education System with No New Funding or Expanded Programs
- Requires Programs to be Developed or Piloted that Already Exist