



Newsletter From Rep. Mary Bentley District 54

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Education Committee Update

This week, the House and Senate Education Committees took a wide-angle look at Arkansas education, examining issues ranging from early childhood access to the state's constitutional funding obligations.

Department of Education Secretary Jacob Oliva and Deputy Commissioner Stacy Smith opened with an update on early childhood education, focusing on how Arkansas funds and delivers early learning. Lawmakers heard encouraging news that the state secured a competitive federal Preschool Development Grant, then turned their attention to the Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) program, the state's flagship preschool initiative. ABC currently serves nearly 24,000 children at an annual cost of approximately \$114 million, yet the number of funded slots has remained unchanged for at least a decade. Secretary Oliva noted that nearly 1,000 seats go unfilled each year, even as waiting lists exceed 2,000 families statewide. Those unused seats cost taxpayers an estimated \$5–6 million annually. In response, the department outlined plans to move away from guaranteed slots toward funding based on actual enrollment, while reallocating seats from underused providers to districts with higher demand.

Later in the week, committees shifted focus to the broader constitutional framework governing education funding. Presentations on the adequacy study traced Arkansas's obligations under the Constitution and landmark cases such as *Lake View*, reinforcing that the state must provide not merely minimal schooling, but an equal educational opportunity for all students. Lawmakers were reminded that adequacy reviews are an ongoing constitutional responsibility.

On Tuesday, members also reviewed the Accountability and Achievement Report, which showed modest but meaningful gains under the new ATLAS assessment system. Approximately 35 percent of students reached proficiency in English language arts and math, with stronger improvements reported in math and science than in early literacy.

As this work continues, the Education Committee will carry its adequacy study forward in the months ahead, building on these discussions to guide future policy and funding decisions.

