

Education Matters

for teachers

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Notes from the Commissioner

Have you heard the term “dropout factories?”

Recent research by Robert Balfanz at Johns Hopkins University shows that about 8 percent of American high schools have become just that because they lose so many of their students between the first day of ninth-grade and high school graduation. These schools largely serve high-minority and low-income students.

For years, this phenomenon has been blamed on socio-economic background and similar factors, but a large focus in our continuing push to make the high school experience more meaningful and beneficial for students is to ensure that students find the same opportunities for success regardless of their ZIP code, family background or income. As you are well aware, research shows that all students are capable of high levels of learning. I firmly believe it is our responsibility as educators to help each child overcome obstacles to learning so he or she can reach his or her full potential.

An organization I belong to as Commissioner — the Council of Chief State School Officers — is developing an action plan to involve those of us at the state level in examining these high schools with challenging populations to determine best practices for retaining and engaging students.

I look forward to sharing with you the findings of this effort.

Sincerely,



Ken James, Ed.D.
Arkansas Commissioner of Education



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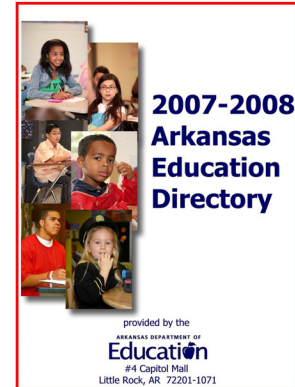
Need to keep up with important events?

Look to **ArkansasEd.org's** Calendar of Events for the dates and information you need.

Arkansas Education Directory now available online

The Arkansas Education Directory is now available at **ArkansasEd.org**. The directory contains contact information for all staff at the Arkansas Department of Education as well as for education associations and all schools and school districts in the state.

The Arkansas Education Directory may be accessed by linking to "Arkansas Education Directory" under the "Quick Links" dropdown menu, which is found on the home page of ArkansasEd.org. The directory is available in PDF and electronically searchable Excel formats.



Smithsonian resources available

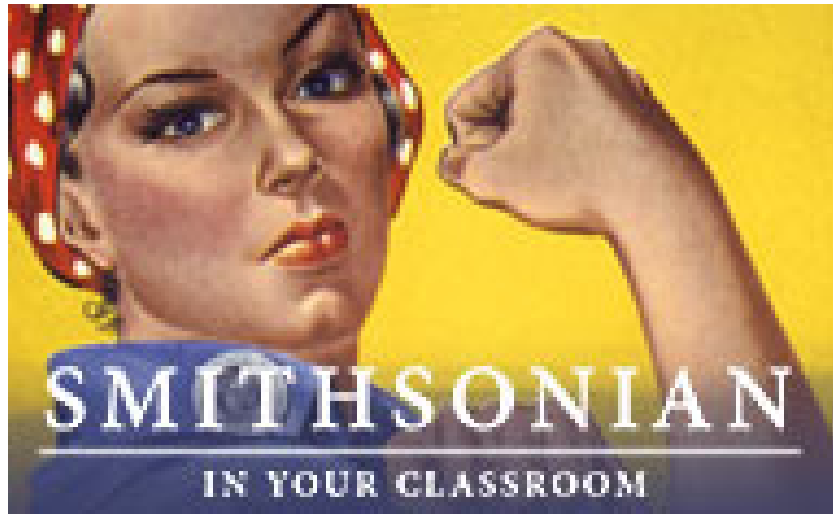
Not only does the Smithsonian Institution offer more than 1,200 free education resources to teachers online at **www.smithsonianeducation.org**, but these resources are now aligned to Arkansas' curriculum frameworks.

Once online, teachers gain access to curriculum-aligned lesson plans, virtual exhibitions, photographs and artworks, and databases of research by entering "Arkansas" into the site's search engine.

"I had an opportunity to learn about this excellent resource for teachers when I was in Washington, D.C., for a meeting of the Council of Chief State School Officers last spring," Dr. Ken James said.

"It's amazing to have access to such a valuable supply of materials, and to have them aligned to Arkansas standards will be a wonderful benefit for teachers

but most especially for students," he added. "It literally is a window on the world for them."



The Smithsonian and the Council of Chief State School Officers established a formal collaboration in January 2006 with the goal of motivating and stimulating increased academic achievement of public school students in grades kindergarten through 12

"The Smithsonian's education resources reflect the authority of the nation's largest museum and research complex," said Stephanie Norby, director of the Smithsonian Center for Education and Museum Studies.

Arkansas teachers in Taiwan share through "Weblogs"

Three Arkansas teachers — Carolyn Scott, Marilyn Hodgkin and Silas Granderson — are now teaching English to students in Taiwan through a program offered by the state of Arkansas and the government of Taiwan.

The teachers left in late summer and will spend the year there. In addition, Nancy Rousseau, a principal, participated in a two-week exchange in July. To learn more about their experiences, you may visit <http://arkansased.org/teachers/taiwan.html>.



Educators and government officials announce the Teaching in Taiwan program for 2007-2008.

NMSI gives to AP in Arkansas schools

Arkansas school districts will soon be able to apply for the opportunity to participate in a program to boost performance in Advanced Placement (AP) and pre-AP courses, thanks to a \$13.2 million grant to the state from the National Math and Science Initiative.

Twenty-one schools will be approved for inclusion in the program, which will focus on raising pre-AP and AP performance through teacher training and potential financial incentives for both teachers and students.

Tommie Sue Anthony, former coordinator of UALR's Arkansas Advanced Placement Professional Development Center, is president of the new organization, Arkansas Advanced Initiative for Math and Science, which will be based at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

Most recent BMI results released by ACHI

In September, the Arkansas Center for Health Improvement (ACHI) posted individual school BMI assessment results at www.achi.net.

Results for each school that reported data to ACHI are included in school-level and district-level profiles. These reports describe the extent to which the school and district are being affected by the obesity epidemic.

In response to Act 201 of 2007, BMI assessments will be conducted this year for students in kindergarten and grades two, four, six, eight and ten. Parents who do not want a child to be assessed must notify the school in writing.

Social Studies frameworks addressed for 7th, 8th grades

Members of the 2006 Social Studies frameworks committee were joined by members of the Arkansas History Education Coalition for three days in September to ensure that a semester of Arkansas history could be taught while still teaching all frameworks for the regular Social Studies classes in the 7th and 8th grades.

Governor Mike Beebe asked the Arkansas Department of Education to convene the meeting after members of the coalition complained that some Arkansas schools would not be able to teach Arkansas history at the 7th or 8th grade. Arkansas law calls for a one-semester course to be taught at some point between the 7th and 12th grades.

The group examined each student learning expectation and, after tightening, cutting and combining, reduced the total of learning expectations for those grades by about 50. The State Board of Education will have to approve the suggested revisions, which, if approved, will go into effect for the 2008-2009 school year.

Feeding the Elephant

By Justin Minkel, 2007 Arkansas Teacher of the Year

In the five years since NCLB smacked down on teachers like a hammer on a thumb, we've seen an over-emphasis on test prep that is staggering. Data is good. Assessment is good. And accountability, not to outsiders with clipboards but to the kids and colleagues we care about deeply, is good.

But the test-prep craze is arguably the most devastating trend to hit education yet, in terms of its impact on student motivation, creativity, critical thinking, real-world skills, and, strange as it may seem, test scores themselves.

There's a saying in India, "When we want the elephant to grow, we don't keep weighing the elephant. We feed the elephant." You can do four hours of test prep a day, and the rise in the kids' scores will be minimal. Why? Because test prep doesn't teach students the skills they need to do well on the test. It just measures the skills they already have.

It's not surprising that when we saturate kids with test prep, sometimes they start doing worse on the tests—because after you fill in a few thousand bubbles, you haven't gotten better at understanding what you read, expressing yourself in writing, or solving problems, but you *have* stopped caring whether the right answer is B or D.

We keep weighing the elephant, but guess what? The elephant is starving to death. Worse, it's our own fault—because we're the ones who chose to stop feeding it.

If we want kids to develop solid reading, writing, and math skills, we need to engage them in a

just one.

Writers' workshop, balanced literacy, and the kinds of meaningful math experiences described in Marilyn Burns' books can give us tools to shape that kind of curriculum.

So can our best instincts and training as teachers—giving kids' choices about what they read and do, asking them questions that have more than one right answer, and providing access to materials: an exciting class library, art supplies, computer software, math manipulatives, maps, and tools for scientific inquiry like magnifying glasses, balances, and microscopes.

The Standards are a good guide, but before you reach for that bulky binder, ask yourself a simple question: Would *you* want to be a student in your class? If not, it's time to make some changes.

Test prep has two purposes: to familiarize students with the format of the test, and to give kids and adults an idea of where the students are with respect to the skills measured on the test.

But let's put test prep in its place—and that place is two or three days a week, for half an

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hour to 45 minutes a session, at most. That leaves a lot of time for real-world, meaningful learning to happen.

The bad news about standardized tests is that they measure basic skills, but they don't measure creativity, higher-order thinking, design skills, or expertise with

today's technology—in short, all those 21st century skills that kids need if they're going to be prepared for *their* future, not for our past. Engineers, architects, and computer scientists need to be able to read and write, add and subtract, but they also need to access information, work together to solve problems, and, above all else, *think*. The good news is that if we teach academic

building a curriculum that's rich, rigorous, and relevant, the scores on those tests will go up. More importantly, our kids will love school, we'll love our jobs, and we'll know that our students are ready not just to help the school make AYP, but to excel in college, pursue a meaningful career, and lead meaningful lives.

Save the Date

What might life be like for students who don't take the Smart Core classes in high school?

That's the question explored in "Do the Smart Thing," a seven-minute video promoting Arkansas' rigorous, default curriculum for high school students that was prepared by a group of EAST Lab students working together on the project this past summer.

"Do the Smart Thing" will be featured in a Clinton School of Public Service Lecture at 6 p.m. November 19 at the Clinton School in Little Rock. To make reservations, please e-mail an RSVP to Publicprograms@clintonschool.uasys.edu or call 501-683-5239.

In addition to a possible appearance by Governor Mike Beebe, the event will include a presentation by Dr. James about Smart Core, a discussion by the students about the conception and production of the video, the debut of the film and a reception.

All attendees will receive a DVD with "Do the Smart Thing" and two 30-second public service announcements promoting Smart Core that were also produced by the students. The public service announcement will air on television channels in December and January.

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