

# Arkansas

## Background

In 1991, Arkansas established the Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) program for at-risk children from birth to age five. In 2003, through the Arkansas Better Chance for School Success (ABCSS) program, the state expanded ABC access to three- and four-year-olds who live below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.<sup>1</sup> ABC and ABCSS are very similar; funding for these programs is often referred to as ABC grants. They follow the same application and funding processes, program requirements, and quality standards.

The Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (DCCECE), under the Department of Human Services, administers ABC funding as a competitive grant. Public schools, Head Start agencies, service cooperatives, private businesses, and nonprofit organizations are eligible providers.<sup>2</sup> Charter schools are also eligible to offer pre-K using ABC funding.

### Charter schools in Arkansas

Arkansas has both conversion charter schools and open-enrollment charter schools.

Conversion charters are former district schools that have been converted to public charter schools.<sup>3</sup> They remain part of the local school district and may only enroll students who reside in the school district's boundaries.<sup>4</sup> Open-enrollment charter schools are new-start charters that operate as independent local education agencies<sup>5</sup> and can draw students from across district boundaries.<sup>6</sup>

The Arkansas Department of Education serves as the authorizer for all charter schools in the state. Conversion charters must also be approved by the local board. New charters undergo a non-binding review by the local school board before the Department of Education makes its decision. Both charter applicants and affected districts may appeal the department's decision to the state's board of education.<sup>7</sup>

## Process for Accessing Pre-K Funds

To offer ABC, charter schools and other potential providers must participate in the application cycle administered by DCCECE every April. Existing providers must reapply annually. All providers must be licensed by DCCECE as child care centers or child care family homes to be eligible for funding.<sup>8</sup>

ABC applications can earn a total of one hundred points. Any provider with an application score of above eighty points will be considered for funding. State legislation requires that, in



TOTAL SCORE

36/50

Arkansas's climate for charter schools to offer pre-K is **somewhat hospitable**

- + There are no state statutory or regulatory barriers to charter schools accessing state funding for pre-K.
- Compared to K-12 funding levels, low pre-K program funding makes offering pre-K less attractive to charters.
- + The size of the pre-K program does not limit charter access to funding.
- + The funding, application, and approval processes are not barriers to charter access.
- + Automatic enrollment from charter pre-K to kindergarten is not prohibited in legislation or practice.



awarding funding, DCCECE must award priority consideration to applications from areas that have:

- Local elementary schools in school improvement status. The longer a school has been in school improvement status, the higher the funding priority.
- Local districts designated as being in “Academic Distress.” The longer a district has held this designation, the higher the funding priority.
- More than 75 percent of fourth-grade students scoring below proficient in state tests in the prior two years. Districts in this category receive funding in descending order of the percentage of students scoring below proficient in literacy and then math.
- All ABC providers must contribute a 40 percent match to state funding. The match can either be cash or in-kind, such as parent volunteer hours, operating funds, or an additional grant.

## Barriers

### Are there any statutory or regulatory barriers to charter schools accessing state funding for pre-K?

 **No.** Arkansas’s charter school and preschool policies do not explicitly allow or prevent charter schools from offering pre-K. Charter schools may apply for ABC funding, but must meet all child care licensure requirements applicable to community-based providers, including requirements for staff-to-child ratios, behavior guidance, record-keeping, nutrition, health, safety, facilities, and equipment and furnishings.<sup>9</sup> As of March 2015, only two charter schools in the state offer pre-K: one open-enrollment charter school and one district conversion charter school.

### Is the funding level of the state pre-K a barrier to charter access?

 **Yes.** Low pre-K program funding makes pre-K less attractive to charters. ABC per-pupil funding is low, particularly considering that it is a full-day program. Charters offering ABC receive less than 58 percent of the per-pupil funding they receive to serve K–12 students. Further, all providers must contribute a 40 percent match in order to receive state funding for ABC. Because charter schools receive much less funding per pupil to serve pre-K students than those in K–12, it is particularly burdensome for charters to provide a match.

### Is the size of the state pre-K program a barrier to charter access?

 **No.** The size of the pre-K program does not limit charter access to funding. The program serves about 33 percent of all four-year-olds in the state.

### Is the application, approval, and/or funding process a barrier to charter access?

 **No.** Charter schools apply to offer ABC as any other potential provider would.

### Is automatic enrollment from pre-K to kindergarten prohibited in legislation or practice?

 **No.** The law does not explicitly allow or prohibit automatic enrollment from pre-K into kindergarten. In practice, at least one charter school enrolls pre-K students via lottery and enrolls those students directly in kindergarten. Because the school’s kindergarten is larger than its pre-K, it can enroll pre-K students in kindergarten while also accepting new kindergarten students.

### Are there other barriers to charter access to state pre-K funding?

 **Yes.** There are two additional barriers to charter schools’ access:

- ABC slots generally become available in April, but providers are not notified of their number of slots until much later, sometimes after school has begun and almost certainly after the beginning of the new state fiscal year in July.
- Charter schools that receive ABC funding must meet all the Department of Human Services (DHS) child care licensing and ABC facilities requirements, some of which are quite burdensome, especially for charter schools, as they receive no facilities funding from the state.

## Recommendations

To address these funding and other barriers, the state should:

- Increase ABC funding to cover the cost of delivering a high-quality program, which would enable more charter schools to offer the program and invite a broader range of other providers.
- Allow charter schools that receive ABC funding to waive the match requirement, or meet a lower match, as long as they are able to meet DCCECE's program quality requirements.
- Award ABC contracts for multiple years. The annual re-application cycle is burdensome for all providers. DCCECE should consider awarding ABC contracts on a five-year term, the same term as charter schools' charters.
- Change the ABC application and award timeline so providers know how many slots they will have before they finalize their budgets for the following school year.
- Allow charters to waive some of the more burdensome child care licensing and ABC facilities requirements (e.g., table height, how children's coats are hung up). These requirements can be costly for schools to meet and do not directly contribute to charter schools' or other providers' ability to prepare children for success in kindergarten.
- Provide facilities funding to charters. In addition to increasing funding equity for K-12 charter schools, this would enable more charter schools to meet the facilities requirements to serve young children.
- Revise the state charter law to allow charter schools to grant enrollment preference for students who attend the charter school's ABC-funded program.

	Arkansas Better Chance (ABC)	Charter schools in Arkansas
Year created	Launched in 1991 <sup>10</sup>	Charter law enacted in 1999 <sup>11</sup>
Children in state	80,792 three- and four-year-olds in Arkansas <sup>12</sup>	590,794 school-age children in Arkansas <sup>13</sup>
Children served	20,129 children served 14 percent of three-year-olds 33 percent of four-year-olds <sup>14</sup>	16,051 students served 2.7 percent of school-age population Thirty-nine charter schools <sup>15</sup>
Charters offering pre-K	Two charter schools in Arkansas offer pre-K. <sup>16</sup>	Fourteen charter schools in Arkansas offer elementary programs. <sup>17</sup>
Funding	Providers receive \$4,860 per pupil from the state to offer ABC.	Charter schools receive \$8,392. <sup>18</sup>



## Endnotes

- 1 Arkansas Department of Education, “Rules Governing the Arkansas Better Chance Program,” August 2, 2007, [http://humanservices.arkansas.gov/dccece/abc\\_docs/ABCrules.pdf](http://humanservices.arkansas.gov/dccece/abc_docs/ABCrules.pdf).
- 2 W. Steven Barnett et al., “The State of Preschool 2013: State Preschool Yearbook” (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2013), <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/yearbook2013.pdf>.
- 3 Arkansas Department of Education, “Charter Schools,” <http://www.arkansased.org/contact-us/charter-schools>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Arkansas General Assembly, “Arkansas Quality Charter Schools Act of 2013” (A.C.A. § 6-23-103), [http://www.arkansased.gov/public/userfiles/Learning\\_Services/Charter%20and%20Home%20School/Charter%20School-Division%20of%20Learning%20Services/Arkansas\\_Quality\\_Charter\\_Schools\\_Act\\_of\\_2013.pdf](http://www.arkansased.gov/public/userfiles/Learning_Services/Charter%20and%20Home%20School/Charter%20School-Division%20of%20Learning%20Services/Arkansas_Quality_Charter_Schools_Act_of_2013.pdf).
- 6 Arkansas Department of Education, “Charter Schools.”
- 7 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), “Measuring Up: Arkansas,” <http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/law-database/states/AR/>.
- 8 Arkansas Department of Education, “Rules Governing the Arkansas Better Chance Program.”
- 9 Arkansas Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education, “Arkansas Better Chance Program Manual,” August 2009, <http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/education/prek/ARBetterChancePrgDocLib/ABC%20Program%20Manual.pdf>.
- 10 W. Steven Barnett et al., “The State of Preschool 2013.”
- 11 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), “Measuring Up: Arkansas.”
- 12 State population data calculated using ACS 2012 five-year estimates; U.S. Census Bureau, “American Community Survey,” [www.census.gov/acs](http://www.census.gov/acs).
- 13 Ibid., all children in households, three to seventeen years old.
- 14 W. Steven Barnett et al., “The State of Preschool 2013.”
- 15 NAPCS, “Measuring Up: Arkansas.”
- 16 KIPP Delta Elementary Literacy Academy and one district conversion charter school.
- 17 Arkansas Public School Resource Center, “Open Enrollment Charter School Directory,” <http://www.apsrc.net/PageDisplay.asp?p1=315>, and “District Conversion Public Charter School Directory,” <http://www.apsrc.net/PageDisplay.asp?p1=591>.
- 18 Meagan Batdorff et al., “Charter School Funding: Inequality Expands,” Arkansas section (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform, School Choice Demonstration Project, April 2014), <http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/charter-funding-inequity-expands-ar.pdf>.