



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Julie Johnson Thompson
Office: 683-4786 Cell: (501) 580-6508
Email: jthompson@arkedu.k12.ar.us

ARKANSAS STUDENTS SCORE WELL ON 2006 STANDARDIZED TESTS

The Arkansas Department of Education today released statewide scores for the Arkansas Benchmark exams and the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills to nearly 1,200 Arkansas teachers at the annual Next Step/Smart Step professional development conference.

"On the whole, we have very good news to share about the performance of Arkansas students on this year's standardized tests, and we wanted the state's teachers to be the first to hear it," Dr. Ken James, Arkansas Commissioner of Education, told the roomful of educators at the Statehouse Convention Center in Little Rock.

More students at every grade level scored at the advanced or proficient levels on the literacy and math Benchmark exams this year than they did last year. The greatest increase was made in sixth-grade math: 57 percent scored proficient and above in 2006 while 43 percent did in 2005. The grade-level benchmarks were administered to 205,641 Arkansas public school students in grades three through eight on March 7-9, 2005. The Benchmark exam is a criterion-referenced test, which means that students are tested against the state's frameworks for what is to be taught at each grade level in those subjects.

Similar advances occurred in the state's two End of Course exams as well. And dramatic improvement is seen in those tests' scores since their inception in the 2000-2001 school year.

On the End of Course Exam for algebra 1, administered in the spring to 33,230 students in grades seven through 12 statewide, 65 percent scored proficient and above as opposed to 60 percent last year and 20 percent in 2001. Fewer students took the January 2006 exam – only 726; of those, 52 percent scored proficient and above while 47 percent did in 2005.

On the geometry End of Course Exam that was administered in April, 60 percent of the 28,485 test takers scored proficient or advanced, topping the 55 percent who scored at those levels the previous year and the 19 percent scoring at those levels in 2001. The same test was administered to 1,109 students in January 2006; 51 percent of those scored at the proficient and above level while 43 percent did in 2005.

Results for the 11th grade literacy Benchmark did not change from 2005 to 2006: 45 percent of test takers scored at the proficient and above level both years. In 2001, only 22 percent scored proficient and above. A total 29,649 high school juniors took that exam.

When looked at by racial/ethnic groups, improvement in scores occurred at almost every grade level for all groups. The only exception to the trend occurred with a one-percentage-point dip by Hispanic students taking the sixth grade math Benchmark.

“This is very positive news, of course, though it means the only significant closing of the achievement gap happened between Hispanic and white students in the lower grades. Closing the gap, of course, is an issue we will continue to address, but I am heartened that these student groups improved their academic achievement almost completely across the board,” Dr. James said.

In addition to the state’s Benchmark exams, the state administered the complete battery of Iowa Tests of Basic Skills to 342,284 Arkansas students in April of 2006. School districts had a two-week window in which to administer the test, so test dates and testing times varied across the state. Because the full battery of tests were given to students this year, as opposed to only portions of the math and reading sections of the exam last year, a direct comparison of scores is not appropriate.

The Iowa Test of Basic Skills is a norm-referenced test, meaning that students’ performance is measured against that of students in the same grades across the nation. Therefore, scores are

reported in percentiles. A student scoring at the 50th percentile score performed better than half of his counterparts and worse than half of his counterparts.

The composite scores for all grades ranged from the 49th percentile, so just below the national median, to the 62nd percentile. Grades eight and nine both scored at the 49th percentile; all others were at the 50th percentile or higher.

“The results of this test echo what we have found with our recent scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which is that Arkansas students are performing right around or slightly above the national average,” Dr. James said. “While we want to be better than average – and I firmly believe that we will be performing in the upper tier before too long -- the performance of our teachers and students on this round of exams is one that the state can and should cheer.”

Results for all tests at the state, district and school levels will be available on the ADE Web site: <http://ArkansasEd.org>. The scores will be presented in Excel spreadsheet format for each test for researchers and others wanting to do comparisons between schools and districts as well as in a drop-down menu format so parents, students and educators can quickly find all of the test scores listed by district and school.

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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.