

American Diploma Project
Arkansas State Plan

The Challenge

Educators and education policy makers in Arkansas have declared high school reform and articulation between secondary education and post-secondary education must receive high priority for reform. The following observations are reflective of the needs that exist in the State.

- Arkansas student's composite ACT score has remained constant over the past four years and is slightly below that of the nation. There is a major gap between the performance of the total group and African American and Hispanic students.
- Only 30% of high school students who took ACT demonstrated readiness for college mathematics (College Algebra). Within that group less than 10% of African American students reached college-ready standards (22 on Act Mathematics)
- Approximately 25% of high school students who took ACT demonstrated readiness for college biology. Within that group less than 5% of African American students reached college ready standards.
- The average graduation rate for the State based on the four-year cohort of students who graduated in the spring of 2004 was 81%.
- Fifty-two percent of high school graduates who enter a state-supported college or university must take at least one remedial course in mathematics before entering College Algebra and 46% of high school graduates who enter a state-supported college or university must take at least one remedial course in reading/writing before entering freshman English.
- Grade inflation studies conducted by the University of Arkansas suggest that in a large percentage of the State's high schools, student grades earned are inflated when compared to the same student's performance of college entrance examinations.

These and other equally telling statistics led Arkansas Educators, legislators and policy makers to commit efforts at the state level to addressing these concerns and developing strategies that will directly address the conditions that are presented. Education excellence as advocated by Thomas Friedman (*The World is Flat*), Bill Gates and others becomes the key to future economic prosperity. Unfortunately, too few of Arkansas' graduates are academically competitive and the education gap continues to widen. Without significant improvements to our education system, the future well-being of our economy and communities are at risk.

Arkansas' Response

Arkansas has joined with 21 other states in the American Diploma Project (ADP), an effort to raise expectations and achievement in our high schools so that all students graduate with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in college work. Governor Huckabee and his staff have affirmed its intent to work with leaders from the K-12 and postsecondary education communities, the business community and the civic community to set in motion the following steps on behalf of Arkansas' students.

- Align academic standards in high school with the expectation for college and work place success, so that all students who meet the standards are prepared for their next steps in life.
- Upgrade high school course requirements so that all students are required to complete a college and work-ready curriculum in order to earn a high school diploma.¹
- Streamline the assessment system so that the tests students take in high school can also serve as readiness test for college work.
- Develop an accountability system to hold high schools and colleges accountable for the success of their students.

In order to make the changes in policy and practice necessary to improve the preparation of our high school students, Arkansas has formed an ADP Action team consisting of state and local government officials as well as representatives of higher education, K-12 education, the business community, and civic and community organizations. This group, which is listed as an attachment, has help shape the Arkansas ADP agenda and is committed to carrying it out.

Additionally, Arkansas was a successful applicant of the National Governor's Association (NGA) awards – Redesigning Arkansas High School – which began its initial work in September 2005.

Summary of Arkansas ADP Action Plan

Arkansas proposes to use a tiered structure for leadership development and involvement in the ADP Project and the NGA Project. The overall policy team (Tier 1) will include the following:

- Dr. T. Kenneth James, Commissioner of Education (K-12), who was designated by Governor Mike Huckabee as chairman of the leadership Team. Dr. James is a recognized education leader in Arkansas and across the nation. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Council of Chief State School Officers, a former state superintendent and directs the work of the Arkansas Department of Education.

¹ Arkansas reports that State policy has increased high graduation requirements for all students to include four units of mathematics, three units of laboratory-based science as part of a college ready, work ready curriculum.

- Dr. Terri Hardy, Governor Huckabee’s education liaison for K-12, is a former special education classroom teacher. She works closely with education initiatives in the General Assembly and represents the Governor on many committees and task forces as a result of the Governor’s leadership role in the NGA and Education Commission of the States.
- Dr. Linda Beene, director of the Department of Higher Education and serves as Executive Secretary of the State Higher Education Coordinating Board. She is a former staff member of the Department of Workforce Education.
- State Senator Shane Broadway, a leader on the Senate Education Committee who has taken championed the development of a plan for funding school facilities in keeping with the adequacy study on school facilities.
- Luke Gordy, represents business and professional interests as a member of the Team. Currently he serves as Executive Director of the Arkansans for Education Reform Foundation, which is committed to supporting and improving Arkansas’ public education system through the championing of meaningful education reform. Mr. Gordy served 11 years as a member of the State Board of Education and two years as its chair. Prior to his affiliation with the Foundation, he was a bank vice president.
- Diane Tatum, vice – chairman of the State Board of Education, is an executive with Entergy, an electric power utility. She is a strong advocate for public education among business and professionals in the state and is committed to strengthening programs that will eliminate the achievement gap.

Alignment of High School Expectations with Demands of College and Work

Arkansas is committed to the alignment of high school courses and requirements for graduation that will set high standards for all students and link those expectations with the knowledge and skills required for success in postsecondary education and work. The following table describes the projected work to be accomplished and establishes a timeline for completing the tasks.

| Work Task | Timeline |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Establish a Tier 2 advisory group (alignment steering committee) to advise the work of the project and to provide an opportunity for dialogue across K-12 education, higher education, educational professional associations, the business and professional community and other government leaders. | October 2005 |
| Have Arkansas English/Language Arts and Mathematics standards reviewed for alignment to ADP and ACT standards | October 2005 February 2006 May 2006 |
| Convene content specialists work groups to begin alignment process (What do we do well? Where are the gaps? Etc.) Representation from the following groups will be included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • K-12 educators to include administrators (superintendents, principals and instructional | December 2005 through June 2006 |

| Work Task | Timeline |
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| leaders), teachers, counselors, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher education • Legislators • State Chamber of Commerce • State business leaders • K-12 State Board of Education • Private universities • Professional associations (Arkansas Education Association, Arkansas Administrators Association, PTA, etc.) This work will utilize the American Diploma Project benchmarks and other nation models as starting points. | |
| Communicate alignment message to stakeholders | Begin January 2006 Ongoing |
| Conduct focus groups to gather feedback information to college/workplace ready standards | April 2006 |
| Survey business and higher education groups related to workplace and college readiness expectations | March/April 2006 |
| Provide for public input on standards alignment documents | May 2006 |
| Identify current policies and programs supporting implementation of college/workplace standards | May 2006 |
| Identify, if necessary, policies and programs needed to support implementation of college/workplace standards | September 2006 |
| Present standards to State Board of Education and Higher Education Coordinating Board | September 2006 |
| Present to Joint Committee on Education of the Arkansas General Assembly | September 2006 |

Testing and Accountability

Arkansas will develop assessments and incentives to hold high schools accountable for graduating students who are prepared for college and work, and to hold postsecondary institutions accountable for their success once enrolled. It is intended that the assessment will align with the college ready/work ready standards. Building the testing and accountability component will be dependent on work accomplished by the Standards group followed by high schools and colleges and universities in the State.

Building tests to assess standards is not a new idea with Arkansas. Through the ADP network, Arkansas proposes to partner with other states in the development of an Algebra II and/or a pool of items that could be used to test these standards. Arkansas will actively seek partnerships with other states in the ACHIEVE/ ADP network and those funded through the NGA to accomplish this goal. Much is gained in such partnerships. However, Arkansas must move forward with hast to get these tests in place. The following tasks are identified essential to developing the testing/accountability that will determine student readiness for college or work.

- Establish a Tier 2 testing and assessment advisory team. Representatives on this team will be reflective of those previously identified, including individuals with assessment training and psychometric expertise. Detailed benchmarks and strategies will be dependent of partnerships that emerge, thus more specificity is not possible at this time.
- Review current assessments and adopt or develop appropriate assessment tools to determine student performance on the revised standards that reflect college/workplace readiness.
 - Determine assessments to be given at the state level, including the type of test (end-of-course, end-of-grade, or cumulative survey test) and the subjects to be tested.
 - Develop timeline for test develop, piloting and full administration
 - Assure alignment with Arkansas academic standards for college work.
- Identify changes necessary to streamline (align) student assessments across K-12 and postsecondary systems. This will include a review of current college admissions and placement processes. Also, plan for using new/revised high school exams for college placement purposes where possible.
- Determine ways for making high school assessments “matter” to students.

Arkansas recognizes this work is time consuming and intense, therefore the State will initiate this work by March 2006 and project completion by December 2008.

Develop an accountability system to hold high schools and colleges accountable for the success of their students

The Arkansas system of school accountability is framed in State legislation originally established by Act 35 of the Second Extraordinary Session of 2003 and amended in the regular session of 2005. The accountability standards have been delineated in State Board of Education Rule, *Arkansas Department of Education Rules Governing the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment and Accountability Program and the Academic Distress Program*. The reader may reference specific requirements of the rule by accessing the following Web site.

http://arkedu.state.ar.us/rules/pdf/current_rules/ade213_actaap.pdf

In summary, the current accountability system for high schools is linked to student performance on criterion-referenced end of course tests in Algebra I, Geometry and Grade 11 literacy. Student performance levels are recorded on the student’s permanent record. Students who fail to reach proficiency must have an individual improvement plan and much participate in a remediation program. However, the tests are not considered gateway exams in that there is no passing score that would that would be considered as a gateway for high school graduation.

Arkansas requires all students who graduate from Arkansas public schools and intend to continue their education at an institution of higher education take the ACT test prior to entry into a college or university. Students who fail to score at a threshold level in

reading and/or mathematics must complete remedial courses before being unconditionally admitted to college.

Some level of school accountability based on ACT scores and high school grades is possible through an annual grade inflation study. The grade inflation study identifies students who have a high GPA in high school by fail to make the cut score to guarantee unconditional admission to the university system in language arts or mathematics. Schools that have a high percentage of students with “inflated grades” are flagged as having grade inflation. Although no sanctions are imposed at the current time, future accountability be directed toward those schools. In excess of 50% of Arkansas high school graduates who opt to attend an Arkansas college or university fail to score at or above an established level (e.g. 19 in mathematics) and thus must enroll in remedial courses. The proposed accountability system purports to address the high number of students requiring remedial courses as well as aligned courses between the high schools and colleges.

A necessary component of the accountability system is robust student tracking, not only through the secondary schools, but spanning college and universities. Arkansas currently has a student tracking system based on a unique student identification number. Students are tracked based on demographics, student performance tests, ACT and other state administered tests, attendance, graduation. There is also an emerging system managed by the Department of Higher Education that tracks students through the college years.

Arkansas is one of several states that received a USDE grant to address issues of data management and longitudinal student tracking. That work is underway with the following under development at the time. Before September 2006, student transcripts will be electronically processed and will include data elements sufficient to implement the accountability system. Additionally, staff members from the ADE and the Department of Higher Education are meeting on a regular basis to work out the necessary links to extend the electronic report card system to span through college and universities. Such seamless data tracking will enable the development of accountability measures linked to the college ready/work ready standards.

Timeline for revision to the accountability System will be dependent on the adoption of the additional assessment proposed under this Plan and full implementation of the student information system. The process is underway and can be expected to become operational within three years or by December 2008.