

public policy WATCH

ARKANSAS PUBLIC POLICY PANEL

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MARVELL, DUMAS LEADERS MOVE FROM CRISIS TO SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS IN SCHOOLS

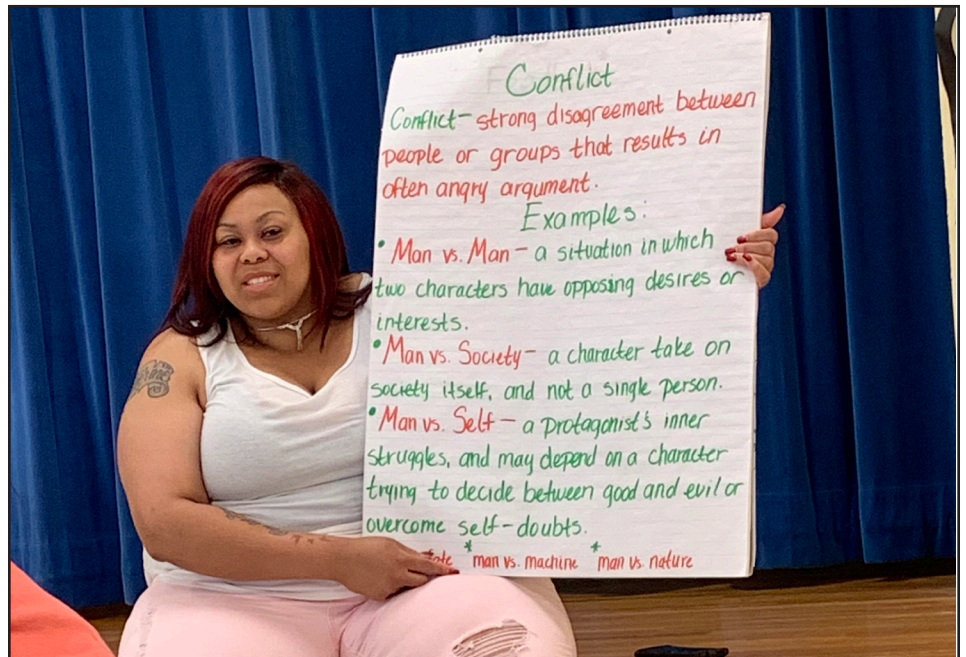
Leaders in two South Arkansas communities are uniting to challenge immediate crises in their schools by building campaigns to tackle broader issues of equity and making sure their students have the opportunities that they deserve.

Parents, students, and the community are organizing. In Dumas, a racist act by a key high school staff member brought the community out to respond. In Marvell, a bullying problem coupled with the loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars from negligence and theft has residents engaged. In both communities, leaders are addressing challenges while they build long-term solutions to improve their education systems.

The student body at Dumas Public Schools is more than 70 percent African American, but the school board, school administration, and teaching staff are all majority white.

When the school's white high school football coach and dean of students sent a racial slur via text in May 2019, parents and members of the community rallied to make sure the incident wasn't swept under the rug.

The Desha County Social Justice Advocacy Alliance organized to voice their concerns before the school's superintendent and board members. Members of



CREATING DIALOGUE: Danielle Wright, a member of the Concerned Citizens of Marvell Area and Teen Talk leader, facilitated a recent discussion among parents on the differences between conflict and bullying.

the board rejected a don't-rehire recommendation by the superintendent, but gave the coach a 100-day suspension, directed sensitivity training, and asked for a public apology.

The incident is still under investigation by the state's Professional Licensure Standards Board ethics subcommittee, and the coach returned to classrooms at the beginning of November after 90 calendar days.

DCSJAA members are campaigning to overturn the reten-

tion decision. They also want to go further and do a racial equity assessment of the school district's budget, staffing policies and leadership.

"Some say the text was an isolated incident," says Alyce Love, chair of DCSJAA. "But Dumas has struggled for a long time with underrepresentation of people of color, and opportunity gaps for our students."

The assessment will measure the impact of the school's bud-
—see **DUMAS**, pg. 5

BUILDING A STRONGER MOVEMENT FOR JUSTICE IN ARKANSAS

A radical political realignment reshaped Arkansas in just the past few years. Progress at the state level is much harder and we have to defend issues, like public education, quality drinking water, and basic civil rights, that are the cornerstones of opportunity and justice. At the same time, there are bright spots to build on from increasing the minimum wage and passing the Dream Act, to defeating some of the most onerous proposals of the far right.



BILL KOPSKY,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

in this environment and building a stronger movement for justice.

I'm excited to say we see opportunities to win significant reforms on key policies in the coming years while building long-term community power. It won't be easy, but we can counteract the radicalization of Arkansas politics by increasing community and voter engagement.

Many of our communities have overcome unbelievable obstacles to the most basic aspects of civic engagement that most Americans take for granted. Secret meetings of public entities, voter intimidation and unrepresentative/unresponsive elected leaders were all commonplace just five years ago.

Today the wins of our communities have opened access to the political process, confronted harassment, and changed significant policy at local and state levels. As our work has matured, we've learned a lot about how to build leadership and constituencies in rural Arkansas and connect them to justice advocates in a powerful statewide coalition, the CFC.

Now our leaders want to take it to another level and win deeper reforms on issues like voting rights and redistricting, education, economic opportunity, clean water and energy, and criminal justice. They want to continue building a powerful organizing and advocacy base to drive reform that shapes Arkansas for years to come.

The key recommendations of the assessment are:

- Expand and strengthen our organizing base. We will double our organizing base and expand into new, underserved areas of the state. We will help our members build more effective campaigns on issues they care about. We will strengthen our organizing on issues like public education, the environment, and racial equity. We are adding a much stronger youth organizing component, building on a pilot we developed over the past two years.

- Expand the capacity of our coalition partner Citizens First Congress (CFC) to help our members build far more powerful campaigns on their priorities. We are strengthening our leadership, engaging more people, and developing ways to reach Arkansans who are outside the current base.

- Build the electoral power of our members. We are developing two prongs of electoral work. One will be a much more ambitious voter education and voter mobilization

strategy. We need more informed voters going to the polls across the state. We are also building a sustained ballot measure strategy to push reforms like reshaping our redistricting process and requiring disclosure of dark money political contributions. When lawmakers won't act, we can go straight to voters with solutions.

- Strengthen our leader development to create a pipeline of leaders for social justice organizing and advocacy in Arkansas, and to run for office themselves. We will launch a new leadership institute in 2020, and we're improving all of our other leadership development tools.

- Ensure that our work remains centered in a racial equity framework. Race equity is at the center of nearly all of our work and we are working with our leaders to highlight and document the driving causes of racial inequity, and build campaigns around solutions.

- Improve the Panel and CFC's capacity. We are strengthening our governance, starting a new organizer training process, and revising our management structure to implement these strategic directions successfully.

External consultants led this assessment and we backed that up with extensive conversations with our leaders, members, and partners. We are building on the lessons of our 56 years of organizing and coalition building.

This is an exciting leap in capacity anchored in the core of our strategy: organizing and coalition building. I hope you'll share your ideas on how to build a stronger social justice movement in Arkansas.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Bill Kopsky', written over a horizontal line.

POLICY IN PICTURES



COMMUNITY OUTREACH: Recent work by Panel organizers and staff included (top left) the 4th Annual Environmental Policy Summit at Pulaski Tech, (top right) a "Know Your Rights" tour of Central Arkansas communities, (second row, left) the Youth Led for Little Rock Ed meeting at the Little Rock Central High School Museum, (second row, right) an Imagination Library Community Coffee event with the Concerned Citizens of Prescott, (bottom left) the third quarter meeting of the Citizens First Congress, and (bottom right) the Annual Gould City Celebration.

2020 CFC CONVENTION DATE ANNOUNCED; MEMBERSHIP DRIVE UNDERWAY NOW

We're excited to announce that the 2020 CFC Convention will take place June 12-14, 2020 at the Four Points by Sheraton Little Rock Midtown.

The convention is your chance to determine the CFC's priorities for 2020-2021 and platform for the upcoming legislative session.

Whether you've been thinking of joining as a first-time member or renewing your membership with the Citizens First Congress, now is the time to connect! Our annual membership drive is underway through December, and we're encouraging everyone interested to join the Citizens First Congress or to renew existing memberships.

The CFC is a coalition of 68 member organizations across Arkansas dedicated to advancing social justice policies in Arkansas. The issues we follow are divided among our Civil Rights, Economic Justice, Education, and Environmental caucuses.

The CFC believes in the power of grassroots organizations to expand opportunities and improve conditions for all Arkansans. The CFC values a representative government that is transparent, accountable, responsive, and inclusive. The CFC envisions a united community working together on many interconnected issues to ensure fairness and expand opportunities in the policy-making process where the voices of all Arkansans are heard.

Its issue-focused caucuses meet in between sessions to develop a short-term list of issues they'd like to see on the

CFC's "Ten Priorities for a Better Arkansas," which are voted on at the Convention.

Caucus meetings provide an opportunity for members to focus on the issues most important to them and develop their analysis in order to build legislative campaigns.

During the convention, delegates will vote to renew existing priorities or to replace them; members get a chance to see how all the issues are connected, and how they can make a larger, more holistic impact by electing priorities and supporting each other's campaigns.

We hope you'll stand with other organizations like yours from across Arkansas in our fight for policy reforms that will improve our state.

Membership dues for 2020 are as follows:

- Individual allies: \$25
- Groups of 10-19: \$50
(Includes two voting delegates to the CFC Convention)
- Groups of 20-29: \$100
(Includes three voting delegates to the CFC Convention)
- Groups of 30 or more: \$150
(Includes four voting delegates to the CFC Convention)

We look forward to our continued partnership with you as we fight to make Arkansas a better place to live.

(For more information, contact Policy Director Kymara Seals by email to kymara@arpanel.org, or by phone at (501) 940-3467.)

Save the Date!

CITIZENS FIRST CONGRESS 2020 CONVENTION

June 12-14, 2020

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DUMAS

— Continued from Page 1

get, staffing, and policies on Dumas' African American and Latinx communities.

"We want to know who applied for teaching positions and who the administrators, teachers, and staff are on each campus. We want to know whether they are African American or Hispanic, and if not, why not?" said Love. "We know that no one thinks they are racist — no one is going to admit they are racist — so it's important that [administrators] ask themselves, 'How does what we do impact the low-income and minority students we serve?'"

Love said she hopes in the future, the racial makeup of the school's administrative and teaching staff mirrors that of its mostly African American custodial and services staff.

"It is very important that the students are able to see people of their own ethnicity in positions of authority and in their classrooms, and that they have culturally competent teachers and allies, no matter their ethnicity," Love added.

The DCSJAA has also launched a campaign to identify more African American candidates for Dumas' five school board seats, and candidates who share the group's values and goals. Dumas' school board is currently comprised of two African American and three white board members.

The group believes a race equity assessment will help everyone better understand how to improve the quality of education for all students.

"Everyone says equity is important, but we need to make sure equity is reflected in our budget, policies and leadership," added Love.

Seventy miles northeast in Marvell, the Concerned Citizens of Marvell Area have seen an uptick of community involvement following a series of unfortunate events in their public school district.

The group reached an organizational milestone with a successful back-to-school event that drew a large crowd of participants. Local businesses provided free services for students, including haircuts and school supplies.

Parents reached out to Panel organizer Jesselia Maples with concerns about bullying in schools. The group organized some initial meetings with students and parents. They reached out to some teachers and counselors. They developed the idea of a "Teen Talk" program to provide a safe space for students to discuss the issues they are facing in their schools.

Maples called the first Talk session "breathtaking," adding that she was taken aback when the group facilitator asked for a show of hands by victims of bullying, and every single student in the room raised a hand.

"Some of the children were shy in the beginning, but they all shined through, and parents are happy that we're doing something positive to address the bullying," Maples said.

CCMA met with the principal and superintendent to get their commitment to continue expanding the program. The process is bringing parents, students, community leaders, educators and administrators together. They are working on bullying, but addressing other issues like reforming school discipline policies as well.

"I'm really proud of the parents and students who are leading this process," added Maples, "and the teachers and school officials who are working with

them."

Bullying is not the only problem community members are addressing in Marvell though. In the last few years, the Marvell-Elaine School District endured the loss of \$100,000 in state funding dedicated to improve opportunities for low-income students due to mismanagement. What's more, a former school employee embezzled \$470,000 in forged checks over a four-year period. Community members are frustrated that school board meetings and procedures routinely failed to follow Arkansas' open meetings law as well.

"Over \$500,000 is a lot for any community to lose, but it's especially concerning in a small, low-income community like ours," said Maples.

Leaders are hopeful now. They are studying the school budget and developing a relationship with a new superintendent who is working to align himself with the community and extend transparency into the inner workings of the school district.

"The new superintendent is making himself accessible, and the community is beginning to feel like they have a voice and that they are heard, so parents are staying at the table for other things in the community," said Panel Organizing Director Janice El-Amin.

In both towns, organizers agree their campaigns are building momentum.

"We're seeing more and more people in our meetings and more participation and activity," El-Amin said. "Sometimes we have to respond to crisis and sometimes we have to start with small things we can achieve, but our leaders are committed to improving their communities. Our campaigns are only going to continue to grow in the next year."

PANEL READIES FOR COMPLETE COUNT



KIDS COUNT: Newborn babies and young children under five are often missed in the census. The 2020 Census helps determine which areas qualify for the critical resources that children and families depend on for the next decade — basically, an entire childhood. Resources that will be impacted include food assistance, Head Start, childcare, housing support, public schools, early intervention services for children with special needs, children’s health insurance, and more. It will also determine how much political representation these kids and their communities will have at the decision-making tables that determine their future.

The Arkansas Public Policy Panel is partnering with several community groups with the goal of a complete count of every Arkansan in the 2020 Census. The work parallels the Panel’s core strategies to organize communities and, bring them together in a coalition to expand social justice.

“There is a lot at stake in this census, from ensuring fair political representation to making sure communities get the resources they deserve to serve their residents,” said Panel Executive Director Bill Kopsky. “When people don’t take the census, it weakens your community and gives away your rights and power in our political system.”

Panel leaders and organizers developed a plan rooted in education and good, old-fashioned phone dialing and footwork.

Efforts will span areas of Arkan-

sas, Bradley, Calhoun, Chicot, Columbia, Crittendon, Desha, Drew, Jefferson, Lee, Lincoln, Nevada, Ouachita, Phillips, Pope, Pulaski, Yell, and Union counties.

Education will center around training on what the census is, the role of the public and community advocates, how to get people to participate in the census and how to conduct a volunteer canvass. Informational tables at public events in the community will further educate and engage residents on the importance of the census.

Staff and volunteers will also distribute educational flyers on the census with the support of partners.

Additionally, the Panel’s census outreach team will organize and support a bureau of local leaders to build community credibility for census work, address the questions or concerns people may have, and

encourage participation.

We will canvass neighborhoods with high numbers of historically undercounted households, and we will assist them in filling out their forms at their door.

The Panel is also organizing leaders to call community members and ask them to commit to being counted. A series of “Fill Out the Census” events will offer communities an opportunity to complete the census in public locations.

Census results are crucial since the once-a-decade data guides Arkansas’ share of funding for services like Medicaid, SNAP, highway and transportation, education and childcare, and housing programs. An undercount of even 1 percent could result in a loss of \$750 million in federal funding for Arkansas over a 10-year period.

The census is the foundation

see **CENSUS**, pg. 7

CENSUS

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for redistricting that determines the number, shape, and size of districts for elected representatives, including the number of congressional seats and Electoral College votes each state gets.

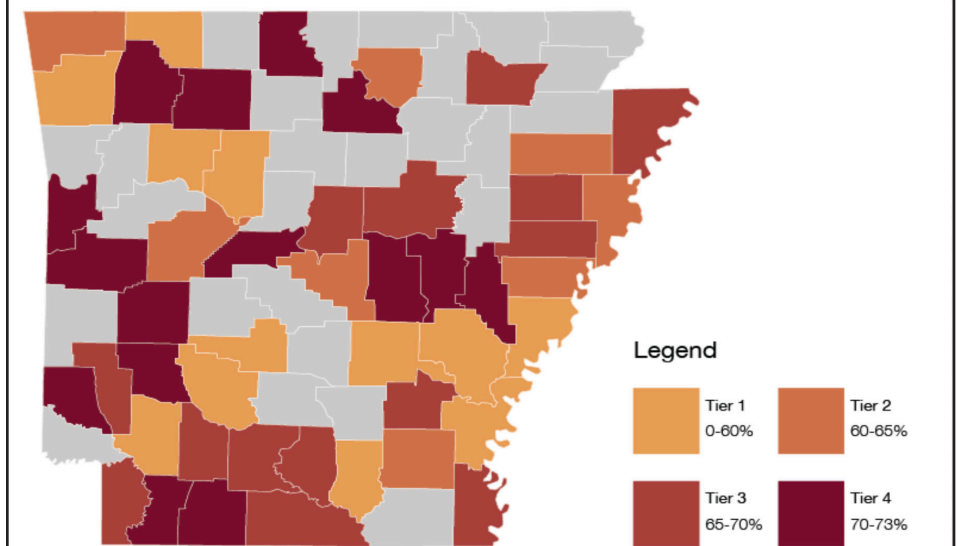
Arkansas' at-risk population includes rural communities, racial and ethnic minorities, non-English speaking residents, low-income households, undocumented immigrants, the homeless, those without access to the internet, young adults and children, the LG-BTQ+ population, and those who generally distrust the government.

An accurate count is paramount so decisions made with the data can help close equity gaps instead of exacerbating them.

Since the last census count, Arkansas' Hispanic population grew by 152 percent. Pacific Islander population saw an increase of 366 percent. About 40 percent of Arkansas' immigrants are living in rural communities of 8,000 or fewer.

And for the first time, the Census is being promoted and made accessible largely online. This presents a unique obstacle to awareness since

ARKANSAS IS VULNERABLE TO AN UNDERCOUNT



BY THE NUMBERS: The map above represents the percentage of Arkansans who completed the census in 2010, outlining the state's most undercounted and hard-to-count areas.

29 percent of Arkansas' households have either limited or no internet access.

Paper forms will still be available, and for the first time, respondents will also be able to call a 1-800 number to provide their information over the phone.

Notable changes for 2020 include new write-in areas under the race question for the non-Hispanic origins of those who identify as white and/or black. New household relationship categories will allow couples living together to identify their

relationships as either "same- or opposite-sex."

Under current federal law, the Census Bureau can't share responses identifying individuals with the public or other federal agencies, including law enforcement and immigration authorities.

It can release anonymous information about specific demographic groups at a level as detailed as a neighborhood.

Most households can expect to see their first census letters in the mail beginning mid-March.



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