

Executive Summary

Act 94 of 2003 established a legislative committee, the Joint Committee on Educational Adequacy. Among the statutory responsibilities assigned to the Joint Committee was the recommendation of a system or method to assess, evaluate, and monitor the entire spectrum of public education across the state to determine whether equal educational opportunity for an adequate education is being substantially afforded to Arkansas' school children.

To help the Joint Committee meet this obligation, a six (6) member subcommittee, known as the Accountability Subcommittee, was established. Based on the testimony and discussion from the Subcommittee's meetings of July 29, 2003 and August 12, 2003, a number of preliminary observations were developed for discussion by the entire Joint Committee on Educational Adequacy. These include:

The accountability functions of the Arkansas Department of Education could be modified by any four (4) of the following methods which include:

1. Leave the current structure in place but enhance it;
2. Modify the current structure of the Arkansas Department of Education by establishing a separate division responsible for accountability that operates under the authority of the State Board of Education;
3. Establish a new, independent entity reporting to a separate board; or
4. Combine either option 1 or 2 with an independent oversight group with its own staff.

Under any of the four (4) models outlined above, there must be a sufficient central office and field staff to ensure that the accountability entity, however it is configured, will have the necessary knowledge and skills to conduct both fiscal and programmatic (i.e., actual instructional delivery of materials to students v. academic content required for licensure and accreditation) review of the state's public schools.

The purpose of any accountability system developed and implemented by the State of Arkansas should be to allow citizens, schools, and state officials to make informed decisions about the performance of the systems of public schools, as well as the districts, schools, administrators, teachers, or students as appropriate. This will require a system that can provide information, in varying degrees of detail and format, to students, their parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, state-level policymakers, the business community, and other citizens.

The focus of any accountability system used by the state must be at the school and classroom level and must include both fiscal and academic measures that are robust, reliable, and valid. The overall structure of any accountability system used by the state must enable both the executive branch and the legislative branch to carry out their respective functions in a reliable and timely manner. Consideration should be given to whether the Department of Education needs more authority to target low performing schools, as most of the Department of Education's authority with respect to the academic distress statutes is applicable only when the entire school district is low performing.

A uniform financial accounting system is an absolute necessity in any successful accountability system. It is an absolute necessity that the system enable the tracking of both

revenues and expenditures at the school-site level with data input and a coding regimen that is strictly adhered to and backed by meaningful sanctions. Any financial accounting system must include the ability to accurately track the expenditures related to school-sanctioned extracurricular activities and other expenses by each school district separately and jointly by all districts in the state. The data maintained by the systems should be available to policy-makers, researchers, and the public.

The structure of the state's accountability system was an area of considerable discussion during subcommittee hearings. While there is agreement about many aspects of the structure of the current system, there are differences in key areas that have yet to be resolved. With respect to these areas, the committee received much testimony and evidence in support of the following conclusions:

- ✓ **Both norm-referenced assessments and criterion-referenced assessments** need to be used each year as a part of the state's system of academic accountability. Generally, the stakeholders can agree that there are benefits to continuing both norm-referenced assessments and criterion-referenced assessments. A blended assessment, commonly referred to as augmented assessment, combines criterion-referenced and norm-referenced assessment. Blended assessments should be investigated for use in Arkansas public schools, with consideration given to how long it would take and how much it would cost to develop a blended assessment.
- ✓ **Terminology alignment is a necessity for the state's accountability system.** The content, comparability, and alignment of the definitions used in the state's accountability system to describe various levels of student academic performance as compared to those used in the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) statute and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) should be aligned. There is great concern and skepticism when the scores on NAEP and the scores on benchmark exams seem to have no correlation.
- ✓ **Student accountability for meaningful participation in the accountability system is necessary.** The need to ensure that students who take the assessments included in the state accountability system do so with a full appreciation of the importance and consequences of their participation (i.e. tying student performance on assessment to course grades, graduation or promotion, and post-secondary scholarship opportunities).
- ✓ **The mechanisms for reporting accountability information to the general public** in a way that is easily understandable and easily disseminated, (i.e. awarding letter grades to schools based on their performance under the state's accountability system) is a necessary component in the state's accountability system. Disaggregating information is a critical tool.
- ✓ **Timely scoring and reporting of the results of the assessments** used in the state's accountability system are important so that complete and comprehensive information can be provided to parents and educators in a comprehensible fashion and so it can be used to make informed decisions regarding student placement and services, as well as educator training and development. Consideration should be given to having students complete the writing sample portion of the assessment prior to taking the remainder of the exam to reduce the amount of time it takes to get the results.

- ✓ **The types of assessments that may be administered to students in kindergarten through grade two (K-2)** as part of the state's accountability system and use of those assessments in student placement and provision of services should be carefully reviewed.
- ✓ **Longitudinal tracking of students in a value-added system** should be considered in developing any accountability system so that the performance of both the student and the educational system can be monitored and adjusted. Longitudinal tracking uses standardized test scores to track the progress of the same student from year to year and from grade to grade, regardless of whether the student moves to another school or another school district within the state. This allows for early identification and intervention for students who are not making progress. The length of time to develop longitudinal tracking with the present accountability system should be accelerated.

The Arkansas Public School Computer Network (APSCN) is the lynchpin of the state's current system for collecting both fiscal and academic data, thereby making it a vital component of the accountability system. It is critical that the hardware and the software associated with it be adaptable for current and future accountability requirements. It is also critical that entities not affiliated directly or indirectly with the Department of Education be utilized to ensure the reliability and validity of the data generated by the state's accountability system. Information contained in the system should be available for researchers and reporting entities.

The Joint Committee on Educational Adequacy reviewed the Subcommittee's report at its August 19, 2003 meeting and accepted it for inclusion in the Committee's final report.