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Education Week's Report on Arkansas


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QUALITY COUNTS 2005

As schools open their doors for the spring 2005 semester, many legislatures around the nation are meeting to discuss accountability standards, equity and adequacy issues, and the link between money and student performance. While the education issues of 2005 are not unique, in that they have been discussed for years, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) deadline for schools to begin performing at higher standards increases the urgency. In addition to the increased standards, state policymakers are facing difficult legal challenges to their school funding systems.

In an attempt to gauge the status of the nation and each state, *Education Week* has published state report cards since 1997 with its annual *Quality Counts* series, one of several national reports issued each year by various education organizations. *Education Week's* report cards grade each state on student achievement, standards and accountability, efforts to improve teacher quality, school climate, resource equity, and resource adequacy. Throughout the nine year history, each year's report includes a special focus. For example, in 1998, the focus was on urban schools, and, in 2004, the focus was on Special Education. The latest report was released early January 2005, entitled *Quality Counts 2005: No Small Change, Targeting Money Toward Student Performance*. This brief summarizes Arkansas' position on the 2005 report, compares Arkansas to its border states on each measure, and illustrates Arkansas' changes over time.

ARKANSAS' 2005 EVALUATION

Student Achievement (no grade): *Education Week* does not grade states with regard to student achievement; rather the report references each state's most recent NAEP performance. The most recent NAEP tests were conducted in 2003, where Arkansas' Grade 4 and 8 percent scoring proficient

and above in reading was 28 and 27 percent respectively, while Grade 4 and 8 percent scoring proficient and above in math was 26 and 19 percent respectively. In both reading and math, Arkansas students performed below the national average and in the middle of its border states. For a thorough discussion of Arkansas' NAEP performances visit http://www.uark.edu/ua/oep/Working_Papers.htm.

Standards and Accountability (C): Arkansas is performing at the average level on this measure, which was based on state academic standards, assessments, and accountability systems. According to the report, Arkansas has established clear and specific standards for English, mathematics, and science for Kindergarten through Grade 9. The English and mathematics standards, however, are not clear or specific at the high school level, while the standards for social studies/history lack clarity and specificity at all levels. The report also states that Arkansas is missing tests that evaluate the established standards (e.g. Arkansas is missing standards-based science or social studies tests in any grade). The report does praise Arkansas' efforts to assess student knowledge at all grade levels and holding schools accountable for student achievement on such assessments. In addition, the report notes that Arkansas provides report cards with test data and assigns each school a grade based on the test results.

Efforts to Improve Teacher Quality (B+): This category rating was based on the thoroughness of a state's requirements for the education, qualifications, and assessment of its teachers. The state requires future teachers to pass basic-skills and subject specific tests in order to obtain a teaching license. Once teachers pass these initial tests, they enter an induction phase, which lasts from one to three years and concludes when the teacher takes the Praxis III. During the induction phase, teachers are assigned a mentor who assists the new teacher in adjusting to the profession. After the Praxis III,

teachers receive advanced certifications and have an established support network.

In addition to the regular process, Arkansas has emergency waivers that allow districts to place teachers into subjects and areas where they are not certified. Arkansas is one of only three states that requires schools to inform parents that an unlicensed teacher is teaching in their child's classroom. Arkansas has also developed a Non-Traditional Licensure Program, which recruits more individuals into the teaching profession.

School Climate (C+): School climate ratings were determined by student engagement, school safety, school and class size, school facilities, choice and autonomy, harassment and bullying prevention, and parental involvement. The report praises Arkansas for having a statewide system of open enrollment, a charter school law, laws intended to reduce bullying and harassment, and for including safety information on school report cards. The report, however, also notes that Arkansas has not developed specific penalties for those who commit violent acts in school and that too many of Arkansas' schools report that absenteeism, tardiness, and low parent involvement are problems.

Equity and Spending (C+): Equity and spending

ratings were determined by the relationship between district wealth and education revenue, and the funding disparities across districts. According to the report, Arkansas has a positive wealth-neutrality score, which means that on average, districts with high property values have more revenue than poor districts do. Arkansas ranks 28th of the 50 states on the wealth-neutrality score. Arkansas, however, does perform comparatively better on the McLoone Index and the Coefficient of Variation, which are other measures of the disparity between district spending. With regard to spending, Arkansas ranks 37th of 49 states for average expenditure per pupil; however, 45 percent of Arkansas students attend a school where the per pupil spending is equal to or higher than the national average.

ARKANSAS' POSITION COMPARED TO SURROUNDING STATES

Arkansas' scores ranged from near the bottom to the top across the four measures (see Table 1). The grade given for standards and accountability was tied for worst among the border states. However, the grade for resources and equity was the best, while efforts to improve teacher quality and school climate grades were tied for second best among the border states.

Table 1: Summary Grades for Arkansas and Border States, 2005

State	Standards and Accountability	Efforts to Improve Teacher Quality	School Climate	Resources Equity
Arkansas	C	B+	C+	C+
Louisiana	A	A	D+	B
Mississippi	B-	C-	D+	C
Missouri	C	B-	B	C-
Oklahoma	B+	B	C+	B-
Tennessee	B	C+	C+	C-
Texas	C+	C-	C	C

Source: *Quality Counts 2005: No Small Change, Targeting Money Toward Student Performance*. (<http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2005/01/06/index.html>)

ARKANSAS' QUALITY COUNTS TRENDS

Since *Quality Counts* is an annual report, we can view changes over time. Table 2 presents Arkansas scores in 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, and 2005. From 1997-01, Arkansas decreased in four of the five categories. However, in resource adequacy, the one

category to improve over the four years, Arkansas increased from an F rating to a C+ rating. From 2001-03, Arkansas improved its rating in three of four categories and maintained in the other category. By 2005, however, Arkansas received lower grades in standards and accountability and resource equity, while increasing slightly in teacher quality efforts and school climate.

Table 2: Summary Grades for Arkansas, 1997-2005

Category	1997	1999	2001	2003	2005
Standards and Accountability	B	D	D	B-	C
Efforts to Improve Teacher Quality	C+	C-	C-	B	B+
School Climate	C-	D+	D+	C	C+
Resources Equity	B	B-	B-	B-	C+
Resources Adequacy	F	C+	C+	C	no data

Source: *Quality Counts 2005: No Small Change, Targeting Money Toward Student Performance.* (<http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2005/01/06/index.html>); *Quality Counts 2003: "If I Can't Learn From You."* (<http://counts.edweek.org/sreports/qc03/index.cfm>). *Quality Counts 2001: A Better Balance.* (<http://counts.edweek.org/sreports/qc01/index.cfm>); *Quality Counts 1999: Rewarding Results, Punishing Failure.* (<http://counts.edweek.org/sreports/qc99/>); *Quality Counts 1997.* (<http://counts.edweek.org/sreports/qc97/>).

CONCLUSION

While the *Quality Counts 2005* report comes from only a single organization, the report does provide insight into how Arkansas' educational system compares to other states and the nation. Based on the 2005 report, Arkansas is performing well in comparison to its border states, although Arkansas' grades have slipped over the last two years. The two biggest drops, however, may have already been

addressed by the legislature. In early 2004, Arkansas passed Act 35, which revised Arkansas' standards and accountability measures, and Act 59, which addresses resource equity. However, in order for Arkansas' ratings to improve and to maintain its position relative to its border states, the Arkansas legislature will be looking to make further improvements to its school system during its biannual session. Future evaluations will determine if the legislature's changes are beneficial to the state's educational system.