



## NEWS RELEASE

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### ARKANSAS BENCHMARK SCORES CONTINUE STEADY CLIMB

Student performance continued to climb and the achievement gap between whites and African-Americans narrowed for the first time on the 2007 Arkansas Benchmark Examination, according to scores released today. Performance on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills remained stable compared to last year's scores.

"We are making sure and steady progress with student achievement in the state," said Dr. Ken James, Commissioner of Education. "Every teacher, administrator, parent and child involved in education in Arkansas should be both proud and encouraged to continue to expect high levels of learning from all students."

The state is realizing achievement gains because of several factors: dedication of public school staff, quality professional development for teachers and administrators, and high expectations for all students, James said. "The trend toward higher scores on our state's tests is proof that higher expectations and accountability lead to positive results. Remember, we have some of the toughest learning standards in the nation, so we can feel confident that when a child scores proficient in Arkansas, he or she is prepared to succeed in Arkansas, in the United States, and, indeed, in the world."

Arkansas standards were recently judged by the U.S. Department of Education to be some of those most closely aligned with the rigorous standards of the National Assessment for Educational Progress examination, which is also referred to as The Nation's Report Card. In fact, U.S. Secretary of Education

Margaret Spellings was quoted in The Washington Post as saying, "States that have shown true leadership, such as Arkansas and Massachusetts, can inspire others to act."

"The fact that scores increased pretty much across the board is reason enough to celebrate," Dr. James said. "But we're delighted to see that the achievement gap between our white and African-American students is starting to narrow in most instances."

While the achievement gap between white and African-American subgroups of students narrowed at most grade levels for both mathematics and literacy, it more frequently grew wider between white and Hispanic students. Much of that is due to the fact that, to comply with U.S. Department of Education regulations, many students with limited proficiency in English had to take the regular Benchmark exam. Previously, these students completed an alternative assessment involving a portfolio of completed tasks, which allowed more assistance in translating from English to their native languages. "It's not surprising that scores in this sub-group dipped somewhat this year," he said.

The Arkansas Benchmark Examination is the state's criterion-referenced test, which means that students are tested against the state's curriculum frameworks. Students' scores are grouped into four performance levels: advanced, proficient, basic and below basic.

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, all students are to score proficient or above by the 2013-2014 school year. In Arkansas, schools are held accountable for having an increasing percentage of their students scoring proficient or above each year, which is called making "adequate yearly progress," or AYP. Schools that do not make AYP are at risk of being placed in school improvement. The Arkansas Department of Education plans to inform schools of their AYP status by the beginning of the school year.

In addition to the Benchmark, students in 2007 took the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, a norm-referenced battery of tests that allows comparison of Arkansas students to nationwide cohorts of students. Those composite scores ranged from the 48<sup>th</sup> percentile in the ninth grade to the 62<sup>nd</sup> percentile in the fourth

grade. A score at the 62<sup>nd</sup> percentile means that on average, Arkansas fourth-graders scored as well or better than 62 percent of their nationwide cohort.

Next year the two tests will be combined into one exam – the Augmented Benchmark Exam – which will serve both purposes but allow testing to occur within a one-week period and scores to be returned earlier.

All 2007 test scores at school and district levels are available on the Arkansas Department of Education's Web site, **ArkansasEd.org**.

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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.***