

rootEd ARKANSAS

IMPACT REPORT

Heartland Summit

DRIVING ECONOMIC GROWTH
THROUGH RURAL EDUCATION
AND WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT

2024-2025 ACADEMIC YEAR



**HEARTLAND
FORWARD**
A THINK-AND-DO-TANK



rootEd
ARKANSAS





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OVERVIEW

In Fall 2024, Heartland Forward partnered with rootEd Alliance and the Arkansas Department of Education to launch rootEd Arkansas, a public-private initiative that places full-time advisors in rural high schools to help students graduate with a plan and prepare for their futures.

In just one year, the program supported nearly **500 students across 10 rural high schools. 98% of seniors developed a defined postsecondary plan, and 83% of graduates intend to pursue further education or training, compared to 50% pre-rootEd.** Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates in rootEd schools are **19 percentage points higher than the state average**, unlocking critical financial aid that helps make college and career training affordable. Students not pursuing college are expected to see estimated **median wage gains of over \$11,000**, and many entered high-demand sectors like healthcare, the skilled trades and advanced manufacturing.

Beyond the numbers, rootEd is helping schools forge stronger partnerships with local employers and workforce partners. Advisors are connecting students with job shadowing, industry tours and local training opportunities—ensuring rural students graduate with a plan.

This report captures year-one progress and demonstrates what is possible when rural students have access to personalized support and clear postsecondary pathways.



rootEd MODEL AND APPROACH

rootEd advisors are trained professionals placed directly in rural schools to provide 1:1 college and career guidance. They help students:

▶ **Explore**

high-growth, high-wage
career paths

▶ **Participate**

in financial planning workshops
and connect with resources

▶ **Apply**

to colleges, apprenticeships,
workforce opportunities or the
military

▶ **Secure**

job opportunities or training
credentials

▶ **Navigate**

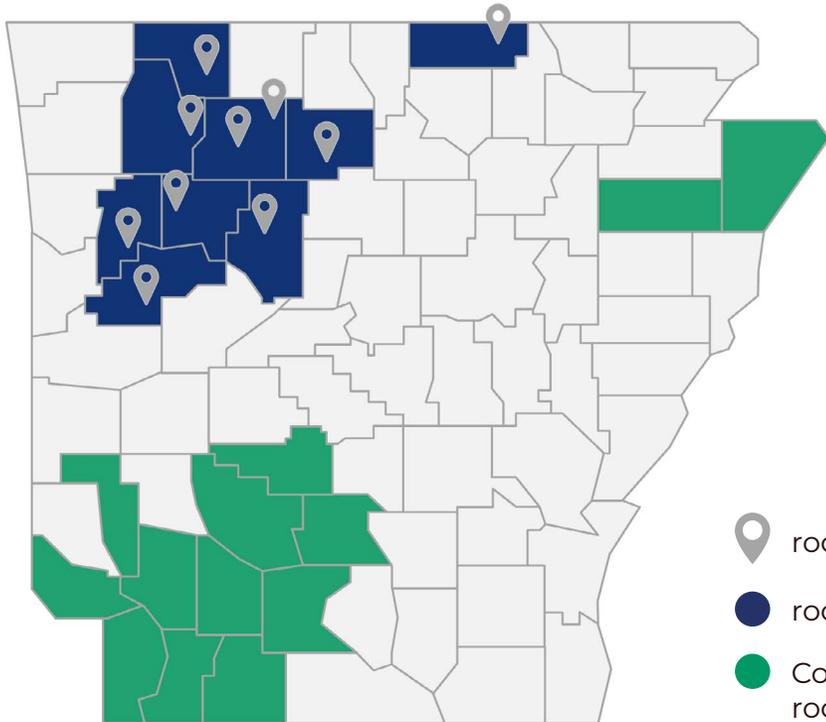
FAFSA and scholarship processes

▶ **Prepare**

for the transition to college and career

Advisors are embedded in schools and often come from the same communities they serve, which helps to quickly build trust and ensure their advice is tailored and relevant.

rootEd ARKANSAS GEOGRAPHIC FOOTPRINT



-  rootEd AR Pilot Schools
-  rootEd AR Pilot Counties
-  Counties for Future rootEd Expansion





“Many students come to me feeling uncertain and even fearful about their next steps after high school, and often their parents share those same concerns. In my role, I am able to support both students and families in seeing the possibilities ahead. I have witnessed countless positive moments as students realize that college and career pathways are attainable—and often easier to navigate than they first imagined.”

- Hayden Savage
rootEd Arkansas Advisor
Mammoth Spring High School

IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

CAREER EXPOSURE OPPORTUNITIES

97%

of students participated in industry tours, job shadowing or internships.

Business visits included partners in **health care, cosmetology, construction, welding, telecommunications** and **electric cooperatives**.

Advisors are increasingly dedicating their time to organizing career exposure and workforce-bound activities—**aligning programming with what students find most helpful** in their postsecondary planning.

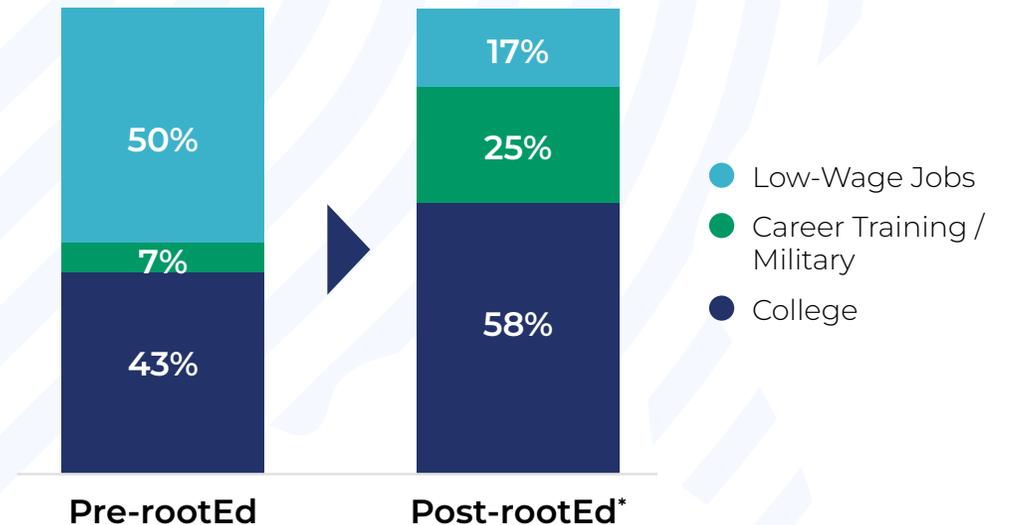
STUDENT ADVISING AND PLANNING

99%

of seniors worked with a rootEd advisor to develop a post-high school plan.

66%

more students intend to pursue education / training over low-wage jobs compared to students before rootEd.



*Post-rootEd data reflects intended plans at the end of the school year and does not account for final enrollment numbers.

IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

FINANCIAL ACCESS



rootEd Arkansas FAFSA completion rate is

19%

higher than the Arkansas state average.

rootEd students access **2x the national average** in financial aid.

Non-college bound students are expected to see estimated median **wage gains of over \$11,000** vs. students at their schools before rootEd Arkansas

IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS

80% of workforce bound rootEd Arkansas students intend to **enter positions in high-growth industries.**

73% of Class of 2025 graduates intended to **pursue further education or training** (vs. 50% pre-rootEd baseline).

85% of rootEd Arkansas students said their advisor helped them **increase their knowledge of postsecondary pathways.**

51%  **71%**
rootEd Arkansas students' self-reported **confidence in their pathway increased** from 51% at the beginning of their senior year to 71% at the end.

TOP 5 CAREER TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR rootEd ARKANSAS GRADUATES

-  Welding
-  Electrician
-  Certified Nursing Assistant Program
-  HVAC
-  Electric Lineworker



YEAR IN REVIEW: KEY EVENTS AND ENGAGEMENT

rootEd CAPITOL DAY

rootEd Capitol Day was a first-of-its-kind event giving rural students from all 10 rootEd Arkansas schools the opportunity to visit the state capitol.

During the event, students:

- ▶ Met with legislators to discuss career pathways and policy solutions that support rural workforce development.
- ▶ Toured the Capitol and participated in a roundtable discussion on broadband, health care and education policy—key drivers of Arkansas’s economic future.

Representative Lee Johnson, co-chair of the Heartland Health Caucus, recognized rootEd students on the house floor and celebrated rootEd Arkansas for preparing and equipping the next generation of Arkansans for success.



“rootEd Arkansas is ensuring students in rural communities have access to college and career advising, providing the guidance and resources they need to confidently plan their futures. We must continue investing in these opportunities to strengthen our workforce and economic future.”

Arkansas State Representative Lee Johnson

▶ rootEd Capitol Day Press Release

YEAR IN REVIEW: KEY EVENTS AND ENGAGEMENT

rootEd DECISION DAY

Advisors organized schoolwide celebrations to recognize seniors' postsecondary decisions—whether students are enrolling in college, entering the workforce, enlisting in the military or pursuing other opportunities.



YEAR IN REVIEW: KEY EVENTS AND ENGAGEMENT



“Arkansas’ rural communities are our engines for economic growth, and their students make up the future of our state. I am thankful for Heartland Forward and rootEd Arkansas’s investment in our students’ education as we continue to work together to strengthen our job market and make Arkansas the best place to live and work, no matter the size of the community.”

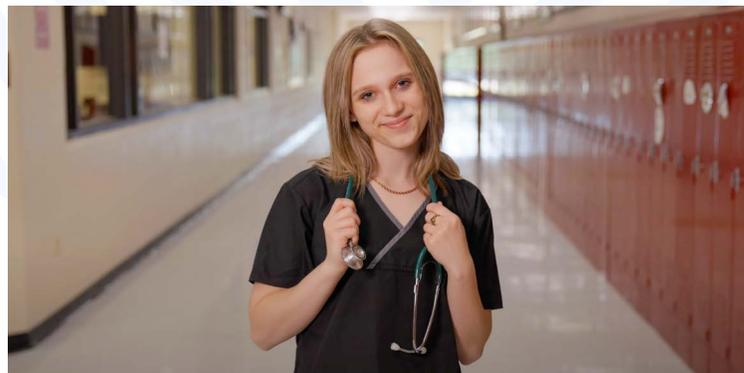
Arkansas Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders

rootEd ARKANSAS IMPACT



[Watch Video](#)

rootEd ARKANSAS: CHEYENNE’S STORY



[Watch Video](#)

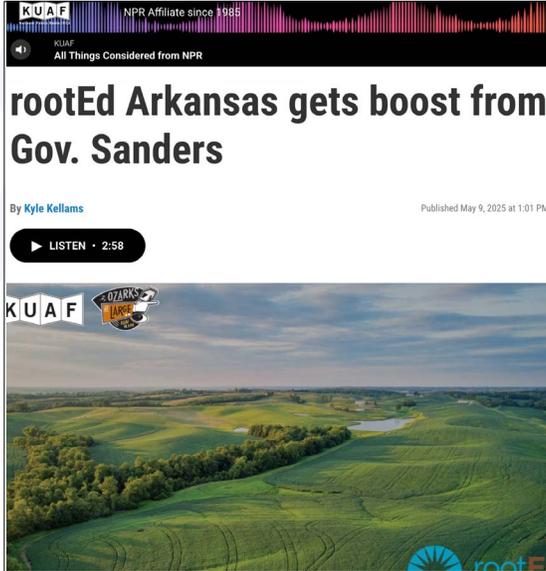
CHARLESTON HIGH SCHOOL: rootEd DECISION DAY



[Watch Video](#)

IN THE NEWS

EARNED MEDIA



rootEd Arkansas gets boost from Gov. Sanders

By Kyle Kellams | Published May 9, 2025 at 1:01 PM

LISTEN • 2:58

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Governor honors high school seniors from small rural schools at the Heartland Summit in Bentonville

May 8, 2025 by Doug Thompson

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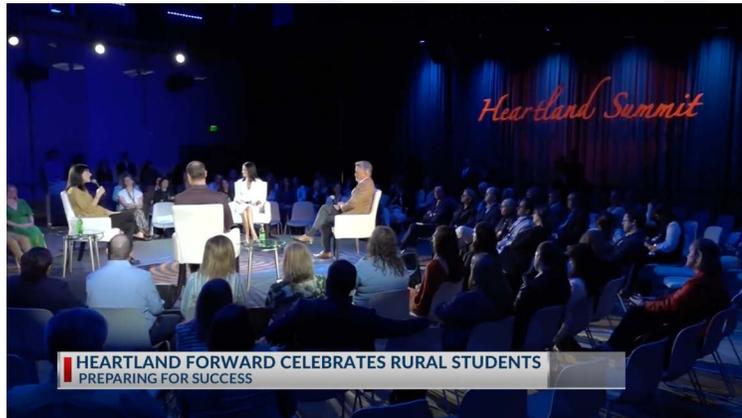


Rural Arkansas students find their path with rootEd Arkansas

by Scott Solomon | Thu, May 8th 2025 at 10:57 PM

In the heart of Arkansas, rural high school students are finding new pathways to success thanks to rootEd Arkansas, a public-private initiative aimed at bridging the gap in college and career guidance. (7News)

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Watch Video

TESTIMONIALS



“My rootEd advisor has been there since day one. When I didn’t think I was getting anywhere, she was there to motivate me to keep on going and to keep on trying no matter how hard it got. I believe every school in Arkansas, and maybe even the nation, should have a program like this.”

- Cheyenne
Charleston High School



“My rootEd advisor has helped me realize there are so many more opportunities that I can do with welding than staying home. I can travel; I can do anything I want with it. She has helped me apply to more trade schools than I can count.”

- Bailey
Dover High School



“My rootEd advisor helped me narrow down options with industry tours, guest speakers and career fair and lots of talks in her office. She showed me the Connecting the Heartland jobs board.”

- Xander
Dover High School



“I knew that I wanted to major in Psychology, but I did not know exactly what that looked like or how to accomplish that until my rootEd Advisor helped me by setting up a job shadowing opportunity with our elementary guidance counselor. That totally opened my eyes, it revealed to me what jobs are available and what opportunities I can take in the field of psychology.”

- Madalyn
Green Forest High School



“My rootEd advisor scheduled a job shadow for me at the University of Arkansas with their assistant band director. I got to walk around with him, see how he interacts with students and talk to a couple graduate students. That really solidified my career pathway but also what college I want to go to.”

- Henry
Green Forest High School

Student Satisfaction



of rootEd Arkansas students are satisfied with their rootEd advisors

Advisor Satisfaction



of rootEd Arkansas advisors feel valued and supported

Administrator and Counselor Satisfaction



of administrators and counselors are satisfied with their advisor's work

LOOKING AHEAD

In just one year, the success of rootEd Arkansas has proven how effective individualized, 1:1 advising is in supporting rural high school students—and this is only the beginning.

NEXT STEPS FOR rootEd ARKANSAS

- ▶ Expansion to additional school districts across Arkansas
- ▶ Roll out gamified AI literacy training across all rootEd Arkansas schools in partnership with [Stemuli](#)
- ▶ Additional partnerships with employers and training providers
- ▶ Provide additional support for rootEd alumni students
- ▶ Continued alignment with state workforce priorities and increased support for workforce-bound students

To bring rootEd to your school or support its mission, contact rootEd Arkansas Director Ali Jeffrey at ajeffrey@heartlandforward.org





**HEARTLAND
FORWARD**
A THINK-AND-DO-TANK

Heartland Forward is a non-profit, policy think-and-do tank that turns ideas into action for states and local communities. Our mission is to accelerate economic growth, change the narrative about the middle of the country and generate \$500 million of economic impact to the heartland by 2030. We do this through applied research, community-driven programs, policy and convenings—focusing on regional competitiveness, talent pipeline and health and wellness.

[Website](#)



rootEd
ARKANSAS

Every student should graduate high school on a path to a well-paying job and economic stability. rootEd Alliance places dedicated college and career advisors in rural high schools to work one-on-one with all seniors to define and create a plan for their futures, whether through a college degree, work-based learning, or military service. Launched in 2018 and now operating in Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, Alaska, and Idaho, rootEd advisors will serve over 20,000 students at 280 rural high schools in the 2025-2026 academic year. This approach is working: as a result of rootEd, 29% more high school students are pursuing college and career training following graduation. rootEd Alliance is made possible by a group of philanthropists and family and founder-led businesses, convened by BDT & MSD Partners.

[Website](#)



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