

# State Capitol Week in Review

From Sen. Jonathan Dismang



August 11, 2023  
LITTLE ROCK – This year back to school activities in Arkansas have historic importance, thanks to the far-reaching changes in Act 237 of 2023.

Act 237 is the LEARNS Act, proposed by the governor and approved by the legislature earlier this year. LEARNS is an acronym that stands for Literacy, Empowerment, Accountability, Readiness, Networking and School Safety.

The act provides parents with more school choice options than they have ever had. Tuition at private and parochial schools will be more affordable than at any time in Arkansas history, thanks to the Educational Freedom Accounts created by Act 237.

Parents of qualified students can use the Educational Freedom Accounts to pay tuition at qualifying schools, which include most of the accredited private and parochial schools in Arkansas.

This year, eligible students are in these categories: children entering kindergarten, students coming from a school that got an "F" on the most recent school report cards or districts in Level 5, meaning they are in distress and receive intensive support from the state.

Also eligible are students coming from the Succeed Scholarship Program, homeless children and children currently or formerly in foster care, students with disabilities and children of active-duty military personnel.

In Arkansas, school funding is based on student population. Act 237 awards eligible families up to 90 percent of that amount. This year it will be approximately \$6,600 per eligible student.

Educational Freedom Accounts are being phased in over three years. This year it is available to 1.5 percent of

all Arkansas students which is about 7,000 scholarships. In the 2024-2025 school year, Educational Freedom Accounts will be available to 3 percent of students in Arkansas.

In the 2025-2026 school year, Educational Freedom Accounts will be universal. However, the state Board of Education may have to set a limit based on the sufficiency of public funds and number of applications received.

Act 237 has other historic provisions, such as a repeal of caps on the number of charter schools in Arkansas. It directs high schools to offer dual course tracks. One track prepares students for college and the other teaches job skills for students who want to enter the job market immediately after they graduate from high school.

The act raises minimum teacher salaries from \$36,000 to \$50,000 and gives all teachers a minimum of a \$2,000 raise. This places Arkansas in the top 5 in the country for starting teacher pay. When adjusted for cost of living, it places Arkansas as number one in the country.

Act 237 also repeals the Teacher Fair Dismissal Act and allows teachers up to 12 weeks of paid maternity leave if a school district chooses to opt in.

The new law raises standards for literacy. Currently, only approximately 35 percent of third graders are reading at or above grade level. The state will hire 120 literacy coaches and will set up a grant program to provide \$500 for families with a student in kindergarten through third grade, who is reading below grade level, so they can hire a tutor.

Arkansas has 259 public school districts and 22 open enrollment charter districts. There are 477,000 students in the state.

## From State Representative Jim Wooten



As we navigate busy streets in our communities, rushing to work or running errands, it's easy to get caught up in the fast pace of modern life. However, one thing demands our utmost attention on Arkansas roadways- a stopped school bus with its flashing lights and extended stop arm.

Every day during the school year, more than 350,000 Arkansas children are depending on school buses to transport them safely to and from school. These buses make multiple stops in every community.

As the 2023-2024 school year is about to begin, we want to remind Arkansans that it is illegal to pass a stopped school bus. The fines, penalties, and punishment for anyone found guilty of illegally passing a stopped school bus were increased dramatically by Act 2128 of 2005, also known as Isaac's Law. The legislation was named in honor of Isaac Brian, an elementary school student in the Bryant School District who was struck and killed when a driver illegally passed his school bus while students were exiting the vehicle.

The law requires drivers to stop on 2-lane and 4-lane highways in both directions, even those with a middle lane. Drivers cannot attempt

to pass in any direction until the school bus vehicle has finished receiving or discharging its passengers and is in motion again.

In the 2021 Regular Session, the General Assembly passed Act 264 to clarify the distance and areas where drivers must stop. It states drivers must come to a complete stop no less than 30 feet from the bus when it stops to load or unload passengers. This 30 feet perimeter would apply to public roads, private or public property open to the general public, and any driveway or parking lot belonging to a public school.

Arkansans should also remember that the use of handheld wireless phones is prohibited in a school zone. In 2019, the General Assembly passed legislation making the use of a handheld phone in school zones a primary offense.

When a school bus comes to a halt and activates its flashing lights and stop arm, it's an indication that children are entering or exiting the bus. This vulnerable moment requires our undivided attention and a momentary pause in our busy lives. Remember: Flashing Red means Kids Ahead.

and the only source for station-level data. GasBuddy's survey updates 288 times every day from the most diverse list of sources covering nearly 150,000 stations nationwide, the most comprehensive and up-to-date in the country. GasBuddy data is accessible at <http://prices.GasBuddy.com>.

SOURCE GasBuddy

# What's Left!

By Lee "Cat" McLane  
Editor/Publisher



Can you believe that the summer is officially gone since school has started? It goes by so fast! I know the kids - some of them - are happy to be back and some of the teachers are happy to be back. I bet it is exciting to see the look on a student's face when they finally understand that Algebra problem or have that look of understanding when the teacher introduces them to a new concept.

I remember when I learned to tell time - at age 4. And when I blew my first bubble with gum - age 5. Learned to read - beginning at age 5. Back then we did not have kindergarten - we had relatives and knowledgeable neighbors. I had a couple who were childless that lived down the street from me and they taught me so much. Not to say anything against my parents - who taught me many things - this couple had much time and no kids. But, shortly after they started teaching me, they decided to adopt. They got three boys and that was the end of my time with them. It took me some time to get over that. It wasn't that I was not welcome there

anymore but they were so consumed with these three boys - as they should have been - that they did not have the time for me. I still have such fond memories of them. I know they made great adoptive parents. I even went to school with the boys - which I never really liked. (Surprise!)

We have a new kitten at our house. She is more rabbit than cat. She hops around for three or four hops then walks a few steps and then hops again. The other day she was on one side of my bed and meant to hop onto me but miscalculated and hopped over me and right off the bed. It was hilarious. She was embarrassed and hid under the bed until she got over it - a couple of minutes - and was then back to hopping. A kitten is such entertainment! My other cats are starting to warm up to her but it will still take a bit of time.

I hope all you students have a great school year!

Go to your happy & grateful place!

See you next week!



## Arkansas Weekly Gas Price Update

Average gasoline prices in Arkansas have fallen 1.7 cents per gallon in the last week, averaging \$3.46/g today, according to GasBuddy's survey of 1,826 stations in Arkansas. Prices in Arkansas are 30.5 cents per gallon higher than a month ago and stand 2.6 cents per gallon higher than a year ago. The national average price of diesel has risen 12.3 cents in the last week and stands at \$4.270 per gallon.

According to GasBuddy price reports, the cheapest station in Arkansas was priced at \$2.35/g yesterday while the most expensive was \$4.19/g, a difference of \$1.84/g. The lowest price in the state yesterday was \$2.35/g while the highest was \$4.19/g, a difference of \$1.84/g.

The national average price of gasoline has risen 2.5 cents per gallon in the last week, averaging \$3.82/g today. The national average is up 29.1 cents per gallon from a month ago and stands 9.6 cents per gallon lower than a year ago, according to GasBuddy data compiled from more than 11 million weekly price reports covering over 150,000 gas stations across the country.

Historical gasoline prices in Arkansas and the national average going back ten years:  
August 14, 2022: \$3.43/g (U.S. Average: \$3.92/g)  
August 14, 2021: \$2.86/g (U.S. Average: \$3.17/g)  
August 14, 2020: \$1.85/g (U.S. Average: \$2.18/g)

August 14, 2019: \$2.29/g (U.S. Average: \$2.64/g)  
August 14, 2018: \$2.57/g (U.S. Average: \$2.86/g)  
August 14, 2017: \$2.10/g (U.S. Average: \$2.34/g)  
August 14, 2016: \$1.93/g (U.S. Average: \$2.12/g)  
August 14, 2015: \$2.31/g (U.S. Average: \$2.66/g)  
August 14, 2014: \$3.25/g (U.S. Average: \$3.47/g)  
August 14, 2013: \$3.31/g (U.S. Average: \$3.52/g)

Neighboring areas and their current gas prices: Memphis- \$3.46/g, down 3.0 cents per gallon from last week's \$3.49/g. Little Rock- \$3.39/g, down 1.6 cents per gallon from last week's \$3.41/g. Shreveport- \$3.35/g, down 5.1 cents per gallon from last week's \$3.40/g.

"The national average price of gasoline continues to hold near the highest level we've seen since last October, touching \$3.84 per gallon. It could climb slightly higher as we get

closer to Labor Day, as oil prices remain under pressure from recent OPEC+ production cuts," said Patrick De Haan, head of petroleum analysis at GasBuddy. "While July CPI data looked pretty good with energy prices well below their year-ago level, August data isn't going to look nearly as friendly. Gasoline prices stand just over a dime away from rising back above their year ago level - something that is definitely possible by the closing summer holiday. In addition, the largest refinery in the Midwest moved up its seasonal maintenance to several weeks earlier than expected, causing a somewhat unexpected jump at the pump in the Great Lakes. Motorists will likely see a mixed bag at the pump this week, with a few states seeing prices fall slightly, while others will see the opposite."

GasBuddy is the authoritative voice for gas prices

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