



Arkansas School Boards Association

ASBA appreciates this opportunity to comment on the status of adequacy in Arkansas public education. The efforts of the legislature since the Supreme Court decision in November 2002 have been monumental. The legislature acknowledges, and ASBA agrees, that adequacy is a moving target, requiring continual assessment. In that light, we offer our comments.

Evolving Definition of Adequacy

As we developed our testimony, we asked the questions, “If you had to counsel your children or grandchildren about what they need to know to get a job or enter college, what would you tell them? Would you tell them not to worry because everything taught as an adequate education in Arkansas is all they need to know?” Those inquiries subsequently raised further questions about both specific and general concerns relating to adequacy as presently defined and applied to our schools:

1. When the funding formula is applied to diverse Arkansas school districts, what is revealed about the suitability of the funding formula in the “real world” of district operations and budgets?
2. Does proficiency as measured by standardized tests ensure a student is ready for constructive participation in community and career life after school?
3. Is the present level of funding sufficient for districts’ technology infrastructure, as well as support to engage and challenge today’s students?
4. Is transportation funded in a way that prevents districts from having to use money intended for an adequate education to supplement their transportation costs?
5. Must students master the full year of frameworks by the time the Benchmark exams are administered in early April, and, if so, what should teachers teach during the remainder of the year?
6. Is the level of quality education leadership sufficient to effectively reshape public education?

“Blueprint” Funding Models

Keeping up with the volumes of education legislation enacted since the 2002 Court decision has been a challenge for those closely associated with its development. Translating the new education landscape to practitioners who were not involved with the legislative design and intent has been difficult, at best. A perennial challenge to lawmakers is to ensure that what appears sound and logical in the State Capitol actually works when implemented throughout the state.

The present funding formula is intended to underwrite the state’s definition of an adequate education, close the achievement gap, and ensure all students are proficient on state standards. We suggest

creating “funding formula implementation blueprints” to ensure school boards and superintendents understand how to use the formula for budgetary decisions.

We believe it will be helpful to approach the funding formula in terms similar to the scientific process taught in our schools: Think of the funding formula as a *theory* of what will work for all school districts, based on the best thinking and data available at the time it was formed. As with science, the task is to establish the validity of the theory, discovering where it works and where it doesn't, and then adjusting it according to new experience and data. School leaders need to know how to successfully translate the funding formula into real-world application.

We envision the funding formula study as a collaborative effort between selected diverse districts and the Bureau of Legislative Research. The BLR is familiar with the legislature's intentions, and the districts are familiar with the realities of complex school operations and budgeting. We suggest selecting at least three districts per Congressional district, using a blind method similar to that used to select the sample schools in the research phase of the previous recalibration study. The study should consist of small, medium, and large districts of varying geographic and demographic makeup representative of districts across the state.

To reflect reality, the funding formula implementation studies need to be comprehensive. Student class schedules, required course offerings, teacher assignments, and statutory and ADE requirements – all the myriad factors school district leaders take into account – must be included. The resulting blueprints can guide other school districts in applying the funding formula to their unique needs. The study may reveal any laws, rules, or other factors that hinder acceptable implementation of the funding formula. It also may reveal unintended consequences within the funding formula that need to be addressed. Further, it may indicate how well the new requirements and opportunities have been communicated to those responsible for their implementation.

ASBA reiterates its August 15, 2006 written testimony urging development of several models that will demonstrate what happens when diverse school districts implement the funding formula while meeting all of the legislative and ADE Rule requirements. We believe designing several models is essential for implementing the funding formula and testing its adequacy. ASBA strongly urges the legislature to study real-world applications of the funding formula before the 2008-09 school year. This will inform the General Assembly in finalizing its recalibration of adequacy prior to the statutory deadline.

Preparing Students for Success

ASBA believes a disconnect is growing between the skills that are being tested and those that businesses identify as necessary for success in the world of work. The U.S. Departments of Labor and Education formed the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) to study the competencies and skills that workers need to succeed in today's workplace. The results of the study were published in a document entitled, *What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000*. The skills and competencies necessary for students to attain proficiency on the state Benchmark exams are a fraction of those the SCANS summary identifies as necessary for success in the workplace.

Proficiency on a test is only a partial measure of adequacy. Generally, the skills being tested are those that readily lend themselves to quantifiable measurement and are now required by NCLB. These are, indeed, important skills. We believe there is a difference, however, between the performance of a student on a test and the same student's ability to be a functioning, contributing, thriving participant in society.

ASBA does not claim to know whether vital components may be missing or shorted in our present education system, but we propose three areas of inquiry for the legislature to pursue:

1. Do the curriculum frameworks adequately encompass the scope necessary for broad student success? If the frameworks are lacking, what changes are needed? If the frameworks are sufficient, are teachers thoroughly incorporating them in every grade and subject? If not, why, and what corrections are needed?
2. Society continues to change swiftly and dramatically. Has our education system failed to keep pace with these changes and to teach in ways in which students are prepared to learn? Educators now understand that people learn in different ways and at different rates. Does the system presently meet individual student's learning styles and rates? Can we afford to have students disinterested and unreachable due to incompatible teaching and learning styles?
3. Has the pressure to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) narrowed the scope of the curriculum, bored students, and increased our state's dropout rate at the same time? Are we educating a generation of children to take tests rather than to function effectively in the complexities of the world beyond the schoolhouse?

Technology (It's More Than Just Computers)

In addition to the evolving definition of adequacy, we also must address the ever-changing world of technology. According to Intel's founder, a technology cycle occurs every 18 months. Most students *live and love* technology, and if public education doesn't adopt a 21st century approach to its classroom use, the technology gap will grow between students and teachers. Arkansas graduates may be technologically handicapped if we don't invest in instructional technology hardware, software and, most importantly, professional development for teachers.

This is more than an education issue. It impacts the economic development of our state. With farm equipment costing more than \$200,000 in some instances, who will be capable of diagnosing those complex, computer-run, satellite-guided machines? With automobile repair shops and other businesses relying on computer diagnostics, how can we ignore sufficient funding for technology? And what types of companies will bring high-paying jobs to Arkansas if our graduates are not skilled in the application of current technology?

ASBA is concerned that the recalibrated adequacy funding for hardware, software, and instructional technology staff may be insufficient. In costing out technology, the present matrix appears to base its calculation on the declining costs of "old technology." If we expect students to graduate with the technology skills necessary for career success, we can't train them on obsolete hardware and software. We acknowledge that costs for comparable hardware and software decline over time, and we are not

asserting that schools should buy every piece of new technology. But we do believe that our students must be much more advanced than mere “keyboarders” if we want them to compete globally.

ASBA is concerned that the present technology funds within the funding formula may not be sufficient to provide an adequate number of student computers, staff computers, and other technology for instructional purposes. It is equally necessary to fund staffing for instructional technology assistance and district network maintenance and upgrades. We recommend that the funding formula implementation studies address this issue to ensure that necessary funding is available to infuse technology into students’ daily instructional lives.

Technology is more than the number of computers, LCD projectors, “smart boards” and other devices that a school averages per student. Successfully integrating technology into the classroom involves more than buying and installing hardware and software. Technology purchases are wasted unless school personnel receive the training and support necessary to build their knowledge and comfort levels to successfully use technology in their instruction. Teachers need ongoing training and support from a person capable of guiding technology’s use as an instructional tool. The instructional facilitators described in the matrix would not necessarily possess the skills to enable them to serve also as technology specialists.

Another concern relates to staffing of instructional facilitators and technology support. The present matrix describes funding for 2.5 instructional facilitators per 500 students, including the potential use of 0.5 of these positions as an assistant principal. The funding distributed through the formula forces a district to choose among the three types of positions – instructional facilitators, assistant principals and technology support – but implies that all of the positions are fully funded.

Additionally, Section 5 of the Arkansas School Facility Manual, developed after the last recalibration, suggests seven roles describing varying responsibilities for implementing and maintaining a district’s technology infrastructure. The manual does not assume any of these roles would also double as an instructional facilitator. The funding provided for staffing needs to be reevaluated given the Facility Manual recommendations to ensure sufficient staffing to perform the identified and necessary roles.

Student Transportation

Student transportation funding is a lingering, complicated issue that needs to be resolved. Transportation was included in the original Act 59 “carry forward” amount of \$1,152, but without any specific portion assigned for transportation. Subsequent efforts to determine a sufficient level of funding for transportation have proven difficult. Picus and Odden researched district transportation expenditures as part of the 2006 recalibration study. They found that the cost for transportation in 2004-05, inflated to 2007-08, varied from a low of \$67 per student to a high of \$695 per student. The average of these figures is \$286, the amount subsequently used in the 2007 funding formula.

The Division of Public School Academic Facilities and Transportation appointed an Advisory Committee to develop a transportation formula to be considered by the 2007 General Assembly. Using 2005-06 data from the ADE, the committee determined the average district

transportation expenditure was \$338.25 per student, well above the \$286 recalibration study figure, which was based on projected 2007-08 inflation rates. The committee's research and recommendations were not acted upon in the 2007 session, but deserve a second look. The committee's suggestion of implementing a high-cost, special needs supplement for districts with greater-than-average transportation costs would prevent districts from having to use adequacy funding for transportation.

Another concern relates to transportation capital outlay costs. To date, the funding figures used for transportation have not included the capital outlay necessary to purchase new and replacement buses. The July 2006 Picus and Odden Transportation Report calculated the annual replacement cycle costs for buses in Arkansas at \$153 per *transported* student. Picus and Odden used a transported student count of 316,000 in determining their annual cost per student. Prorated to a statewide enrollment of approximately 466,000, the replacement cycle costs would be \$103 per year per student. Under the current district funding, the vast majority of money districts spend to purchase buses comes directly from per-pupil adequacy funding. ASBA recommends that the legislature address the costs of transportation capital outlay.

ASBA staff members have listened to some committee discussions concerning the possibility that the State of Arkansas may provide computerized student bus routing to districts. While ASBA believes that computerized routing can improve efficiency, each district has unique characteristics that may not be obvious in centralized software applications. While computerized routing software can help districts, ASBA is opposed to state-devised mandated bus routes. Many factors districts consider in establishing their routes are not evident when looking at computerized maps from a distance. For example, computerized routing may recommend a student walk one mile along a particular two-lane road to get to a bus stop. However, local residents know that the road has dangerous curves, no shoulders and deep drop-offs. Computerized routing may assist districts, but it cannot replace local wisdom about student safety.

Benchmark Exam Content

Benchmark exams play a crucial role in the state's accountability system and affect all facets of schools. The exams are considered "high stakes" because they determine whether a school makes adequate yearly progress and may control whether teachers receive bonuses under performance pay plans. Despite the importance of the tests, many educators, parents, and others are confused about the content of the Benchmarks.

The curriculum frameworks prescribe the academic material to be taught over an entire school year, and, in turn, Benchmark exams measure students' mastery of that material. But the Benchmarks aren't given on the last day of school; they are given several weeks earlier in the spring, long before the term ends and before the all of the frameworks are scheduled to have been taught. Moreover, completing the year's material is further complicated by the universal need to begin each fall term with review and re-mastery of the previous year's content because students lose ground over the summer.

To date, the state hasn't established what portion of the frameworks each teacher is responsible for teaching – and students are responsible for learning – by test time.

The timing of the Benchmarks in relation to the scope of their content raises serious questions. Should a fourth grade teacher, for example, be expected to teach all the fourth grade frameworks by the time students are tested on them several weeks before school is out? If not, then the state needs to clearly identify which portions of the frameworks the Benchmarks will cover. If, on the other hand, the teacher must rush to complete a full year of frameworks before spring testing, how does that affect the quality of teaching and learning? And then, after the exams are over, what should the teacher teach?

Let's consider this issue in the context of performance pay, where a portion of teachers' pay is based on students' longitudinal growth. For the purpose of our example, let's assume that teachers are only responsible for teaching the frameworks, according to the prescribed content and pace, up to the time students take the Benchmarks. A fourth grade teacher would inherit, for better or worse, whatever efforts the students' third grade teacher made to cover additional third grade material after exam time. If the third grade teacher didn't spend those final weeks of the school year in strong instruction, the fourth grade teacher's performance pay might be negatively affected. This scenario is unfair because it doesn't accurately reflect each teacher's performance.

The concerns we've discussed here are serious, and we appreciate Senator Bisbee's longstanding efforts to address them.

Education Leadership

The adequacy legislation resulting from the Lake View case has laid a solid foundation for the state to build upon. An essential element for continually improving public education is a wide base of quality education leadership. Parents and teachers have the greatest effect on student learning, but excellent leadership within a school is necessary to create an environment in which students flourish. Beginning with the passage of Act 236 of 1991, which created the Arkansas Leadership Academy, the General Assembly has encouraged and supported quality education leadership.

ASBA applauds the Arkansas Leadership Academy and believes its work to develop leaders has been instrumental in moving public education forward. The need for quality education leadership is huge. Picus and Odden have consistently noted that successfully implementing the revised funding formula will require rethinking and restructuring schools. The leadership necessary for such systemic change must come from all facets of the education community: teachers, administrators, school boards, the departments of education and higher education, and members of the General Assembly. In reexamining the components of an adequate education, ASBA encourages the legislature to increase its efforts to build a critical mass of leaders capable of reshaping public education.

We must develop in Arkansas a seamless system – pre-kindergarten through college. U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education Ray Simon recently told a legislative committee that a pressing challenge for Arkansas is improving the alignment between high school and higher education. Though the issue is far greater than leadership alone, the vast majority of Arkansas's education practitioners are homegrown. Higher education plays a critical role in ensuring its education graduates have the

knowledge and skills necessary to assume important classroom and school leadership positions. ASBA supports ongoing professional development and leadership training in order to build the capacity needed to establish successful learning communities throughout the state.

Additional Topics of General Concern

Education Excellence Trust Fund

The February 6, 2008 meeting of the Joint Adequacy Oversight Committee of the House and Senate Interim Committees on Education discussed problems associated with the Education Excellence Trust Fund (EETF). ASBA concurs with the testimony presented to the committee. A.C.A. § 6-5-307(b) states that EETF funds shall be disbursed by ADE pursuant to the funding formula under A.C.A. § 6-20-2305. The EETF is never mentioned in A.C.A. § 6-20-2305, which we believe means that districts are required to fund salaries from a revenue source that no longer exists separately from the per-pupil funding districts receive from the present funding formula. ASBA believes adequacy and the new funding formula require the elimination of the fund.

Health Insurance

ASBA is concerned about the cost of school employee health insurance. As the employee share of health insurance premiums increases, we understand that some employees drop their health insurance coverage. Lack of health insurance is a frightening prospect for the future of some Arkansas families. A shrinking pool of participants also can affect the actuarial experience of those who remain in the insurance plan. When young teachers with fewer health issues opt out, they leave behind older employees who tend to have more health claims. ASBA does not suggest a solution, but we urge your continued focus on this important issue.

Oil Cost Increase

As fuel prices continue to climb, they have a huge impact on school district budgets. Not only have fuel costs for buses increased, but costs for utilities and all transported commodities also have risen. ASBA asks that inflationary adjustments be made to ensure that districts can continue to maintain an adequate education, employ highly qualified teachers, and pay for increased utility bills and commodity purchases.