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## **State Panel Okays Plan Expanding Access to a High School Diploma for Arkansas Adults**

*The Excel Center® Seeks to Open Two New Schools*

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (June 17, 2021) — This week, the Charter Authorizing Panel put its stamp of approval on a plan to open two new adult high schools in Arkansas. The two locations, which are contingent on the securing of funding, are to be located in the Jonesboro and Springdale areas.

The Excel Center, operated by Goodwill Industries of Arkansas, is a charter school for adults 19 and older. The existing campus is located at Goodwill’s headquarters, 7400 Scott Hamilton Drive in Little Rock.

“Census data suggests that there are approximately 46,000 adults over the age of 25 in Springdale and the surrounding communities, as well as an additional 22,000 in the Jonesboro area, who currently lack a high school diploma,” said Markous Jewett, vice president of mission services at Goodwill Industries of Arkansas. “The Excel Center provides an opportunity for adults to achieve that goal, through a supportive environment with an intentional focus on ‘what comes next,’ in terms of college and career readiness for each adult learner.”

The Excel Center opened in 2017 and is the only tuition-free school in the state offering adults an opportunity to graduate high school. Approximately 320,000 adults in Arkansas lack a high school diploma. The Excel Center is built around the concept of making education available to all and removing barriers adults may face in completing their education. The Excel Center provides transportation assistance, tutoring, life coaching and free drop-in childcare while students attend class.

"Ever since I walked into the place, it has changed my life. It was everything I needed right when I needed it," said Excel Center graduate Melvin Williams. "It helped remove some of the barriers I had in the work world, and ultimately I wanted to be able to go further."

Goodwill believes making education more accessible improves a person's employability, improves their financial independence, strengthens families and communities and creates a workforce that will stimulate the economy.

"We see The Excel Center as a both an educational and workforce solution for the entire state of Arkansas," added Goodwill President and CEO Brian F. Marsh. "In graduating from The Excel Center, doors that were previously closed to our students are now open and accessible. The impact The Excel Center has on our graduates doesn't stop there. By making education a cornerstone of the foundation in their homes, we are able to make meaningful, multi-generational change for our students and their families."

While it has passed its first step in the approval process, in order for the plan to become reality, the school must find a funding source. Unlike traditional charter schools, The Excel Center currently receives no state funding. Instead, the \$2 million in operation costs is funded nearly entirely by the sale of donations at Goodwill stores. The plan will go before the full State Board of Education July 15.

#### **About Goodwill Industries of Arkansas**

Goodwill Industries of Arkansas is dedicated to changing lives through education, training and employment. Goodwill runs The Excel Center®, the first tuition-free high school for adults 19 and older, with life coaches, drop-in childcare and transportation assistance. The 501(c)(3) non-profit organization also runs robust reentry program for those returning from incarceration. Fewer than 6% of those who complete the program return to prison. In addition, The Academy at Goodwill is a state licensed private post-secondary career school that offers a variety of certifications for high-demand careers. Goodwill's economic impact on Arkansas was \$200,000,000 in the last fiscal year.

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