

Schools prepare for 1st year with LEARNS Act in place

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Catholic schools in Arkansas are preparing for changes as a result of the LEARNS Act.

Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed the act into law March 8. The law sets a \$50,000 annual minimum salary for new public school teachers and creates a new voucher program called Educational Freedom Accounts (EFA), which allows families to choose the school that's best for their children, regardless of income.

Theresa Hall, superintendent for Catholic schools in Arkansas, has been helping school leaders inform parents about how the LEARNS Act and Educational Freedom Accounts will help impact their children through an informational letter. The letter advises that families "can apply for an Education Freedom Account (EFA) to be used for tuition and fees up to \$6,600 per student."

“There are a lot of questions about how this is all going to work, but for the most part the people that it’s really communicated to well, they get it and understand it,” Hall said. “That is probably going to be our biggest key piece — how do we communicate this to our families?”

For the 2023-2024 school year, eligibility was limited to:

- students enrolling in kindergarten for the first time
- students with a disability identified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
- students considered homeless under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act
- foster children or former foster children
- students with special needs currently participating in the Succeed Scholarship Program
- children of active-duty military personnel (Title 10 or 32)
- students who were enrolled in the previous school year in a public school that has a rating of “F” or a public school district classified as in need of Level 5 - Intensive Support.

As of Aug. 9, nearly 1,000 Catholic school students in 26 schools will be receiving tuition assistance through the LEARNS Act.

Hall is working with the Arkansas Department of Education to finalize details regarding deadlines and crossover eligibility between public and Catholic schools. Hall said all Catholic schools in the state are accepting funds through the state’s EFA. She acknowledged the possibility that Catholic school enrollment could grow as a result of the new law, but said some problems might arise.

“Right now some of our schools don’t have any room to grow ... we’ve talked to our schools for years about this — the cost of educating versus what they charge for tuition. And they don’t charge enough for tuition to really educate one child, and part of that was because they used to get more subsidies from their parishes. But now parishes are having to cut back on what they can offer for subsidy. And so there’s a larger gap between what the schools get in income and what their expenses are for the school,” Hall said.

Some educators have raised concerns about the possibility of a widening gap in the teacher to student ratio, with EFA incentives encouraging students and some school salaries deterring teachers. For Hall, the key to success in Catholic schools lies in quality, not quantity.

“You have to look at what is our mission in our Catholic schools ... our Catholicity is number one, staying Catholic, our Catholic identity. The other thing is, you have to look at what is really the max per classroom that you want, not necessarily the max of students that you think could be in that classroom or how many you think you can handle,” Hall said. “You almost have to do it class by class.”

Myndi Keyton, principal of Christ the King School in Fort Smith, said she thinks the LEARNS Act gives parents more choices.

“I do believe LEARNS will give parents more options for the education of their children. As we all know, education is not a one-size-fits-all situation,” Keyton wrote in response to questions from Arkansas Catholic.

For Keyton, the LEARNS Act will alleviate some of the costs for parishes, schools and families alike.

“Tuition does not cover the cost of educating students. Catholic parishes have always financially supported their schools to bridge the difference in tuition and actual costs. The LEARNS (Act) will reduce some of those costs,” Keyton wrote.

Keyton said while Christ the King School in Fort Smith’s enrollment for the 2023-24 school year is higher than the previous year, she doesn’t believe that the increase is a direct result of the LEARNS Act because “the majority of the students had enrolled before knowing if they would qualify for the funding.”

Keyton said she is concerned, though, about the spread of inaccurate information about private schools in Arkansas using LEARNS Act funds.

“LEARNS requires any school that receives educational funding to be ANSAA (Arkansas Nonpublic School Accrediting Association) accredited or in the process of ANSAA accreditation. Christ the King Catholic School in Fort Smith has been an ANSAA accredited school for years. Our teachers are highly qualified and we give our students standardized tests,” Keyton wrote.

Vivian Fox, principal of St. John School in Russellville, has also been helping parents navigate the enrollment process. Fox thinks St. John will become more financially stable as a result of the LEARNS Act.

“I believe in the long-term we will grow — after the third year when all students are eligible. This first year we have three or four new students who may not have attended kindergarten with us without the LEARNS EFA account,” Fox said.

For Fox, her support of the opportunities provided by the LEARNS Act stems from her personal experience in enrolling her children in Catholic school, as well as the opportunity to share the faith with new students and families.

“I look forward to having the LEARNS Act in place. I personally put my son through Catholic schools from K-12 grade and my daughter from K-eighth grade ... I am looking forward to reaching out and sharing our faith with more students and families. I am also looking forward to the financial stability it will bring,” Fox said.

Alisha Koonce, director of advancement at Sacred Heart School in Morrilton, said she believes that EFAs will provide many families with the opportunity for a Catholic education.

“Sacred Heart has been and remains committed to ensuring that families who are interested in a Catholic education have access to it. EFAs will certainly help with that,” Koonce said.

Koonce said while EFAs will make Catholic school more accessible, a much wider pay gap in teacher salaries will present a challenge.

“Thanks to a generous and committed community, Sacred Heart has continued to thrive, despite decades of financial challenges. Maintaining affordable tuition in a small town like Morrilton has meant that around half of our annual operating budget has been generated through fundraising,” Koonce said. “Our teacher pay has always been below the public school and even diocesan pay scales. The public school raises brought about by LEARNS further widened that gap, but the funding from EFAs will be extremely helpful as it will allow us to better compensate our teachers ... EFAs will allow us to continue to recruit and retain

excellent teachers while also helping families.”

As a parent, Koonce said she is thankful for the improvement in services for children with special needs.

“As a parent who has had a child receiving a Succeed scholarship since the program began, I'm also glad to see any increase in opportunities for children with special needs,” she said. “Succeed has allowed Sacred Heart to develop and improve services for children with special needs like my son. We were not always sure that he would have access to the same Catholic education as his sisters, but thanks to this program he has and will continue to.”

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