

More community colleges to offer aid to poor parents

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After five months of development and growth, a partnership aimed at attracting poor parents without degrees to higher education is expanding to 11 of the state's 22 community colleges, Gov. Mike Huckabee and other officials announced on Wednesday.

Arkansas Career Pathways provides services including financial aid, child care and transportation stipends to more than 750 adults who are already participating in the program.

In addition to lowering the college price tag, Pathways offers counseling to help parents thrive in the college scene and tackle obstacles that have kept them away from it.

"There are many barriers that are in the way," Huckabee said at a news conference. "Those barriers sometimes include transportation, sometimes it was a barrier of child care."

The program began in August with five colleges, and demand is high, officials said.

"It was overwhelming," said Phil Shirley, president of Southeast Arkansas College in Pine Bluff, where the program was piloted. "We are really full to the maximum."

The school has about 280 students who are benefiting from the program.

"We've had great early response from our local residents," said Ed Franklin, director of the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges.

"We're getting feedback that this is the right way to help them."

State officials estimate that about 193,000 Arkansans are eligible for the initiative's assistance.

To advertise the program, the partnering agencies are mailing letters to those who are qualified.

"We say in Arkansas no adult will be left behind," said Linda Beene, director of the Arkansas Department of Higher Education.

Arkansas Career Pathways is funded by a two-year, \$16 million grant from the Arkansas Transitional Employment Board, she said.

The Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges, Arkansas Department of Workforce Education, the Arkansas Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Workforce Services and the Southern Good Faith Fund are also partners in the program.

Huckabee said the Pathways program is a big step in raising

Schools participating in the initiative

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The following two-year schools are now offering services as part of the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative:

- Arkansas Northeastern College in Blytheville.
- Arkansas State University-Beebe in Searcy.
- Arkansas State University-Newport.
- Black River Technical College in Pocahontas.
- Cossatot Community College of the University of Arkansas in De Queen.

■ East Arkansas Community College in Forrest City.

■ Mid-South Community College in West Memphis.

■ Ouachita Technical College in Malvern.

■ Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas in Helena-West Helena.

■ Pulaski Technical College in North Little Rock.

■ Southeast Arkansas College in Pine Bluff.

More information about Arkansas Career Pathways is available at www.arpathways.com or (866)400-7284.

the state's educational attainment and thus, its per capita income.

"If we were to do that we would actually have more money coming in to cover things such as education and Medicaid and highways and everything else," he said.

The program's advisers help students see if they qualify for Pell grants or other state or federal aid first. If they aren't eligible, the Career Pathways program has assistance for which they may qualify.

"The system works because it delivers services at the local level where we can make a positive impact in the communities," Franklin said.

For Samantha Dougar, a Sulphur Springs resident, the Pathways program has made her commute to the Southeast Arkansas College campus affordable.

The 26-year-old mother of two boys, one born prematurely with a host of medical problems, takes advantage of gas vouchers worth 20 cents a mile.

"There's also a lot of emotional support from the instructors and counselors," Dougar said. "You get a friend, someone you can lean on when you're having a hard time. I thought, 'Had I waited too long to go back to school?' They were there to give that boost."

Dougar plans to work on her prerequisite courses so she can study respiratory therapy.

Requirements for Arkansas Career Pathways participants include being a parent with children under the age of 19 living at home and receiving or having received Transitional Employment Assistance, receiving food stamps or Medicaid, or having annual family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

Since its inception in August,

the program's total grant awards to the 11 participating colleges, Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges and the Southern Good Faith Fund totaled \$6.1 million, according to the Arkansas Department of Higher Education. Each of the schools received about \$500,000.

Of the grants awarded to the institutions, about \$665,000 had been spent as of Dec. 30, a department official said.

On Wednesday, Huckabee bragged on the community colleges' ability to deliver the services poor students need.

"I cannot stress enough how that when you really need to do something innovative that requires an immense response, it's the two-year colleges in Arkansas that have the capacity to do that," he said.

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