



Newsletter From Rep. Matthew J. Shepherd District 97

January 9, 2026

Committee Receives ACCESS Update

Members of the House and Senate Education Committees reviewed updates to the Arkansas ACCESS Act this week, underscoring its focus on strengthening the path students take from the classroom into college, careers, or service.

ACCESS builds on the LEARNS Act with a common goal. By the time students graduate, they should be enrolled, employed, or enlisted. The way the state is getting there starts earlier than many people realize. Career exploration now begins in middle school, with students starting to think about interests in sixth and seventh grade and completing a required Student Success Plan by the end of eighth grade. That plan follows them into high school and helps guide course choices and career pathways.

The Arkansas Department of Education has identified more than 20 success-ready pathways tied to workforce demand and wages in the state, ranging from advanced manufacturing and construction to nursing, computer science, and supply chain. Students who complete a pathway can graduate with merit or distinction, depending on the rigor of their coursework and how they demonstrate readiness through college credit, industry credentials, apprenticeships, military preparation, or advanced academic programs. The Class of 2028 will be the first to fully benefit from all of these requirements.

The results are already showing up. Career and technical education enrollment has climbed to more than 171,000 students, an increase of over 10,000 in one year. Concurrent credit participation is also up significantly.

ACCESS also made changes to scholarships. The new ACCESS to Acceleration Scholarship replaces the old Concurrent Challenge, expands eligibility to ninth graders, allows more credit hours, and dramatically increases total lifetime funding. The Workforce Challenge was broadened to include more institutions and in-demand fields, with higher award amounts. Together, these changes reflect a shift toward flexibility, relevance, and making sure students leave high school with real options and real momentum.

