AAEA believes it is imperative that this funding source remains intact and enhanced for public schools to continue improving the quality of education for the children of Arkansas. School administrators acknowledge that it is time to review and modify allowable expenditures.

Funding for struggling learners (more commonly known as ESA funding) has been part of the state-funding formula for Arkansas public schools since the 2006-2007 school year. The number of K-12 students in each school district that received free/reduced meals, in accordance with federal eligibility guidelines, determines the funding allotment for each district. Since its inception, this categorical funding source has been a valuable component of Arkansas’ efforts to assist struggling learners and to improve educational outcomes for all students. Districts are provided flexibility to utilize these funds for a number of programs/initiatives under laws established by the Arkansas Legislature and rules developed by DESE.

AAEA offers these guidelines as considerations for the funding model and allowable expenditures.

• Each school in Arkansas has multiple variables in student demographics they must overcome to improve student achievement and help struggling learners. Therefore, maximum flexibility in resource allocation is a necessity for districts to efficiently and effectively meet the educational needs of students without unnecessary restrictions. However, AAEA supports the current approval process of ESA expenditures by DESE for districts based on levels of support.

• It is important to note that the Adequacy Subcommittee made the following recommendation in 2006, “Although the subcommittee agrees with Picus that the use of tutors is one of the best methods of improving academic performance for struggling students, it finds that additional restriction on NSLA (now ESA) funds would remove the flexibility that school districts need to implement their programs for struggling students.” It is also important that schools maintain the current flexibility to transfer funds between categorical funds to meet the individual needs of districts to best serve their diverse student population.

• Every district in Arkansas has poverty students and struggling learners and the poverty numbers are increasing. If districts are expected to provide programs and resources for all struggling learners, an adequate level of ESA funding is essential to provide needed services for our children.

• Statewide, the current level of ESA funds should not decrease. In fact, as poverty levels continue to rise in the State, funding levels should increase proportionally. Also, districts should be held harmless due to the current pandemic.

• A consistent and accurate measurement of student success is needed to gauge student growth. This measurement should include more than just closing the achievement gap as these funds are to help ALL struggling students. AAEA would work with school districts and DESE to develop a proper measurement of student growth.

AAEA has conducted several educator surveys over the years on ESA allowable expenditures. Survey results regularly identify allowable expenditures considered to have the greatest impact in assisting struggling learners achieve and improving student learning for all children. AAEA strongly believes that the initiatives listed below, that are currently allowed by law, must remain eligible expenditures of ESA funds.

• Before and after-school academic programs, including transportation.
• Pre-K programs such as ABC.
• Tutors, aides, counselors, social workers, nurses, and curriculum specialists.
• Summer programs.
• Materials, supplies, and equipment, for programs approved by DESE.
• Professional Development identified in a district’s support plan.
• Dyslexia programs and interventions.
• Recruiting and retaining effective teachers.
AAEA also strongly believes that several other expenditures allowed by rule be added to current law regarding allowable ESA expenditures

- Instructional facilitators or Literacy/Math/Science/School Improvement Specialists.
- Professional Development in literacy/math/science.
- School safety measures such as SROs that promote a safe and secure school culture.

There are “other activities approved by the DESE” that are neither in law nor rule. AAEA recommends that the following be added as allowable expenditures in law.

- Social Emotional Learning programs along with other mental health supports for struggling learners such as behavioral health specialists.

**Talking Points:**

- Every district has struggling learners. An adequate level of ESA funding is essential to provide needed services for our children.

- AAEA strongly supports an inflationary COLA for ESA funds. A large portion of these funds are spent on personnel providing essential services to children. Recent state mandates in the minimum teacher salary schedule and minimum wages have substantially increased personnel costs.

- Performing districts should be allowed maximum flexibility in resource allocation to meet the educational needs of students without unnecessary restrictions.

- Flexibility to transfer between categorical funds to meet the specific needs of districts to best serve their diverse student population is absolutely critical. DESE also needs flexibility to