

THE ARKANSAS DEPARTMENT OF
Education
NEWS RELEASE

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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Julie Johnson Thompson

Office: (501) 683-4788 Cell: (501) 580-6508

Email: jthompson@arkedu.k12.ar.us

NEW ERA FOR ARKANSAS BENCHMARK EXAMS BEGINS

More than 205,000 Arkansas students in grades three through eight took part in the 2005 state benchmark exams, which were administered in public schools across the state last March. The scores, which are part of the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment and Accountability Program (ACTAAP), are important indicators for individual student progress as well as tools to assess school and district performance for statewide and national accountability purposes.

At least half of the students in grades three through eight scored proficient or above – considered grade level – on the 2005 Arkansas benchmark literacy exams, with the exception of fifth grade, which had 47 percent scoring at that level. Math scores were slightly lower, with at least half of the state’s third and fourth graders scoring proficient or above, at least 40 percent of fifth through seventh graders doing so, and 33 percent of eighth graders reaching proficiency.

“Overall, these are strong results, and they speak well for the effort put forth across the state by students and educators alike” Dr. Ken James, Arkansas’s Commissioner of Education said. “It is important to remember, though, that these scores represent the beginning of new ‘trend lines’ for each of these grades, so they will serve as the bases for future comparisons of growth.”

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**Communications Office
4 Capitol Mall, Room 403A
Little Rock, AR 72201-1071**

Telephone: (501) 683-4786 ♦ Fax: (501) 683-4097

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The original benchmark trend lines began when the benchmark exam was first administered in 1998 to fourth graders. In subsequent years, testing in eighth and then in sixth grades was added. During the intervening years, the trend lines have generally moved in an upward direction.

Several factors made 2005 a good time to begin new trend lines for all grades:

- No Child Left Behind demanded the addition of math and literacy tests in third, fifth and seventh grades. So now benchmark exams are administered in third through eighth grades.
- Two years ago, it was time to review the English Language Arts frameworks. These research-based revisions were performed by a committee of educators and content experts.
- With the revised frameworks, the literacy benchmark test had to be revised and new cut scores for performance levels of below basic, basic, proficient and advanced developed. Another committee of Arkansas educators completed this task this past summer, setting new cut scores for grades 3 through 8 in both subjects.
- Also, Act 35 calls for the state to be able to track students longitudinally, so a system to follow a cohort from one grade to the next is now being developed.

Changes such as these are not uncommon with standardized tests. As more research is done and as changing times demand knowledge of new content, learning frameworks are regularly updated. Tests are then redesigned to reflect the new frameworks and new cut scores for performance levels are designated. For instance, the National Assessment of Educational Progress -- or NAEP -- will begin a new trend line in 2009.

Because a new trend line begins with the 2005 scores, these scores will serve as a base of comparison for future scores as long as the frameworks and test design remain the same. They cannot, however, be compared with past scores.

"With the new trend line, we will be able to follow progress of students, school districts and the entire state. It will tell us what we are doing right and where we need to improve. Those are the tools we need for improving student proficiency each year," Gov. Mike Huckabee said. "We have made

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progress in improving education with programs like Smart Start, which places a heavy emphasis on reading and mathematics for students from kindergarten through the fourth grade, Smart Step, which has similar emphasis for students from the fifth through the eighth grades, and Next Step which does the same for grades nine through 12,"

Arkansas students score in one of four performance levels on the benchmarks: below basic, basic, proficient and advanced. A student scoring proficient is considered to have mastery of the material and skills set forth in the frameworks for each subject in each grade.

The statewide percentages of students performing proficient or advanced on the 2005 benchmark exams are as follows:

Grade	Math	Literacy
3 rd	58	50
4 th	50	52
5 th	41	47
6 th	43	57
7 th	43	50
8 th	33	57

Gaps between white students and African-American students and between white students and Hispanic students remain present and too large with the 2005 tests, Dr. James said. "Obviously, we still have to find the best way to tackle this problem," he said. "This is a dilemma we share with states across the country, and it's one we will resolve. We will not be satisfied until all students are performing at their potential."

Benchmark scores are significant at a number of levels. Local educators use to the scores to assess individual students progress and, when necessary, to formulate individual academic improvement

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plans. They are also used to place school districts in the state's academic distress category. This is done when more than 25 percent of students score at below basic for two consecutive years. The scores are also used to calculate adequate yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

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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.