



NEWS RELEASE

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ADE SUBMITS PLAN TO ACHIEVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM APPROVAL

The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) today submitted to the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) a plan for achieving approval of the state's assessment system by the end of the 2006-2007 school year. Federal approval of the system by that time is mandated by the No Child Left Behind laws, and the state's failure to do so could result in financial penalties. In June the USDOE placed Arkansas' assessment plan in the category of approval pending, citing the need for the state to show alignment between its testing of special populations and evidence that the state's Benchmarks adequately measure students' higher order thinking skills.

"I feel confident that the plan we are submitting today addresses the U.S. Department of Education's concerns with our assessment system," said Dr. Ken James, Arkansas Commissioner of Education. "We may have some further refining to do as the year progresses, but we are definitely on the right track to earning full approval by the end of the school year."

Arkansas was one of 38 states placed in the pending approval category in a "peer review" process by USDOE. The largest area of concern about Arkansas' system stemmed from the state's method of testing students with limited English skills – Limited English Proficient or LEP students, in educators' lingo. Instead of taking the Benchmark, children who are identified as LEP have been allowed to complete portfolio assessments.

"We believed that this was the most fair method of assessing the academic achievement of these children, though even at the outset the education experts who serve on our Technical Advisory

Committee for the Benchmarks stipulated that a portfolio could never be considered mathematically comparable to the assessment," Dr. James said. "We informed the U.S. Department of all of this at the time we submitted our original plan."

Conversations with USDOE officials since being notified of the "approval pending" status have led ADE staff to conclude that Arkansas' assessment system has little guarantee of meeting USDOE approval this school year – or at all -- unless the portfolio system is abandoned.

"This was not an easy decision, but approval of our assessment system is a must," Dr. Ken James said. "Therefore, beginning this school year, we will not use the portfolio system with our LEP students. Instead, we will substitute the regular Benchmarks but support these children with appropriate accommodations as they take the tests. To this end, we will join in a partnership with USDOE to better incorporate any and all research-based accommodations that have shown to be effective, such as the availability of translation dictionaries and longer test-taking periods."

Through the partnership, ADE will have access to the nation's leading experts in the field of accommodations for English language learners. In addition, ADE hopes to bring some of these experts to Arkansas to provide professional development for teachers so they learn not only which accommodations are most appropriate for which students but also how to incorporate them effectively into classroom activities throughout the year.

Under NCLB, LEP students do not have to take the literacy exam their first year in school. And though they are required to take the mathematics Benchmark, mathematics scores are not counted as official until the second year.

In addition to the LEP testing concerns, the Department is also required to show alignment of special education students' alternative assessment. This assessment is based on the same content standards contained within the state's curriculum frameworks. In September, ADE will assemble a broad-based committee of special educators and regular educators to review the alignment of the content standards and the alternate assessment for students with disabilities. Result of the review will be submitted to USDOE in October.

In addition, USDOE asked for evidence that the Benchmarks measure higher order thinking skills. As evidence of this, ADE responded that :

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- Arkansas considers strategic thinking items to require higher order thinking skills as they require “reasoning, planning, using evidence,” according to *Aligning Assessments to Guide the Learning of All Students*, a series of reports published by the Council of Chief State School Officers, which classifies strategic thinking as Level 3. The reports go on to say, “The cognitive demands at Level 3 are complex and abstract. The complexity does not result from the fact that there are multiple answers, a possibility for both Level 1 and Level 2, but because the task requires more demanding reasoning.”

Generally, anywhere from *one-fourth to one-third* of the questions at any grade level are strategic thinking questions, which the state considers to be representative of a rigorous standard of performance.
- As for “extended” thinking questions -- classified as Level 4 in the aforementioned reports -- few exist on the assessment because Arkansas believes that the knowledge and skills needed for these complex questions are best assessed at the classroom level. Level 4 items are defined in *Aligning Assessments* as those that require “complex reasoning, planning, developing, and thinking, most likely over an extended period of time.” Level 4 activities include “designing and conducting experiments, developing and proving conjectures, making connections between a finding and related concepts and phenomena; combining and synthesizing ideas into new concepts; and critiquing experimental designs.”
- Arkansas law requires the content standards, and thus the assessments, to focus on the application of knowledge and skills, which explains why basic application items occurred with higher frequency.
- Two areas the state will address as a result of the alignment study include the need for more strategic thinking questions on the End of Course Algebra I exam and the need for more recall-level questions in reading at grade eight.

“We believe our response is right on target,” said Dr. James. “Through it, we show the federal government evidence of the quality of our system as well as a willingness and the ability to make alterations where necessary. I’m confident that this plan will get us to a ‘yes’ in the approval process.”

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The Arkansas Department of Education strives to ensure that all children in the state have access to a quality education by providing educators, administrators and staff with leadership, resources and training.