

## **“Back to School. Time for LEARNS.,” by Dr. Chris Jones**

As summer draws to a close and Arkansas students prepare to return to school, there is a strong sense of unease among parents, educators, and concerned citizens alike. The source of this anxiety is largely the LEARNS Act. This massive legislative overhaul, mainly aimed at reshaping our educational system, poses significant risks to the quality and accessibility of education in our state.

The LEARNS Act, which stands for Literacy, Empowerment, Accountability, Readiness, Networking, and Safety, sounds promising in name. LEARNS certainly has good parts: literacy tutors, increased teacher pay, and a broader push for public school to improve education quality. These are all great things.

However, a closer look reveals a series of components that could undermine the very foundation of our public education system. One of the most publicly argued parts of LEARNS is its push for the expansion of voucher programs. While some argue that these measures provide parents with more choices, they often lead to the rapid reduction of funds from public school education, which leaves the most vulnerable students in underfunded and overstressed conditions.

Arkansas, like many states, already struggles with quality education access. Schools in some areas tend to have more resources, better facilities, and higher-paid teachers compared to those in low-income and rural communities. The LEARNS Act, by redirecting public funds to private and charter schools, only deepens this divide. It shifts attention and resources away from the public schools that serve most of our children, effectively creating a two-tiered education system. The big slap in the face is the fact that public schools have more demands put on them than other schools that now receive our tax dollars.

That’s not all. The emphasis on standardized testing as a measure of accountability is deeply flawed. High-stakes testing has been seen as primarily narrowing the curriculum and placing undue stress on students and teachers. Instead of fostering a love for learning and critical thinking, it reduces education to a series of rote memorization tasks aimed at boosting test scores. This approach fails to account for the diverse talents and needs of students, stifling creativity and innovation in the classroom.

But one of the most troubling pieces of the LEARNS Act is its lack of real support for teachers. We have faced a teacher shortage for some time, with many educators feeling undervalued and overworked. LEARNS does little to address these real issues. Instead, it focuses on punishing educators, and schools, who fail to meet complex and unclear requirements. This approach demoralizes teachers, driving many out of the profession and discouraging potential new educators from entering the field.

As we send our children back to school this year, we must work together and assess the impact of the LEARNS Act. While the goal of improving education is one that we can all agree on, the methods proposed and now imposed by LEARNS are misguided and potentially harmful.

**Now is the time for action.**

Parents, educators, and concerned citizens must unite to advocate for a fairer, higher quality, and more accessible educational system. We can all unite and fight by contacting our local representatives, attending school board meetings, and making our voice heard. Together, we can push for policies that truly support our public schools, invest in our teachers, and ensure that every child in Arkansas has access to a high-quality education. Only then can we build a brighter future for our state.

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