

# **FROM GOOD TO GREAT IN ARKANSAS: INCREASING ACCESS TO QUALITY PRESCHOOL ONE COMMUNITY AT A TIME**



**GOOD2  
GREAT**

Expanding Quality  
Pre-K in Arkansas

**OCTOBER 2016**





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# FROM GOOD TO GREAT IN ARKANSAS: INCREASING ACCESS TO QUALITY PRESCHOOL ONE COMMUNITY AT A TIME

by Paul Kelly, AACF Senior Policy Analyst  
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This is the story of how two rural Arkansas communities worked to improve educational outcomes for their children. It started with a national philanthropic organization and six Arkansas partners coming together. In late 2013, officials from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) came to Arkansas and talked with preschool advocates about expanding preschool services. There had been remarkable progress followed by a period of stagnation. Arkansas's preschool campaign was at a turning point.

In 2003, Arkansas passed landmark legislation to expand access to quality preschool. As a result, each year the state spends \$111 million for quality preschool programs that serve almost 24,000 preschoolers. Around the same time, the Arkansas Better Beginnings quality rating system was created. It offers a step-by-step process for increasing program quality through professional development for educators. These positive results made Arkansas a national leader in the field.

Despite those successes, after 2008, funding did not increase for Arkansas's quality preschool services. Programs were faced with making tough budget choices between quality and the number of kids they could serve.

A diverse coalition of Arkansas nonprofits proposed a plan. Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF), Arkansas Public Policy Panel (The Panel),

**It started with a national philanthropic organization and six Arkansas partners coming together.**

Arkansas State University's Childhood Services (A-State), and the Clinton School of Public Service (CSPS) initiated a grassroots approach. They would choose two pilot sites in rural communities to help expand access to quality preschool. It would be a model for increasing quality preschool "one community at a time."

The two test communities had to have certain strengths to build upon. They needed to be a manageable size, have existing preschool programs willing to grow and improve, and have grassroots community support for quality preschool. The group soon chose the southern Arkansas towns of Marvell-Elaine and Prescott, and named the project "Good to Great" (G2G). Both communities were already good places for children, but they wanted to be great places where all children would thrive. They developed a three-year plan, which kicked off in May 2014.

## GOALS OF THE GOOD TO GREAT MODEL

- Increase staff capacity at local preschool programs
- Increase family and community engagement
- Influence statewide policy change to improve preschool access and quality

## BUILDING COHESION

The project involved people of diverse ages, races, backgrounds, and perspectives who all shared a commitment to early learning for all Arkansas children. Most had never met, much less had they worked together on a project such as G2G. The project had to cross many lines of diversity. There were different segments of the local communities; differences between collaboration partners and the community; differences between community residents, schools and providers; and differences between the collaborative partners themselves. It took time to build trust with the core team of outside collaborators before the real work could begin.

The project's core team also had to learn how to work together. They had to define their roles and appreciate what each brought to the table. Meetings and day-long retreats were held throughout the project. Community meetings and regular conference calls helped build trust and resolve differences. They held an all-day retreat to examine the impacts of race on their relationships. The project staff and local community members shared perspectives and life experiences.

Things moved slowly in the beginning. Open, honest discussions helped team members listen and learn from

each other. They participated in each other's local meetings and activities. They got a sense of each organization's unique contributions to the project. A shared perspective emerged: G2G was a meaningful collaboration. Partaking in its successes was worth the effort.

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## THE CORE TEAM

The seven entities involved in G2G each fulfilled an essential role. Their individual contributions are summarized in the table below.

Organization	Contributions
Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families	Research and data collection, communications, and state policy
Arkansas Community Foundation	Project fiduciary agent
Arkansas Public Policy Panel	Parent and community organizing
A-State Childhood Services	Support professional growth of teachers and administrators for quality improvement
Clinton School of Public Service	Host for two visiting nationally recognized researchers/scholars
Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation	Project coordination, oversight, staff support
W.K. Kellogg Foundation	Project funding

## THE ARKANSAS PUBLIC POLICY PANEL (THE PANEL)

The Panel’s role was to engage parents and community members. Their solid reputation for grassroots community organizing met the challenges unique to G2G. To foster engagement, The Panel hired community members to serve as G2G organizers — one in Marvell-Elaine and one in Prescott. Their role was to organize local meetings and events that engaged and informed members. The focus was on leadership development and engagement in the political and educational process. Members attended monthly school board meetings, built relationships with school district officials, and became stronger community leaders.

Additionally, The Panel formed a separate parent group that provided parents in both communities a safe space to learn and practice the tools to advocate for their children.

The Panel also created community advisory groups (CAGs) in both communities. The CAGs included parents, teachers, school administrators, and community leaders concerned about preschool. The CAGs promoted the importance of expanding quality preschool and addressed the other needs of children and families in the communities.

G2G community organizers went door-to-door and surveyed 358 parents. The purpose was to identify their concerns about issues that impact children and families. In Marvell, a top issue was the lack of safe or fun places

“The fact that the Public Policy Panel was involved, and they were going door-to-door, was great. I think it showed parents that the community was interested in their family and their child. And that brought more of them to the table than would normally come.”

**A-STATE PROJECT COACH**



for kids to play. In Prescott, there were many issues, including crime, violence, law enforcement, and racial tensions. Racial tensions were a key concern for African-Americans (66 percent), but not among whites (6 percent). This disconnect led to a deeper conversation about racial equity and social justice.



Each CAG developed a strategic plan to address the needs identified in the survey. The Panel staff encouraged local community leaders to put in place elements of the plan, to engage in school board and city council meetings, and to take part in statewide efforts to improve outcomes for preschool children and their families.

The CAGs had a core of 10-15 group leaders who regularly attended meetings. By the end of the project they were leading the meetings, facilitating discussions, and making sure progress was made on their strategic plan.

### **A-STATE CHILDHOOD SERVICES**

A-State works with preschool programs to support children's development and learning across the state. They work with preschool directors to improve management and leadership practices, and with teachers to improve instructional practices. The G2G project provided ex-

tra funds for this effort. A-State was then able to provide an intensive and focused effort in both communities, well beyond what was typical of their work in other communities.

Every licensed preschool program in Marvell and Prescott was invited to participate. The goal was to increase the quality of existing preschool programs in each community. Past experiences with external consultants focused on deficits and shortcomings, so some school administrators and teachers were wary. However, A-State staff focused on the strengths of each school, classroom, and teacher. They also helped the programs meet the specific needs for new books, blocks, and other supplies to fulfill higher standards. Personal and professional relationships were built over the first nine-12 months of the project. Trust and commitment became evident. A-State and local educators made significant progress in increasing teacher confidence and competence.

A-State conducted a baseline assessment of quality for each program and classroom. The assessments measured administrative practices, adult-child interactions, and the quality of the classroom environment. G2G coaches, teachers, and administrators identified strengths and next steps for quality improvement. Training focused on curriculum implementation and teacher-child interactions.

Participants attended evening workshops, book-study groups, conferences, community-wide networking meetings, and multi-day seminars. Coaching visits helped teachers and administrators implement the skills learned during training. The goal was to create and sustain a climate of learning and support for staff and children. There was frequent turnover in preschool staff, so there was new staff training throughout the course of the G2G project.

**"A-State has been with G2G from the ground floor. Their commitment has never wavered. They have been there for teachers. They have been right beside us, step by step, in the classroom to help us understand how to use what we were taught. They have been our partners and followed through on all the things they said they'd do. Trainings were available to us that smaller school districts like ours would not have the opportunity to participate in or afford."**

**MS. SYLVIA MOORE, PRINCIPAL  
MARVELL-ELAINE ELEMENTARY**



## ARKANSAS ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

AACF supported the local efforts of the G2G project. The nonprofit compiled data on the impacts of income, education, and child and family health and well-being on educational outcomes. AACF helped define outcome measures and project goals for each core partner and analyzed community survey results. The organization also worked with The Panel to campaign for an increase in preschool funding.

AACF provided communication tools that explained the vital role quality preschool plays in each town's future. These included an infographic showing what quality preschool looks like and why programs need more resources. AACF also created a parent advocacy manual to help parents get their children needed services, and a project website to house all the communications tools in one place.

In addition, AACF produced seven short videos that support preschool expansion in Arkansas. Two capture the work done in Marvell-Elaine and Prescott, while others demonstrate the importance of preschool in improving educational and social-emotional outcomes for children. AACF's statewide social media campaign promoted these videos and raised awareness of the program and the need for quality preschool across the state.



## CLINTON SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE

CSPS hosted two national preschool experts, who visited the communities, talked with G2G participants, and met with state officials. They brought attention to the importance of preschool in moving the state forward.

The two visiting scholars provided a “big picture” perspective. They presented the research, shared their views, and answered questions. And they listed all the possibilities quality preschool programs could hold for the children of Arkansas.

The first to visit was Joan Lombardi, an expert on early childhood and author of “Time to Care: Redesigning Child Care to Promote Education, Support Families and Build Communities.”

The second was W. Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University.



## PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

The G2G project focused on early learning, so the role of parents could not be overlooked or understated. It was the primary part of The Panel’s community organizing efforts.

The Panel took parents and grandparents through a leadership development process. They learned they aren’t just limited to helping their children at home — they can actually change public policy that affects the entire education system, from the local to the state level. They went to school board meetings and met with superintendents to discuss their issues. It was a unified group of informed parents with a slate of priority issues.

They also built relationships with the preschool providers. They shared information and events and held meetings at the local preschool centers. Parents were able to understand what a quality program looks like and the standards involved in better preparing children for kindergarten.

Parents focused on the unequal percentage of black children disciplined in the schools. The Panel helped parents understand how they can impact what happens at school and change policies that address this critical issue. By working with the providers and school officials, parents made incremental progress. They addressed this at the early childhood and elementary school levels, so that discipline does not turn into a bigger issue in high school.

In 2016, AACF published the “Parent’s Guide to Pre-K Advocacy.” It addresses issues discussed by the parents and teachers participating in the G2G project. The guide also focuses on what parents could do at home, at school, in the community, and at the State Capitol to ensure their children receive quality preschool and prosper in the community.

**In 2016, AACF published a G2G-based guide focused on what parents can do at home, at school, in the community, and at the State Capitol to ensure their children receive quality preschool.**

“It was important that we worked with the parents separately and took them through the training to see the way the system works. This helped them understand what was going on when we brought them to the table with the other partners and the community advisory group.”

**THE PANEL ORGANIZER**

“I know that having The Panel hold some of their parent meetings at the preschool center helped address some of those things. The preschool directors thought those meetings were powerful. Although they did not have a large number of parents in attendance, there were more there than they’d ever had at a meeting they organized.”

**A-STATE PROJECT COACH**

“The only way we can address [school discipline] is for the parents to recognize the power that they have, how they can speak up for themselves, and how they can make things change in the school district.”

**THE PANEL COMMUNITY ORGANIZER**

“We have always thought about parent engagement as getting the parents to come to the schools for parent-teacher conferences, holiday parties or field trips. I think that view is really changing: parent engagement includes becoming an advocate for their child at the doctor’s office, on their sports team, or just engaging with their child at home. They can support what their child is doing at school and become more of a partner with their teacher. Preschools are starting to see their role in parent education as well. That they could have classes for parents, they could be the host of those, and they could give parents information about being advocates for their children outside of the school setting. The roles of the centers could change in how they support parent engagement.”

**A-STATE PROJECT COACH**





## ADDRESSING SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

School discipline and the impacts of zero-tolerance policies was a concern of the G2G partners for many years. So it came as no surprise when it was identified as a problem in both G2G community surveys. It is characteristic of racial inequity, which remains a systemic problem in communities across the south. The work to address this will continue beyond the life of this project and will need to move beyond individual school districts. Local parents have been deeply concerned about racial disparities in school discipline for many years. One major step forward was the acceptance of this issue by school district officials and their openness to working together with parents to find solutions.

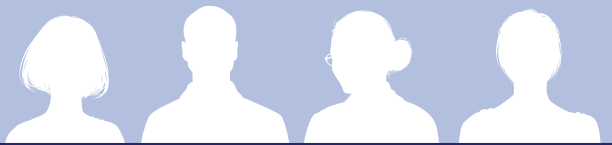
This is an excellent example of how the G2G holistic approach engaged parents and community to address a specific problem. In Prescott, the community had focused on discipline in their high schools, but turned their attention to the elementary level once they began hearing from parents. The Panel and the parent groups were focusing on restorative justice, something that AACF also recommended in their report on school discipline in Arkansas. A-State offered preschool teachers training on “Conscious Discipline®,” a less punitive approach to school discipline.

The CAGs asked A-State for a presentation on Conscious Discipline® during their community meetings. Both communities wanted their preschools and elementary schools to begin implementing Conscious Discipline®. Parents also wanted to take part in the training to apply those skills in their homes. Prescott’s superintendent provided training for the teachers in the district, contributing some



“So A-State was talking about Conscious Discipline® ever since they got here, and The Panel was finding out what parents really wanted. And those two things came together. The academic tools that A-State brought to the table met authentically with what the parents said they wanted for the school and their kids. It was through those interactions that things happened in this project.”

**G2G COORDINATOR**



money from the school’s budget. The G2G project kicked in and provided the remaining funds, so that parents could take part as well.

The Marvell-Elaine school district selected a shorter version of this approach. Called “Ten Steps to Positive Discipline,” the program will be available to elementary teachers and parents in that community through scheduled trainings.



## TAKING STOCK AND GOING FORWARD

This project tested a novel grassroots approach to expanding quality preschool. Six seasoned Arkansas organizations worked together to make it a success, and two small Arkansas communities welcomed the opportunity to improve the lives of their children now and well into the future.

The hope was to fuel a statewide expansion of quality preschool to every community in Arkansas. Led by local residents, the G2G project laid a strong foundation for improving early childhood education in these two communities. The initial funding for the collaboration is ending, but the partners are developing plans to take the next steps and continue driving progress forward.

G2G partners made every effort to create a better trained and more effective preschool workforce:

- Ninety-eight percent of teaching and administrative staff took part in training. Between August 2014 and September 2016 A-State provided 1,807.5 hours of training.
- During the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school years, four project coaches engaged 100 percent of program staff in 233 coaching visits. Plus, there were many coaching conversations via phone, email, and text messages, all to strengthen teaching and administrative skills.
- A-State, in association with the G2G centers in both communities, is producing a set of short videos. They show how teachers use the new Arkansas Child Development and Early Learning Standards. The completed video series will be available in January 2017 to all Arkansas teachers who work with children ages birth through five.

As a result of The Panel's community organizing efforts, each community now has a core group of trained, organized advocates for young children:

- There are 40 well-trained parent leaders committed to early childhood success.
- Over 500 community members and allies were engaged in the meetings, forums, and other activities related to the G2G project. They stand ready to talk with their lawmakers or testify in committee hearings. They can share stories with the media and mobilize the community to contact lawmakers.

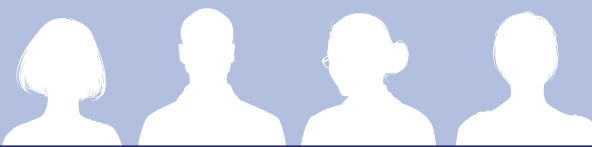
The work of the G2G project has enhanced efforts to create statewide policies that increase access to quality preschool across the state:

- In 2015, the Arkansas legislature approved a one-time \$3 million increase for preschool programs, the first since 2011.

"All those heads together at the same table, sharing their thoughts and ideas and providing information ... it was a catalyst that will keep us rolling to bigger and better things for our children and our community."

"We call G2G the Dream Team! You came in and made a change in the Prescott school district that will forever be a part of the future that we are looking for. I've never been involved in anything like this in my life. It really made a difference."

### COMMENTS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PRESCOTT G2G ADVISORY GROUP



- An impressive array of preschool advocacy tools was developed to encourage citizens and elected officials to support policies that offer every child in Arkansas access to quality preschool.

The progress realized by the G2G project in three years is likely to endure, but at a slower pace due to the loss of funds.

The Panel will continue to engage with both the community groups and parents as part of their Opportunity to Learn Campaign (OTL). The goal of OTL is to bring more educational resources and attention to the needs of marginalized families and their children.

A-State will also continue to offer training and support to increase the quality of preschool programs across Arkansas.

AACF will keep advocating at the State Capitol for an increase in state funding for preschool, along with all the partners in this project.

The expectation is that the relationships built by G2G will remain, the skills learned will inspire more learning, and the intensive focus and support for these communities will be absorbed into the fabric of daily life.

We can't stop until every small and large community in Arkansas is a great place to raise our children and see them reach their full potential.

“Most people overestimate what they can do in one year and underestimate what they can do in ten years.”

**BILL GATES**



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