



ARKANSAS EDUCATION MATTERS

SEPTEMBER 2008

Volume 1, Number 1

- [MESSAGE FROM THE COMMISSIONER](#)
- [ARKANSAS GETS LATE SUMMER NOD FOR SES PILOT PARTICIPATION](#)
- [BENCHMARK SCORES CLIMB – MORE THAN HALF PROFICIENT IN EVERY GRADE](#)
- [NOTES FROM TEACHER OF THE YEAR PAUL GRAY](#)
- [TAKING “SMART” TO THE NEXT LEVEL: SMART LEADERSHIP](#)
- [STATE TAKES CONTROL OF TWO DISTRICTS](#)
- [ADE ENACTS SECURITY MEASURES AT FOUR CAPITOL MALL](#)

MESSAGE FROM THE COMMISSIONER



Another school year is already upon us! But it's no wonder that the summer seemed to fly by quicker than a first-grader's morning recess. We've had lots of good news regarding test scores, a successful Smart Leadership conference and the launch of the Arkansas Department of Education's new logo and branding efforts.

Unfortunately, we've experienced some not-so-good news as well, as the state had to take over two school districts because of severe fiscal issues. Two very able leaders have taken the helms at those two districts, and we will continue to assist those communities as they work to overcome some very real obstacles to obtaining financial health.

From the department this year, you will experience a continued push to increase rigor for all of our students at all grade levels. I am convinced – both from available research and from my own experiences – that our students are able to reach higher levels of learning than we often either expect or demand from them. We have a culture that is laden with preset notions of about which types of children are able to succeed. It's no surprise that this attitude produces the very results it predicts, yet we know that with appropriate, research-based interventions, all of our students can and will achieve amazing results.

So here's to a terrific year for all of us. Let's work together to raise our students' achievement to increasingly higher levels. That's the right thing to do for them, and the right thing to do for our state.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken James". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

ARKANSAS GETS LATE SUMMER NOD FOR SES PILOT PARTICIPATION

The U.S. Department of Education approved Arkansas' proposed amendment to the Arkansas No Child Left Behind Accountability Workbook to reverse a school's required action under School Improvement – Year 1. Therefore, beginning with the 2008-2009 school year, Title I schools in School Improvement – Year 1 will be able to provide supplemental educational services (SES) rather than school choice as required by NCLB statutes.

This strategy, the result of years of requests by state school chiefs and by school district leaders, is aimed at providing options at the local school site to meet student instructional needs before invoking the mandatory choice options. Schools in School Improvement – Year 2 or higher must continue to provide both SES and choice options each year.

School districts will be allowed to count costs for providing parent outreach toward the 20 percent expenditure requirement, up to an amount equal to one percent of the 20 percent expenditure requirement for SES. There are no other changes to the procedures associated with SES.

On or before September 1, 2008, each school district must provide notice to the public about its participation in the pilot program in the manner in which it customarily provides similar notices to the public about SES.

Each district must also submit a report under Section 9401(e)(1) of the ESEA to the Arkansas Department of Education at the end of the 2008-2009 academic year that: describes the district's provision of SES in Title I schools in the first year of school improvement; describes how those schools continued to provide Title I services to eligible students during that year; and evaluates the progress of the district and schools in increasing the quality of instruction and improving the academic achievement of students.

The flexibility agreement is subject to a review at the end of the 2008-2009 academic year to determine if the flexibility will be continued.

BENCHMARK SCORES CLIMB – MORE THAN HALF PROFICIENT IN EVERY GRADE

Arkansas students continued to show improvement in the latest round of state Benchmark scores, with increases being made at every grade level and a narrowing of the achievement gap for the second consecutive year.

“The exciting point to note about this year's scores is that at all grade levels in both literacy and math, we have more than half of our students scoring proficient and above,” Arkansas Commissioner of Education Dr. Ken James said. “Just three years ago, that milestone seemed a daunting one to reach. Credit for these results must go to our excellent, hardworking classroom teachers and school-level administrators who provide their students with high expectations, productive learning environments and meaningful interventions, all of which are imperative for students' performing to their full potential.”

The spring administration of the Arkansas Benchmark Exams marked the inauguration of the Augmented Benchmark Exam, in which criterion-referenced and norm-referenced test items were incorporated into one examination. An equating exercise between the 2008 Augmented Benchmark test and last year's Benchmark exams allows for continued comparison of scores across the years. The table below shows the increase in students scoring proficient and above at each grade level in each subject, with the only exception being seventh grade literacy, which remained constant at 57 percent.

Dr. James pointed to a number of firsts with this year's scores:

- First time over 60% proficient and above in grade 3 Literacy
- First time over 70% proficient and above in grade 4 Math
- First time over 60% proficient and above in grade 4 Literacy

- First time over 60% proficient and above in grade 5 Literacy
- First time over 70% proficient and above in grade 6 Math
- First time over 60% proficient and above in grade 7 math
- First time over 50% proficient and above in grade 8 math

Percent scoring proficient or advanced on the Arkansas Benchmark Exam

| Grade | 2005 Math | 2006 Math | 2007 Math | 2008 Math | 2005 Literacy | 2006 Literacy | 2007 Literacy | 2008 Literacy |
|---------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Third | 58% | 67% | 74% | 79% | 50% | 57% | 59% | 64% |
| Fourth | 50% | 60% | 65% | 74% | 51% | 61% | 59% | 67% |
| Fifth | 41% | 50% | 61% | 67% | 47% | 56% | 59% | 64% |
| Sixth | 43% | 57% | 68% | 72% | 57% | 59% | 60% | 63% |
| Seventh | 43% | 50% | 58% | 62% | 50% | 53% | 57% | 57% |
| Eighth | 33% | 44% | 48% | 56% | 57% | 66% | 63% | 67% |

For the second year in a row, the scores also represent a narrowing of the achievement gap. While this did not occur across the board, the gap between the percentage scoring proficient and above narrowed on eight of the 12 tests between whites and African-Americans and seven of 12 tests between whites and Hispanics.

“All of these instances represent what we think of as the best kind of narrowing, because all scores improved,” Dr. James said. “What you don’t want to see is narrowing due to dropping scores for the higher achieving group.”

The scores are used to determine if schools have made adequate yearly progress under No Child Left Behind. The Arkansas Department of Education has begun informing schools of AYP status. Schools wishing to appeal are in the process of doing so now. The final School Improvement list will be released toward the end of October.

Because the state contracted with a new company to design the Augmented Benchmark exams, the norm-referenced portion of the augmented test is a new instrument and, therefore, its scores cannot be compared to previous years’ scores. However, the scores for the SAT-10 questions on the test are listed in the table below. The scores are listed as percentile scores. A score at the 62nd percentile would mean that on average, Arkansas students scored as well or better than 62 percent of their nationwide cohort.

Under Arkansas law, students in grades kindergarten through nine participate in norm-referenced testing. Because the testing company inadvertently supplied some districts ordering practice tests the actual version of the kindergarten test, the kindergarten tests from this spring will not be scored. An alternative assessment will be administered to first graders (last year’s kindergarteners) early in the 2008-2009 school year so teachers will have valid scores to use when developing educational plans for their students.

Percentile scores on the SAT-10 for Arkansas students

| Grade | Mathematics | Reading | Comprehensive | Science |
|-------|-------------|---------|---------------|---------|
|-------|-------------|---------|---------------|---------|

| | Problem Solving | Comprehension | Language | |
|---|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|----|
| 1 | 48 | 41 | | |
| 2 | 49 | 41 | | |
| 3 | 56 | 48 | 34 | |
| 4 | 65 | 64 | 33 | |
| 5 | 61 | 56 | 41 | 52 |
| 6 | 64 | 46 | 44 | |
| 7 | 56 | 53 | 45 | 54 |
| 8 | 64 | 53 | 41 | |
| 9 | 63* | 53 | 46 | |

*The ninth-grade score is for mathematics.

All 2007 test scores at school and district levels are available on the Arkansas Department of Education's Web site, <http://arkansased.org>.

NOTES FROM TEACHER OF THE YEAR PAUL GRAY

It is time to begin the search for the next Arkansas Teacher of the Year (ATOY). This month, applications from among Arkansas' best teachers will flow into the Arkansas Department of Education. Choosing the best for 2009 will be a challenging but rewarding process for everyone involved.

Yet it is the purpose and process of teacher recognition which is paramount. Whether a nominated teacher becomes a state finalist or the ATOY is not all-important. The essential element of teacher recognition is the reflective nature of the ATOY process. All teachers will be better teachers once they go through the rigorous nomination process. And, of course, we all know that being recognized, at some point, for what we do is a basic occupational need.

Everyone agrees that good teachers are the most fundamental and crucial indicator of student learning. If a child has good teachers around him or her each day, significant learning will occur. So, where does teacher recognition fit into student learning?

Teacher recognition is not just about rewarding teachers for a job well done. Teacher recognition is one of the best ways to provide good teachers the opportunity to reflect about their practice. Teachers who are recognized for outstanding teaching get opportunities to encounter many other facets of education they rarely get to see. An award-winning teacher may participate in professional development venues with other teachers who have won similar awards.

The results of such experiences are abundant. I know my time as the 2008 ATOY has afforded me the opportunity to be around the best teachers in the U.S. and glean numerous ideas, teaching tools and lesson strategies. When my time as ATOY is over, I will return to the classroom a much better teacher. If I am a better teacher, then my students will reap the benefits of my experiences.

How else will teacher recognition matter to teaching and student learning? I will return to the

classroom with a richer and more complete understanding of all facets of education and education policy. I will be able to be a better leader in my building and my district. My experiences will facilitate my being a useful teacher leader. I will have the tools needed to be an effective link between the administration of my building/district and the teachers who are the lynchpins to student learning.

Since I am a teacher, I have an assignment for everyone reading this article right now. In the next couple of weeks, make it a point to encourage every school administrator you know or encounter to nominate someone in their building or district for the 2009 ATOY. Remember, if the ATOY process is good for teachers, then it will be great for their students.

TAKING "SMART" TO THE NEXT LEVEL: SMART LEADERSHIP

Changing the role of the building-level administrator from one of building manager, grounds keeper or head disciplinarian to one of instructional leader is the goal of the Arkansas Department of Education's newest Smart program, Smart Leadership.

"It's the smart thing to do," Dr. James said, adding, "No pun intended, but without our school leaders taking on the responsibility for creating a rigorous, quality instructional team and environment, all the other work we've done in professional development is in danger of having little or no impact."

Smart Leadership builds on the foundation laid over the last decade through Smart Start (grades K-4), Smart Step (grades 5-8) and Smart Future (grades 9-12, formerly known as Next Step for Arkansas' Future.)

"This is a new school culture necessary to meet the demands today's and tomorrow's world will place on our students," Dr. James said.

STATE TAKES CONTROL OF TWO DISTRICTS

Two school districts in northwest Arkansas – Decatur and Greenland – were placed under state control at the direction of the Arkansas State Board of Education this summer. Dr. Roland Smith has been placed as interim superintendent of the Greenland School District for the 2008-2009 school year, and Leroy Ortman will serve in that position for Decatur this school year. Both men will report directly to Dr. Ken James, Arkansas Commissioner of Education, as both school boards have been removed.

"Both of these districts are facing high hurdles as they try to achieve fiscal stability this next year, as they both started the year with great debt burdens," Dr. James said.

The State Board has called for quarterly financial reports from the district by Arkansas Department of Education staff as well as a study of how to feasibly annex one school district into two or more of its surrounding districts. Until now, districts have been annexed whole into a contiguous district.

To read more about Greenland and Decatur, please click on the following links:
http://www.arkansased.org/communications/pdf/greenland_release_072408.pdf
http://www.arkansased.org/communications/pdf/decatour_release_080708.pdf

Ten other districts are also in fiscal distress: Bald Knob, Bismarck, Clinton, Concord, Gentry, Hartford, Hermitage, Mineral Springs, Murfreesboro and Westside Consolidated.

ADE ENACTS SECURITY MEASURES AT FOUR CAPITOL MALL

After the tragic shooting death of Bill Gwatney, chairman of the Democratic Party of Arkansas at the nearby party headquarters, Commissioner of Education Dr. Ken James instituted a number of security measures at the agency's Arch Ford Building in the State Capitol Mall. Visitors are now asked to sign in and out at the receptionist's desk, and all employees are asked to show their badges. Only the front door is open to guests. A new security system which will allow employee entry by swiping a coded card is in the works, but all visitors will follow the same protocol even after the new system is installed.

"We had already made progress on many of these changes before the horrible events at the Democratic Headquarters, but I have worked to speed up the process in light of the shooting," Dr. James said. "We hope to create an environment that is both welcoming to our visitors but also safe for all who work, meet and visit here."

For more information, please visit the ADE's main Website, <http://arkansased.org>.