



CRAFTING A BOLD VISION FOR
EDUCATION IN ARKANSAS



HOW WE BUILT A
STATEWIDE MOVEMENT
IN PUBLIC EDUCATION



VISION

Every Arkansas
student will graduate
prepared for college
and **the workplace**

COMMIT TO MOVING FORWARD WITH US

Strategic investments in education today are key to the long-term future of Arkansas. The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation and Walton Family Foundation continue to use our resources to identify and lift up best practices. Ultimately, it will require investment from our national supporters and our state's government to scale these best practices and make certain that all of our state's students are successful. Make the commitment to expect more from our state's public education system. We can and we should:

- Expect excellence for Arkansas students
- Expect opportunity for Arkansas schools
- Expect prosperity for all Arkansans

Acknowledgments

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VISION

The public education system in Arkansas was failing its students. On June 2, 2014, Sherece Y. West-Scantlebury called Kathy Smith because something needed to change and fast. Arkansas schools weren't supporting and preparing students to become productive business owners, innovators, and leaders for their communities. This wasn't the first call between the two. They'd talked about what was being done to change the trajectory of students' futures, what needed to be done, and the many schools and districts that were being taken over by the state. During this call, though, West-Scantlebury and Smith had had enough and agreed to take action together. The state's students and families simply deserved better—they deserved a new vision for their school system and a clear, strategic path to get there.

The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation (WRF) had a long history of collaborating with partners to realize the vision that every Arkansas student would graduate high school prepared for college and the workplace. Since West-Scantlebury became President and CEO at WRF in 2007, she had made it her top priority to empower Arkansans to craft such a vision, but she knew she and the Foundation she led couldn't take this on alone. Over the years, WRF had built strategic partnerships with community, education, nonprofit, and business leaders and made considerable investments to drive Arkansas toward improving education outcomes for all students regardless of economic, racial, or social factors. However, the Foundation's network and investments could only take the state's public education system so far.

Arkansas residents desperately needed to come together and take action. Many Arkansas schools were not living up to their charge to prepare students for success. In response, Arkansas legislators shifted from solely classifying entire school districts as being in Academic Distress to applying this classification to individual schools in which less than half of students scored proficient or advanced in math and literacy on state exams for three years. As a result, the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) took over several schools and two districts.

The Walton Family Foundation (WFF) was determined to change what was happening, and they had collaborated with WRF for several years to improve education outcomes for students. When West-Scantlebury called WFF Senior Program Officer Kathy Smith, neither of them could stand it anymore. Smith had led WFF to commit resources to improve public education in Arkansas, and she felt like WFF had only been able to brush the surface. While WRF and WFF had previously collaborated to rally Arkansans around taking action to improve their schools and prepare students for success after high school, both leaders knew they needed to do something more bold to radically transform the system.

Failure to prepare students in elementary through high school classrooms meant students struggled in higher education. While college-going rates in the state were among the highest in the nation, college remediation rates throughout Arkansas were also among the highest. In 2012, 74 percent of students entering two-year colleges were required to take remediated courses, and 33 percent of students entering four-year institutions simply weren't prepared. As a result, six-year college graduation rates were among the lowest in the US, which meant students left college without a degree in substantial debt and with limited career opportunities.

Arkansas's education crisis was an economic crisis as well. West-Scantlebury and Smith weren't alone in feeling frustrated. Concerned parents, educators, business leaders, and policymakers had all expressed how deeply painful it was to watch students graduate with limited prospects after high school. In 2013, 70 percent of Arkansas's jobs required a high school degree or less, and the majority of these jobs didn't provide a family-supporting wage. A critical mass of concerned residents knew Arkansans couldn't let data determine their future. They needed a vision and a path that would allow them to expect more of themselves, their children, and their future.



ForwARd public engagement media event at Arkansas's American Broadcasting Company affiliate.

On July 2014 WRF and WFF began a long-term partnership with the Arkansas State Board of Education to dramatically transform Arkansas's public education system. Together, these partners committed to engage and mobilize residents across the state to develop a vision to shift the paradigm and future of public education in Arkansas. Through a strategic approach, the partners created a process to:

- Conduct baseline research on the state of education in Arkansas
- Listen to residents across the state through surveys, focus groups, and interviews
- Develop policy solutions to address key needs
- Create a bold vision and roadmap to prepare students for college and the workplace

How did they do it?

What follows is an exploration of the process WRF and WFF used to answer the question, “What would happen if we brought diverse Arkansans together to do what’s best for Arkansas’s kids?”

This is a story of taking risks when the rewards are uncertain, of challenging the status quo in innovative ways, and expanding networks to create a vision for statewide change.

This is the story of ForwARd, an unprecedented long-term commitment from Arkansas students, parents, educators, nonprofit leaders, foundations, business owners, and policymakers to ensure every child has access to high-quality education. Ultimately, it’s about one shared vision: **Every child in Arkansas will graduate prepared for success in college and the workplace.**

What follows is a chronicle of how two foundations formed a partnership with a state’s educational leadership to establish ForwARd, engaged thousands of Arkansas residents to collectively determine how their public education system should operate and what success looks like, articulated a vision for education shared statewide, and set a course for achieving this vision within a generation.

In many ways, the outcomes from the ForwARd process exceeded the expectations of the efforts’ key partners.

“Our original goal was to create a ‘comprehensive strategic plan for P-16 education in Arkansas,’” said ForwARd lead facilitator Jared Henderson. “We realized we hadn’t created a plan, but more of a vision and recommendations that will allow us to focus education improvement efforts throughout the state.”

The vision and recommendations that ForwARd produced have no particular ideological “stamp” on them, which increases their likelihood of broader statewide buy in and implementation.

“It seems that this vision and recommendations take into account all the communities in the state in a more supportive and more insightful way than anything else I’ve seen,” said a rural education advocate.



ForwARd partners present the initiative's vision and recommendations to the Arkansas Senate Education Committee.

With ForwARd, Arkansas now has a new, broad, and diverse network of partners who are more interested in working together and supporting one another around educational reform than before. There is a deeper understanding between foundations about how to reinforce each other's investments in shared goals. Many organizations and institutions throughout the state have become allies in implementing ForwARd's recommendations. "For the first time, we'll have a broad coalition that is always here and always focused on a shared vision," said WFF's Smith. As the ForwARd recommendations are implemented, they will support public education to weather the often fickle nature of politics.

Key Themes

Vision-Driven & Bold

ForwARd has established a statewide vision and recommendations for public education that will close the achievement gap in Arkansas and establish the state as a national leader for education within a generation.

State and community leaders are now realizing this bold vision by reaching across political and ideological divisions to prepare Arkansans for college and the workplace.

Grounded in Arkansas's Aspirations for Greatness

ForwARd's recommendations were developed through interviews, focus groups, and surveys with thousands of Arkansans.

Feedback from every region and sector of the state continues to inform the implementation process.

Determined to Make Arkansas a Model for Academic Excellence

ForwARd catalyzes excellent practices, actions, and policies through coordinated and data-driven community- and state-level decision making that drives public education in Arkansas to prepare all students for college and career.

Driven by Passionate Leaders Committed to Excellence

The ForwARd Steering Committee was composed of parents, teachers, business leaders, and policymakers committed to establishing the greatest vision possible for Arkansas communities.

The ForwARd Implementation Group includes many of these same ardent leaders determined to mobilize communities and leverage existing resources to make this vision a reality.

Guided by the Best Knowledge and Resources

WRF, WFF, and the State Board of Education are dedicated to providing the absolute best knowledge, skills, and resources toward the development, statewide support, and long-term implementation of ForwARd's recommendations.

NOT JUST ANOTHER EDUCATION REFORM PLAN

The conditions that produced ForwARd, both in the state of Arkansas and among the key players in the collaborative, are worth noting to understand the “Why now?” and “Why here?” questions this unique partnership raises.

Where Education in Arkansas Has Been

Arkansas’s leaders have made education a political and policy priority for decades. In the late 1990s, the Murphy Commission released a detailed study of Arkansas’s state government that included many recommendations about standards, accountability, testing, tracking, and consolidation in public education. In 2001, under Governor Mike Huckabee, the Arkansas legislature created a Blue Ribbon Commission to make recommendations for strengthening public education. In 2002, the Lakeview Ruling—one of a series of rulings in a 15-year court battle over the constitutionality of Arkansas school funding—spurred mandates to provide more funding for public education in distressed communities with limited resources.

Yet there was much more to be done. As in other states, debates about what to do were becoming more and more politicized and polarized. Statewide efforts had produced inconsistent results.

Better Together

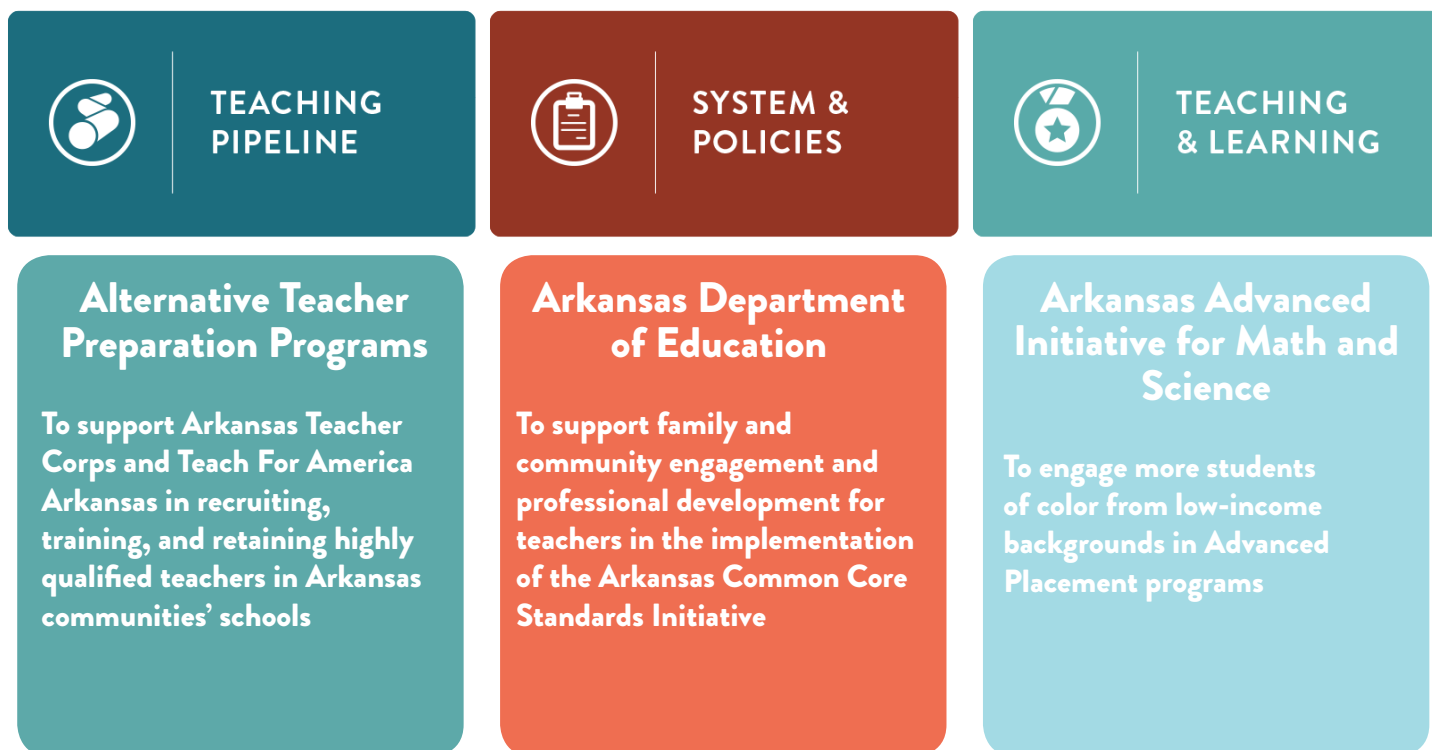
No statewide effort had yet taken advantage of the financial resources and public leadership of two of the state's largest foundations in support of a statewide coalition of students, parents, community leaders, educators, business leaders, and policymakers.

WRF and WFF both have deep roots and extensive networks in Arkansas. Though the foundations have different funding priorities, strategies, and funding footprints—WFF gives about 20 times more each year in Arkansas than WRF—they are arguably the highest profile independent foundations in their home state.

Most relevant to ForwARd, both foundations have a funding profile that prominently features P-16 education, although their investment decisions have sometimes differed significantly. WRF has largely invested in traditional public education as a core societal value. Before ForwARd, WRF supported statewide initiatives like the Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, organized around policy and advocacy in partnership with organizations like Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, and collaborated to promote and perpetuate high-quality learning opportunities through the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign. WRF has also supported a number of programs assisting children, youth, and families outside of the education system with the understanding that peripheral forces outside of school buildings affect what happens inside them. Their grantmaking directed at systems change in education led WRF toward a statewide education funding strategy.

“For the last nine years, everything we’ve done has been pointing toward ForwARd,” says WRF President & CEO Sherece Y. West-Scantlebury. “It’s a systems change agenda, and it was on our radar from the day I arrived here. With our grantmaking, we’ve been building the case and evidence, both school-based and community-based.”

WFF has emphasized the concept of school choice as an avenue to expand educational opportunities by empowering parents and children to choose schools based on their individual needs rather than being assigned to an attendance zone. In doing so, WFF has garnered a national reputation as a leading supporter for voucher programs and an advocate for increasing the number of charter schools in communities throughout the US. WFF has also made investments in traditional public schools, although sometimes to advocate for alternatives within the existing system. It has also supported the Arkansas Public School Resource Center, which provides technical, legal, financial, and pedagogical assistance to traditional rural and charter schools in the state.



Common investments made by WRF and WFF prior to the launch of ForwARd.

“Our overall philosophy is that we want to assist in providing high-quality educational options for every child in Arkansas,” explains WFF’s Smith. “Our investments may be in new schools, like charters, or in existing systems to get them to innovate. We are also fully in support of new policies that allow schools to receive waivers from some traditional rules and regulations so they can try new innovations.”

Collaboration between the two foundations did not start with ForwARd. In 2011, WRF and WFF began working together with ADE on a statewide implementation plan for the Common Core Standards. This cooperation involved investments in strategic communications, parent and community outreach, and professional development to ensure the interests of Arkansas students, parents, and educators were represented throughout the process. Both foundations have funded alternative teacher preparation programs like Teach for America and the Arkansas Teacher Corps with the intent of building the teacher pipeline to address the teacher shortage within Arkansas. They also provided matching funds for a statewide initiative to engage more students from low-income families and students of color in Advanced Placement programs.

The head of a teacher pipeline program who participated in the ForwARd process noted, “The partnership between WRF and WFF to establish ForwARd was meaningful because, while both share very similar goals with respect to education, they have worked with very different groups and in very different ways around the state. When the two of them joined forces and announced that they were going to collaborate together with the State Board of Education, it meant that we could bring two different groups—those seen as supporting choice in education and those seen as holding the traditional line—of Arkansans together to collaborate as well.”

Perhaps most important, their partnership demonstrated the value of bringing together the diversity of two foundations to strive for a shared goal. They came together with their allies and partners to invest time and effort in a shared objective. In doing so, they demonstrated that with trust, vision, and a shared aspiration for educational attainment for their home state, they could have a lasting impact.

“ForwARd was really not so much of an unlikely partnership in terms of a shared goal for better schools. Everyone wants the best for all of our kids. It’s the how where we get some differences. WRF and WFF were after the same thing, so my hope was that this process would pull them together in the how,” recalled a former school superintendent involved in the ForwARd process.

It is important to acknowledge the most influential factor in making ForwARd a reality. Many of Arkansas’s schools were not preparing children for college or success in the workplace. In fact, the deep uncertainty about Arkansas’s education system led ADE to initiate a process of state takeovers of schools and school districts determined to be in what the Department called “Academic Distress.” The disappointing outcomes at certain schools and districts coupled with the upsetting loss of local school control had understandably angered students, parents, and education activists. Some observers at the time referred to the state’s reaction to failing schools and the poor outcomes that motivated their sweeping response as a crisis. This Academically Distressed Schools crisis was the largest precipitating factor in ForwARd’s creation and the motivation for all the efforts undertaken by WRF and WFF. The two foundations understood that parents, community leaders, educators, business leaders, and policymakers were concerned about the future for children attending these schools in Academic Distress. ForwARd provided a shared vision and roadmap for moving students toward improved education outcomes and a more promising future.

Key Players



PROCESS

Two years before ForwARd was born, West-Scantlebury and Smith began talking, learning about each other's perspectives, hypothesizing about possibilities, and building trust. As the situation in Arkansas's schools worsened, and the Academically Distressed Schools takeover process accelerated, they realized their foundations could act as a catalyst for transformational change in Arkansas's education system.

"We knew Arkansas well enough to know that there was more common ground here in terms of public education than not," says West-Scantlebury. "We also realized that as funders, we were probably the best and most likely entities to get everyone around a common table to create a long-term vision and roadmap for achieving that vision. It was an opportunity to play a leadership role that no one else could play."

WRF and WFF both knew that Arkansas was a state where a broad initiative like ForwARd might indeed succeed. While it's a largely rural state with several distinct regions and varying economic conditions, it's also small enough and tightly knit enough to make realizing a statewide vision and recommendations for education possible. There are only about 480,000 school-aged children in Arkansas—a number smaller than some single urban school districts. Leaders and groups throughout the state also have a tradition of cooperation.

“Arkansas is such a small network, there’s a lot of goodwill here,” said an individual involved with ForwARd. “Relationships are built where people are willing to find areas for agreement. We always can agree on better, if not perfect.”

Together, the funders reached out to the state Board of Education and recruited them as a partner in the initiative. The Board agreed. They welcomed the opportunity to develop an inclusive, resident-driven plan that it could use to realize a vision and strategic approach.

In July of 2014, the two foundations presented the Board of Education with their proposal for a statewide initiative to set ambitious, long-term goals for educational outcomes. At a public meeting, West-Scantlebury and Smith laid out **the process that the funders knew would alter the future of Arkansas’s public education system.**

- Secure outside expert assistance on designing and managing the process
- Collect and present baseline data on the state of education in Arkansas
- Convene a steering committee of Arkansas parents, community leaders, educators, business leaders, and policymakers
- Conduct a stakeholder engagement process to collect and integrate Arkansas’s priorities and values
- Develop recommendations to move Arkansas’s public education system toward educational excellence based on research and ongoing stakeholder input
- Begin implementing recommendations

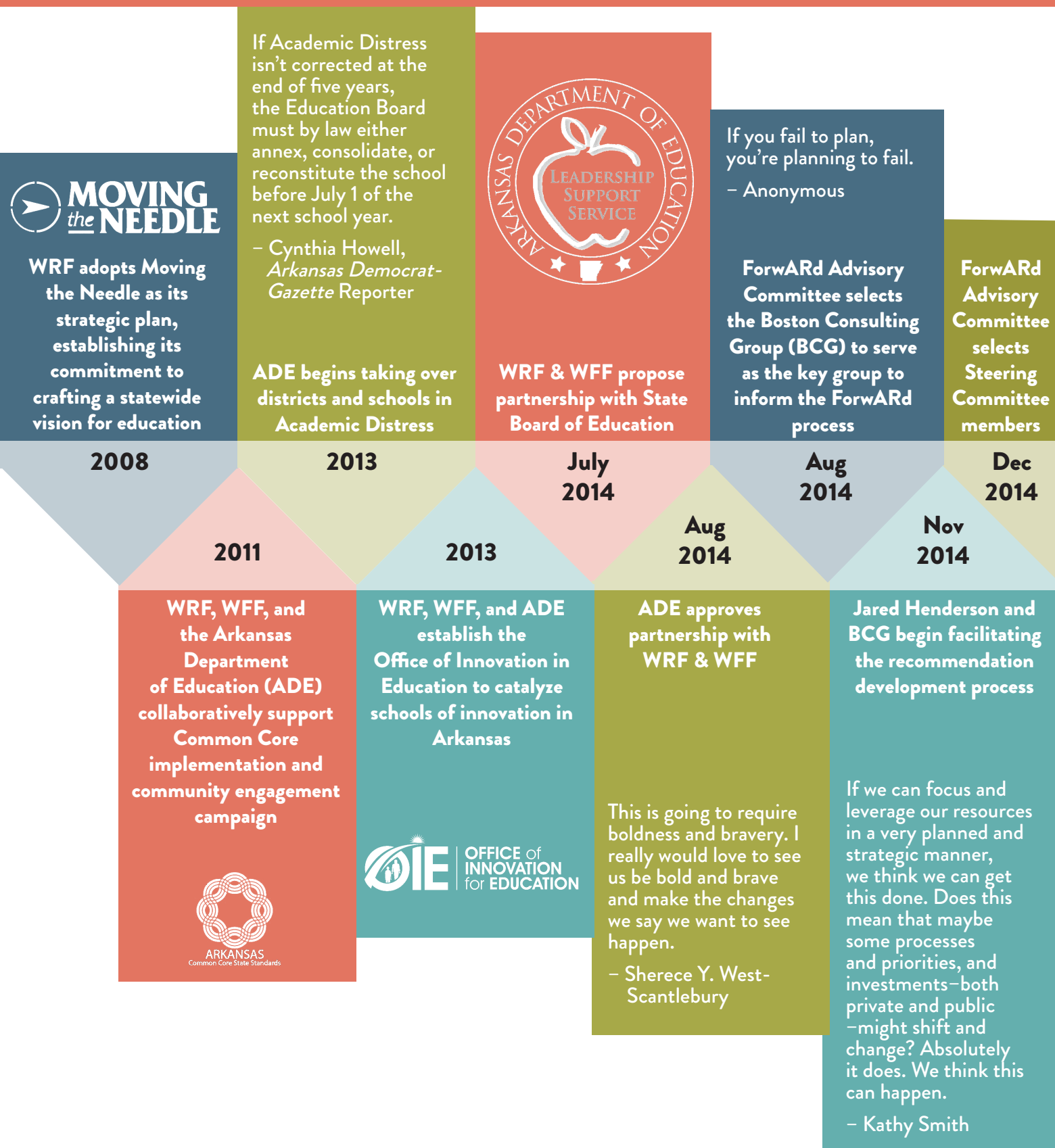
The state Board of Education voted to approve the partnership with WRF and WFF, and ForwARd was officially under way.

Secure the best expert assistance

With the help of an ad hoc advisory committee of each foundation’s partners and allies in Arkansas, ForwARd’s first item of business was to select a consulting firm to bring new perspective and expertise to bring to the process.

For additional support and facilitation assistance, WRF and WFF partnered with Boston Consulting Group (BCG)—an internationally renowned research and strategic planning agency. Could someone internally have played the outside consultants’ role? The unanimous answer from ForwARd participants is “no.” While Arkansas has a number of highly skilled facilitators, the combination of knowledge, capacity, and process quality that BCG brought to the table was unmatched.

ForwARd Timeline



The activities that are going to be organized around this effort, including the survey that is on the website and including the stakeholder meetings around the state, are very important to the effort. We need to have the voices from all the different sectors and from all the different constituencies to put together a plan that will be meaningful.

– Kathy Smith

ForwARd launches statewide resident engagement process that includes input through interviews, focus groups, and surveys

Arkansas needs a comprehensive plan for turning around schools that are in distress. The state needs to make sure it is providing an adequate education for all students. I'm excited because not only are we going to be addressing academics as far as coming up with a plan, but we will try to figure out how to engage parents and the community and all the people who need to come together to make a great education system.

– Melanie Fox

ForwARd announces Steering Committee Members

The ForwARd steering committee has completed its assessment of the condition of education in Arkansas and is planning the next phase of 'statewide engagement to create a new vision for education.

– University of Arkansas, Office of Education Policy

Steering Committee approves recommendations

This has been my dream. I never expected to see it in my lifetime. I know the hard work is beginning now but with the leadership that you all have shown, I have no doubt that we will sustain the momentum. This is a huge moment in time for the state of Arkansas.

– Victoria Saviers, Arkansas State Board of Education Member

State Board of Education unanimously approves ForwARd recommendations

Jan 2015

Jan 2015

May 2015

September 2015

Jan 2015

Jan 2015

Jan-May 2015

June 2015

ADE takes over the state's largest district, declaring the Little Rock School District as being in Academic Distress



ForwARd releases the *State of Education in Arkansas* report

This report is one of several data sources ForwARd will use to develop its comprehensive plan to improve education in our state. Paired with the input from Arkansans through our online survey, meetings, and advocacy group outreach, this report will give us a strong foundation to advance education in Arkansas.

– Sherece Y. West-Scantlebury

ForwARd Steering Committee and Working Groups develop recommendations for educational excellence based on research and ongoing resident input

Understand, there has been a genuine effort of study, and working together and listening to one another and appreciating what each member of the body thought. It is a report out there for people to weigh in on so that we can do what we can to move forward.

– Sen. Joyce Elliott

ForwARd establishes Implementation Working Group

It remains to be seen exactly what the ForwARd recommendations will look like when implemented.

– Benjamin Hardy, *Arkansas Times* reporter

BCG staff were on the ground in Little Rock every week, Monday through Thursday, for nine months. They earned high marks across the board for their impartiality, their willingness to provide any piece of research requested, and their constant communication with each ForwARd participant to ensure they were recording ideas and recommendations accurately and respectfully.

“What worked the best and made it the least painful committee I’ve ever served on was the role of BCG in recording, providing feedback, circling around over and over until everyone was satisfied that they were completely reflecting the intent and ideas and will of the participants,” said a rural schools advocate. “They found research for us. Recorded all of our meetings, sent out summaries, answered any question, and addressed any quibble. They would call us and work through any issue. In between meetings, they worked it out so that end results truly reflected what committee members were working through.”

Research gathering was a key role. “BCG brought in a lot of research from around the world and from within the state,” said WFF’s Smith. “They told us things about ourselves that we didn’t know. And anything our Working Groups wanted, BCG got for us.”

“Their process was exactly what we needed—on the money, transparent, validating, real, relevant, reliable, and authentic. Because we had that strong process in place, that’s why we could move forward,” said a teachers’ association representative.

The investment in BCG ensured the ForwARd leaders had access to the best facilitation, the best research, and the best management knowledge and tools available throughout the process.

In addition to BCG’s technical and managerial support, ForwARd’s foundation partners also understood the process would need a committed local facilitator. Jared Henderson, Executive Director of Teach for America’s Arkansas region, served as the group facilitator. Selected by WRF and WFF for his knowledge of his home state and his leadership on education policy, Henderson led discussion planning, co-facilitated conversations that developed the vision and recommendations, and steered the groups involved toward consensus. Although some ForwARd participants admitted that seeing Henderson’s Teach For America title made them suspect they were being led toward a more biased agenda, he proved to be a non-biased, politically neutral facilitator.

“We knew it would be important to have someone locally known, with good standing in the state, to be the primary facilitator of this conversation,” says West-Scantlebury. “We were bringing in a very diverse group, and we needed someone to shepherd our conversations who wasn’t a foundation person or even the chairman of the group, but someone who could focus solely on facilitating peers in a way that cultivated trust. Jared proved invaluable in that role.”

Collect and present baseline data

ForwARd, with significant assistance from BCG and ADE, next established a set of baseline data about education in Arkansas that informed the development of a vision for education and recommendations for realizing that vision.

The research, presented in the January 2015 report *The State of Education in Arkansas*, drew attention to data on access to education, standards, outcomes, and the achievement gap. The facts lifted up education policy, poverty, and regional differences that produced educational outcomes, with special attention given to equity—and often the lack thereof—in Arkansas children’s school experiences and education outcomes. The report concluded that, while Arkansas’s schools had recently made progress in improving outcomes, there was indeed a long way to go to ensure the highest quality education was available to every Arkansan and that education policy was crafted to best serve the needs of Arkansas’s students.

The State of Education in Arkansas and the data therein were integrated into the ForwARd process early. Steering Committee members and organizers, WRF, and WFF wanted to ensure the process and the resulting recommendations were grounded in the very best knowledge about where the state’s education system stood. Arkansas itself was polarized over the state of local schools and school districts, especially about the state takeover of schools in Academic Distress. In January 2015, public anger flared in and around Little Rock when the Little Rock School District (LRSD) was taken over the same month *The State of Education in Arkansas* was released. Both foundations knew their attention had to remain on understanding the needs of students and communities.



ForwARd engaged students, parents, educators, policymakers, and business leaders to learn where public education in Arkansas was and where it needed to be.

Convene a Steering Committee

ForwARd's 28-member Steering Committee was at the heart of the iterative, data-driven process of collecting Arkansans' input and developing recommendations. In creating this committee, WRF and WFF recognized that the vision and recommendations must represent the diversity of views and experiences, race and economics, regions and professions that exist throughout the state. They knew they also had to carefully balance the value brought by "usual suspects" versus fresh voices.

Committee members were selected by the ad hoc advisory committee—the same group that selected BCG—along with WRF and WFF. Each member needed to have deep knowledge of the Arkansas education system, both locally and at the state level. They also needed experience with large-scale systems changes and strategic planning in an educational setting. The committee members were drawn intentionally from all of ForwARd's key stakeholder groups: parents, community leaders, educators, business leaders, and policymakers. The advisory committee ensured they were representative of Arkansas's regional diversity as well as diversity of age, race, and background.

The outcomes were impressive. The ForwARd Steering Committee members were from every region of the state, with a third hailing from rural Arkansas. More than half of the members were either classroom educators or educational administrators. Together they comprised a group of high-caliber leaders deeply connected to their home state who functioned well together as an effective and cohesive group.

Of course, some Arkansas education advocates were frustrated at not being included in the committee.

"It was good to bring in a lot of new faces, like folks from the business community and those who haven't been immersed in education policy debates. But grantees and partners like us who have been doing a lot of work in this area had a lot we could have offered. We could have helped with Work Group discussions, and that didn't happen," said one statewide nonprofit leader.

In an initiative as large as ForwARd, every voice can bring value, so WRF and WFF had to be firm and honest in weighing the pros and cons of participation in light of the group's goal of crafting a shared vision and path forward. Considering candidates meant looking deeper than diversity, politics, and knowledge. It meant considering the entire group dynamic.

We had to be realistic about a manageable size and a balance of perspectives.

“There was a host of smart and talented people on our list, and any one of them could have been an asset—but we had to be realistic about a manageable size and a balance of perspectives,” says WRF’s Executive Vice President Cory Anderson. “The reason some folks were not included was because they were so dogmatic about their agendas. That’s not that their agendas aren’t right, but we knew it would be tough to get them to consensus. In addition to making sure our group was diverse, having people who could work toward consensus was a big part of our criteria.”

The diversity of perspectives and experiences in the Steering Committee presented an opportunity for deep collaboration and compromise unlike any Arkansas education experts and advocates had ever seen. However, Steering Committee members pushed each other to think beyond the backgrounds, regions, and organizations they represented.

“Since I live in Little Rock, in an urban environment, I look through that lens at everything,” said one business owner. “When someone comes in from a rural area, like the Delta for example, and shares their perspective, that opens your eyes. Being in a group with people from all walks of life and hearing their perspectives on change is eye opening.”

“I came in convinced that the Walton Family Foundation was trying to push privatization—and I found that not to be the case,” said a former school board member. “It was an open discussion and committee members made decisions. I found that to be a pleasant surprise.”

Steering Committee members were instrumental throughout the process that culminated in ForwARd’s recommendations. The committee reviewed research and communications materials developed by the ForwARd working team (WRF, WFF, BCG, ADE, Henderson, and a few other consultants); they identified needs, opportunities, and set the course of action for the initiative; they supported the stakeholder engagement process; they shaped and approved the recommendations; and they will continue to champion the process and implementation going forward.

The committee’s first task was to conduct a robust stakeholder outreach process. This ensured all of ForwARd’s recommendations were grounded in the lived experiences of Arkansans.

Conduct stakeholder engagement

In January 2015, ForwARd began an in-depth stakeholder engagement process. In any statewide initiative like ForwARd, and especially in one concerning education, ensuring the results reflect the values and needs of communities is important for long-term success.

Early in the process, ForwARd conducted broad stakeholder engagement in two parts: First, they conducted 48 focus groups across the state, working with the Rural Community Alliance to provide training, materials, and instruction to group leaders about how to record what they heard.

Second, ForwARd hosted two online surveys. One was open to anyone in Arkansas. Its goal was to understand the aspirations and concerns that Arkansans held with regard to public education. A second was sent directly to educators through superintendents and principals in each school district. Its goal was to hear first-hand from practitioners about what was succeeding in Arkansas schools and classrooms and what wasn't.

This outreach strategy was particularly important for feeding information that wasn't dominated by the prevailing urban perspectives in Little Rock into the Steering Committee's process.

"When you get past the top 15 largest school districts in Arkansas, the rest are small town and rural schools with very different cultures," explained a representative from a rural community. "Our vision and recommendations needed to be useful to all of them."

"Asking communities what they thought about education was huge. It wasn't just about WRF's opinion or WFF's. It reinforced the idea that we are all here for the same goal—we want every child in Arkansas to succeed, and we all have to do this together," said an education association leader.

Based on the many voices, all the data, and the ongoing education system strife in Arkansas, the ForwARd Steering Committee agreed upon its guiding vision: Every Arkansas student will graduate prepared to succeed in college and the workplace.

Our vision and recommendations needed to be
useful to all.



ForwARd combined an assessment of the state of education in Arkansas with stakeholder feedback to craft a shared vision for public education in the state.

Develop recommendations

Stakeholder engagement was at the core of developing ForwARd's recommendations. Based on data collected from students, parents, educators, community leaders, business leaders, and policymakers, the Steering Committee crafted ForwARd's vision and identified seven areas of focus—narrowed down from 25—that will be key to making that vision a reality:



These focus areas were identified by focus group participants and survey respondents and were selected by the Steering Committee. They identified key issues and opportunities for the state of Arkansas to direct its attention during the implementation phase of ForwARd's recommendations. In order to develop those recommendations, the Steering Committee split into Working Groups to contemplate specific focus areas. With the help of survey and focus group data combined with expert advice, they proposed recommendations to the full Steering Committee to be included in the final ForwARd vision and recommendations report. For committee assignments, Henderson and BCG asked for volunteers and assigned Steering Committee members to Working Groups based on areas of expertise and backgrounds. They tried to strike a balance between rural and urban members and educators and non-educators. Additionally, Henderson and BCG applied ideological balance when needed, especially between differing opinions of how best to reform Arkansas's education system.

The Working Groups also drew on the expertise of individuals not yet engaged in the ForwARd process, including people previously considered as potential Steering Committee members during the selection process. The experts provided insider or in-depth knowledge about elements of the focus areas, but the arrangement also built transparency for community members who were skeptical of ForwARd and the initiative's intent.

"I was struck by the fact that the Working Group questions were open ended, not leading, and that there was no apparent agenda. It was very open, honest, and authentic. That's critical in this process," said one Working Group participant who was not a Steering Committee member.

Working Groups were staffed by BCG and met anywhere from four to thirteen times over the course of the project. The smaller Working Group setting allowed committee members to voice opinions more freely and build deeper relationships and trust.

All relevant data, including stakeholder input, was discussed in these groups. BCG helped members analyze data and understand the rationale for recommendations before Working Groups shared their ideas with the broader Steering Committee. If the Steering Committee had questions, the Working Groups could take questions back to their meetings for further research and conversation. As a result, the Steering Committee deeply explored each of the seven focus areas, included many perspectives, and vetted ideas.

Asking communities what they thought about
education was huge.

“If all of us had had to work through all seven focus areas together, it would have been too much. As it was, our Working Group met more than others and it took us longer to determine our recommendations,” said a member of the Academic Distress Working Group.

Developing recommendations was an iterative process that involved constant communication with Henderson, BCG, and Steering Committee members. As a result, the recommendations they produced were inclusive, cohesive, and bold.

The facilitators and consulting partners strived to create an environment in which all parties felt their perspectives mattered. On more than one occasion, Henderson or a BCG staff person picked up the phone to talk with members who seemed unsettled or uncomfortable with a particular discussion or at odds with a fellow committee member.

“Sometimes I had to get on the phone with folks and figure out where they were and help coach committee members through tough conversations with one another,” Henderson said. By addressing these issues head-on and helping to continually bridge divides, he and the other facilitators helped the Steering Committee feel consistently valued.

Committee members uniformly emphasize that throughout the process they felt free to disagree without sacrificing the respect they held for one another. The Steering Committee used an 85/15 rule as a marker: As individuals, if they agreed with 85 percent of what was being proposed, they would support it. “We went into it knowing that we all wouldn’t agree on everything, so we tried to make it so that no one could walk away based on disagreement about one small part. We were all accountable,” explains an elected official.

Respect and mutual accountability allowed Working Group members to be bold and motivated by their shared vision for Arkansas instead of by old wounds or personal beliefs.

“Knowing all the different players in the room, and having been in this dysfunctional system for decades, left me wondering whose voices would rise to the top. I feared that we’d just be trying the same stuff over and over again. But sticking with it and trusting the process got us where we wanted to be,” said a teacher association leader.

“This process wasn’t encumbered by the status quo or driven by the state, even though the Arkansas State Board of Education was a partner. This was a group of people who were really trying to come up with best solution for the future,” said one business leader.

Within a prolific ten-month period, the Working Group process produced a single comprehensive vision for Arkansas's education system called *ForwARd: A New Vision for Arkansas Education*, which included 95 concrete recommendations to improve educational outcomes for Arkansans. These recommendations were based in facts that revealed the baseline for education in the state, they were bold, ambitious, and attainable.

As soon as ForwARd released *ForwARd: A New Vision for Arkansas Education*, communities, organizations, and state agencies began reaching out. They wanted to know how they could align with ForwARd. They wanted to know what they needed to do to dramatically improve education outcomes for Arkansas students, and they knew they wouldn't have to do it alone.

Assemble an Implementation Working Group

The first stage in the implementation of ForwARd's recommendations was to convene an Implementation Working Group (IWG) to develop and support a strategic plan to see ForwARd's goals become reality. The IWG was established to provide long-term support for Arkansas's educational reform process. Members of the group were asked to commit to at least a full year of participation, bearing in mind that the IWG would ideally be operational for at least ten years.

A subset of ForwARd's Steering Committee, the IWG's primary charge is to support all facets of the implementation process: establish support structures, contribute to stakeholder engagement, champion ForwARd's recommendations, and monitor progress toward ForwARd's goals. The IWG agreed to meet regularly throughout the implementation process to share successes and lessons learned and to coordinate the complex process of ensuring ForwARd continues to reflect the values and aspirations of Arkansas's students and parents.

We went into it knowing that we all wouldn't agree on everything, so we tried to make it so that no one could walk away based on disagreement about one small part. We were all accountable.

What the Implementation Process Required

A strong, diverse coalition with ownership of implementation

System leaders who championed the vision and recommendations

Investment in quick wins

Dedicated implementation support capacity and funding

Frequent and relevant communications and engagement



The ForwARd IWG discusses what quick wins the movement will pursue to gain momentum in realizing ForwARd's vision and 95 recommendations.

Like the stakeholder engagement and recommendation development stages of the ForwARd process, the IWG's decision making is informed by a few guiding principles. First and foremost, the IWG puts students' interests first. Arkansas's educational outcomes are not living up to expectations, and not just in schools in Academic Distress. In order to succeed, the IWG makes decisions based on what is best for Arkansas's students. The IWG also maintains ForwARd's openness to new ideas and makes decisions informed by facts. *The State of Education in Arkansas* was, after all, a baseline. As such, the IWG's decisions are based on constantly and diligently collected facts from Arkansas schools and communities.

The IWG as well as ForwARd's key foundation partners have heard Arkansans' hope that ForwARd's vision and recommendations come to life rather than sit on the shelf. If the IWG is successful in building institutional and political support for ForwARd's recommendations, that hope will be realized.

ForwARd Arkansas, independent nonprofit

In October 2015, the foundations and the Arkansas State Board of Education voted to approve ForwARd's vision and recommendations. Since then, the Foundations and the IWG hired a new executive director for the initiative, Susan Bonesteel Harriman. Bonesteel Harriman immediately started the process of making ForwARd an independent 501(c)(3). In the midst of meeting with key stakeholders and formalizing partnerships, Bonesteel Harriman also met with the IWG's Policy Sub-committee to identify shared policy goals to pursue with other organizations during the state's 2017 legislative session. But legislation is only part of the picture when it comes to governance. Part of ForwARd's agenda, Bonesteel Harriman says, will be to look at ways to help the ADE streamline rules and regulations to better align with ForwARd's goals. And of course, ForwARd will do a great deal to support schools, teachers, families, and students in communities throughout Arkansas.



ForwARd Executive Director Susan Harriman aligns with organizations to create an agenda for improving pre-K quality in Arkansas.

Image Credit: *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*



Arkansas State Board of Education discusses ForwARd's vision and 95 recommendations.

— CHALLENGES & RISKS —

Undertaking a broad, bold initiative to affect statewide policy change, especially on a very polarized issue like education, comes with some risks and challenges. ForwARd is no exception.

Understanding a complex subject

While most participants had expertise in some aspect of public education—teaching, policy, systems to name a few—no one understood every aspect or issue that was discussed. The Working Groups did a great deal of in-depth research and engaged in discussions, and then presented findings and recommendations to the larger Steering Committee. As one participant explained, “When we came together as a Steering Committee, it was sometimes hard to understand what another Working Group was talking about. Sometimes that made it a little harder to come to consensus.”

The sheer volume of data was also overwhelming for some. “There was a lot of information to weed through, understand, and contemplate,” said a small business owner. Just trying to keep up with it all and stay organized was a lot of work. We’d get giant slide decks that talked about process, where we’d been, where we were going, but I still had to dig through old notes

to get to earlier data. I wish I'd had a cheat sheet or index for when I wanted to go back so it wasn't so cumbersome. Having easy access to notes about how other Working Groups drew their conclusions would have been helpful as well."

Logistics

Travel, particularly in terms of time, was a barrier to some participants. For some, attending a two-hour Steering Committee meeting in person required a full day of travel. As a result, areas like Southwest Arkansas had fewer representatives participating fully in the Steering Committee process.

Although participants could always call in to meetings that they could not attend in person, that was not ideal. BCG worked hard to ameliorate this, sending materials for review in advance of meetings and providing quick follow-up summaries afterward. WRF staff also used web conferencing tools to allow remote participants to view materials in real time.

Inclusivity

No matter how inclusive a committee may be, not everyone can be at the table, and WRF and WFF needed to go the extra mile to explain their criteria. "The foundations didn't explain why close allies like us were not at the table," said one longtime partner. "I knew why some others wouldn't be there, but wasn't sure why I wasn't there. We never had a conversation about why I wasn't there or what my expected role would be otherwise." Another longtime partner suggested that an ongoing feedback loop of some sort might have helped them feel more connected to what was being accomplished.

On a couple of occasions, the Steering Committee recognized a notable absence of perspective among their ranks and invited additional members to join in. While the attempt to be more inclusive is laudable, the challenge of on-boarding new members into a group in terms of building trust, explaining the process, and catching them up on all the research and discussions was frustrating for both new and veteran members. "It was a little awkward coming in," said one teacher representative. "There were conversations and discussions already going on. I navigated that by speaking from the heart."

There was a lot of information to weed through,
understand, and contemplate

Transparency

The ForwARd group also took a risk in terms of outward communication. Although all meetings were open to the public, the standing rule was that what was said inside the meetings stayed inside the meetings. ForwARd leaders developed this policy to encourage openness and sincerity so no one need fear being raked over the coals later for something he or she said.

While the Steering Committee’s “cone of silence”—as it was described by one participant—was designed to protect the space for open, honest dialog, it also caused problems in terms of external perception. Steering Committee members interpreted the request not to discuss meeting conversations as a ban on talking about the issues themselves, which caused some frustration. “I know we had our reasons for holding off on releasing information or parts of the vision and recommendations, and I can see why when we were creating it that was a good idea. But at times, I felt we created a lack of transparency. It may have seemed we weren’t open to the public when we had such a public purpose,” said one education advocate.

Unfortunately, because virtually no one chose to take advantage of the Steering Committee’s open attendance policy, and committee members were reticent to speak about what happened in their discussions, the group was seen as secretive, which fed into some negative—and incorrect—assumptions by the media in and around Little Rock. However, this coverage soon fell by the wayside after WRF leaders met with local reporters. After ForwARd released its recommendations, reporters commended them for being balanced, fair, and feasible.

Putting reputational and political capital at stake

Any policy initiative puts political and reputational capital at risk. This is especially true for education policy, where emotions are hot and stakes are high.

In some cases, participants with high-profile positions in and around Little Rock were staking their reputations on their association with other participants. Many involved felt that being there with people who represented “the other side” generated fallout among their own peers and supporters.

Several Steering Committee members reported that they spent hours talking with friends and colleagues to combat what one called the “narrative of suspicion” that arose among outsiders in and around Little Rock who saw the high-profile charter school supporters on the committee and made assumptions. Several opponents of charter schools in particular had to reassure their allies that they were not selling out to a secret privatization agenda.

“Groups are still active and beating the drum about WFF trying to take over. People like me who are considered on the other side were asked if we’d turned our backs and aligned with the dark side. I just dealt with it head on by talking to people and reminding them, ‘You know me, you know what I stand for, and if I’m not part of the conversation I should be. I’m stating our side of the case,’” explained one elected official.

In the end, the inclusive, trusting process nurtured by BCG and each foundation partner ensured participants were willing to be bold and take risks to make ForwARd a success.

Weathering a political storm

In the beginning of 2015, a political maelstrom broke over Arkansas that represented the confluence of each of these challenges and presented ForwARd with one of its most promising opportunities.

During the early months in which the Steering Committee and Working Groups met, the state announced it was taking over the LRSD. The Arkansas State Board of Education voted in favor of this decision as fewer than half of students scored proficient or advanced on state exams in six of the district’s 48 schools. Several Steering Committee members were publicly on record as being in support of or opposed to this decision, including members who testified to the State Board of Education. In addition, a bill authorizing the creation of a statewide “achievement school district,” to be operated by a charter school provider, was introduced in the state legislature.

The LRSD takeover made ForwARd a lightning rod for the ire of education activists and parents in and around Little Rock. These developments also drew fire on ForwARd from some Little Rock media and community members who did not understand what the Steering Committee’s role was and tied it to the school district takeover.

As a facilitator, Henderson now sees that the district takeover and the contentious legislative debate were an opportunity for Working Groups and Steering Committee members to lean into discussions they might not otherwise have had. “This forced us to have conversations that allowed us to acknowledge where we had different opinions. As a group, we were able to compartmentalize our differences while celebrating our common goals and areas of agreement.” Henderson believed that this situation both added urgency to the ForwARd process and served as a reminder that they were developing a vision and recommendations that would take a generation to implement.

“Because we were already talking about how to intervene with struggling schools and how to use sanctions versus other approaches in our Academic Distress Working Group, it was natural to talk about how we felt about this,” says WFF’s Smith. “But we didn’t let it change our purpose or our focus.”

The LRSD takeover also drew attention from people who may not have otherwise been involved on the ForwARd process, bringing more public input to bear on the final recommendations.

“The whole experience with the district takeover and the legislature proved the power of the process,” says WRF’s Anderson. “We didn’t deviate. We had conversations that we might not have had, but we didn’t deviate from the process at all.”

Of course even with these challenges having been surmounted, the largest task for ForwARd is still yet to come: taking these recommendations and the energy and expertise gathered among ForwARd’s participants and turn them into action.

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— GOING FORWARD —

ForwARd partners must stay the course to ensure Arkansas students receive the education they deserve. Without action to match the boldness of ForwARd’s vision and recommendations for Arkansas education, the vision will be, after all is said and done, just 95 good ideas. The value of this vision for Arkansas’s future is primarily in its implementation.

ForwARd must transition from a series of recommendations to actions that ultimately transform Arkansas’s public education system. Only time and an incredible amount of determination from the IWG as well as students, parents, teachers, community leaders, business leaders, and policymakers across the state will tell if this planning process will shape Arkansas’s future. The recommendations are ambitious but attainable, and ForwARd partners seek long-term change in the state’s public education system. Many ForwARd partners will be long-retired before ForwARd sees its 20-year milestone, but they must continue to take action together knowing opportunities for the next generation will be great.

“The vision and recommendations of ForwARd, developed by such a diverse group of citizen stakeholders, are nothing like Arkansas has ever seen before,” says West-Scantlebury. “We’re proud to have helped create the process that has gotten us this far, and we look forward to remaining heavily engaged in the implementation. But we make no mistake about it: the true power of ForwARd lies with the people of Arkansas. If we’ve played our role correctly, they will see themselves reflected in the vision and recommendations and will want to make them a reality for our communities and our kids.”

ForwARd's Next Steps

Implement ForwARd's Recommendations

Implementation will occur through support structures and continued engagement and mobilization of residents, educators, business leaders, and policymakers to serve as advocates, activists, and ambassadors for ForwARd's vision.

Select ForwARd Communities

ForwARd Communities will serve as proof points for what works in education, laboratories of innovation, and a learning and support network comprised of diverse residents.

Advocate for Systems and Policy Changes

A shared advocacy agenda will provide students with just, equitable educational opportunities and dismantle structures that serve as economic, racial, and social barriers to students striving to succeed.

Track Progress and Celebrate Accomplishments

Continuous assessment and reporting will build trust and consensus within a broader network of stakeholders.

Share What Works

Sharing best practices and lessons learned will make it possible for education, business, policy, and philanthropic leaders across the nation to put what works in place in their communities.

Progress toward ForwARd’s vision must be measurable. This progress will be measured by how much closer Arkansas’s public education system is to closing the achievement gap over the course of a generation and ensuring every student graduates high school prepared to succeed in college and the workplace. Achieving ForwARd’s vision will mean Arkansas will become one of the top five states in the country in indicators of progress in education. It will mean 480,000 students can expect more for themselves, their state, and their future.

Foundation partners must continue to make strategic investments to increase public awareness and resident engagement as well as to bring more funders to the table. Currently, WRF and WFF are investing time and resources in building a coalition of ForwARd leaders and communicating the vision and recommendations to build ambassadors for the movement.

“This is a leveraged partnership,” says Smith, “but if everyone looks at the two foundations as the sole source of support, it won’t be sustainable. We have organizations in the state that are well-suited to join the effort as partners, supplying funds, resources, or volunteers. We will have to explore other options in both the ForwARd communities and across Arkansas.”

ForwARd’s process is a model that can be adopted by regions and states across the US. The ForwARd process illustrates a few important lessons for other foundations considering undertaking a similarly ambitious systems and policies intervention driven by diverse groups of stakeholders. In order to succeed, ForwARd had to be:

- Vision-driven and bold
- Grounded in Arkansans’ aspirations for greatness
- Designed to make Arkansas a model for academic excellence
- Driven by passionate leaders committed to excellence
- Guided by the best knowledge and resources

ForwARd is in the implementation phase. If Arkansas residents continue to celebrate milestones along the way, reflect on challenges and lessons learned, and maintain the passion and commitment that has gotten them this far, they will be that much closer to making their vision for Arkansas a reality.



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