



# ARKANSAS SCHOOL CHOICE SOLUTIONS

September 20, 2023

School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic had devastating effects on the educational progress of American schoolchildren, revealed deep inadequacies of the public school monopoly, and left families feeling powerless about setting the direction of their children's education. Thankfully, on March 8, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed the comprehensive [Arkansas L.E.A.R.N.S. bill](#) into law. The bill ensures that Arkansas parents will have the right to choose which education is best suited to their children—private, parochial, or charter. It prioritizes increasing access to effective teachers, increasing record-low test scores, and using federal/state funds to expand quality childhood education.

National test results for 2022 show that school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic had a harmful effect on American schoolchildren. For the first time in the history of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), scores in reading and math fell by the largest margin in more than 30 years, and students in Arkansas were no exception. See *Chart on page 2*.

## In 2022, according to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in Arkansas:

The **reading level of 4th grade students** who performed at or above the NAEP Proficient in was only **30%**.

**Black 4th grade students** had an average reading score that was **33 points** lower than that for White students.



**Hispanic 4th grade students** had an average reading score that was **20 points** lower than that for White students.

**Low-income 4th grade students** had an average reading score that was **34 points** lower than that for students from middle and high income families.

These test scores can have powerful consequences for a generation of children. Reversing these achievement losses will need aggressive action over the next several years. Parents need the ability to leave their government-mandated schools if necessary to help ensure their children have better academic opportunities. School choice is also shown to improve public schools by increasing accountability, fostering competitiveness, and boosting student outcomes. When parents can choose which option best fits their child's needs, whether that means opting to switch or not, students reap the benefits. "Through my Arkansas L.E.A.R.N.S. plan, we will expand access to quality education for every kid growing up in our state, empower parents, not government bureaucrats, and prepare students for the workforce, not government dependency, so everyone has a shot at a better life right here in Arkansas," said Governor Sanders.

This Education Savings Account (ESA) program was a result of the Center for Education Opportunity (CEO) efforts to educate Arkansas policymakers and the Governor's team about school choice policies. America First Policy Institute (AFPI) provided model policy, student outcomes research, fact sheets, and expert testimony.

"Every American student deserves the opportunity to receive a quality education. Governor Sanders' plan will empower parents to pick the best school for their children and reward the best teachers for their work in the classroom," said Brooke Rollins, President and CEO of AFPI.

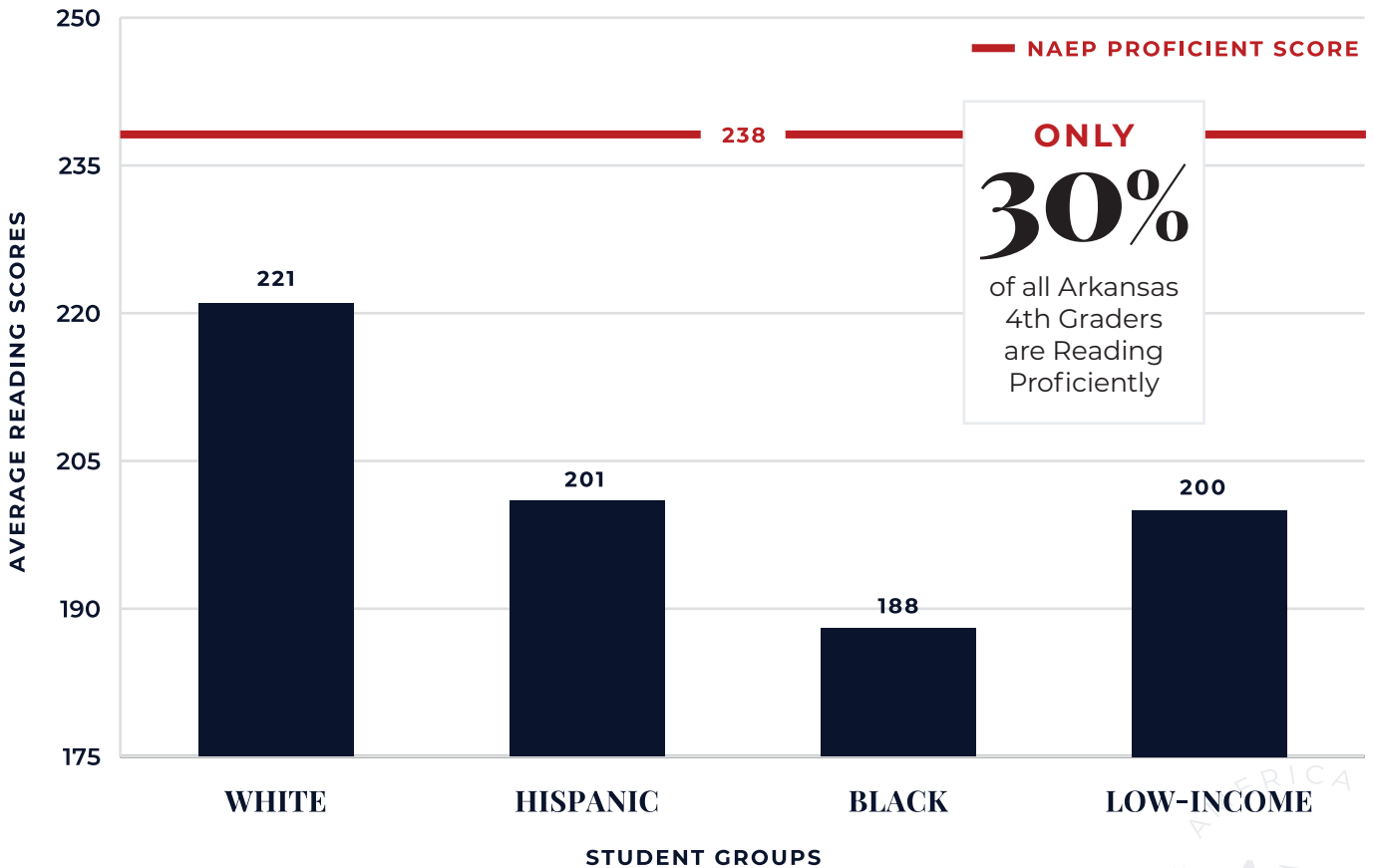
In addition to benefiting parents and students, the bill also prioritizes teachers by mandating a minimum salary of \$50,000 and repealing the outdated Teacher Fair Dismissal and the School Employees Fair Hearing Acts that allowed for automatic renewal of tenure. Raising salaries and increasing retention will incentivize teachers to put their best foot forward and commit to districts. This type of action is needed to continue combating teacher attrition in America.

At AFPI, we believe that school choice is the key to ensuring that all students—regardless of background, neighborhood, or ability—should have access to a stellar education. Ensuring access to such education is at the core of AFPI’s mission and remains a top priority. Thanks to Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Arkansas students, parents, and teachers will be hindered no more.

As the Chair of AFPI’s Center for Education Opportunity repeatedly states, “No one knows the needs and interests of a child more than their parent or guardian.”

School choice is representative of two core American values—freedom and opportunity. At AFPI, we believe that the purpose of education is to prepare Americans for the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. As public support for school choice continues to grow, students across the nation will have access to schooling that meets individualized needs, and educational outcomes will improve. Most importantly, parents will be empowered to have a stronger voice in the conversation about their child’s schooling. While the Biden administration tries to stall progress on school choice policies, the Center for Education Opportunity at AFPI remains highly committed to the school choice mission.

### Arkansas 4th Grade Reading Scores



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2022 Reading Assessments.

