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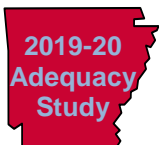
# **Holding Arkansas Schools Accountable**

Ensuring an Adequate and Equitable Education for All Students

**September 10, 2019**

**Prepared for**

**THE HOUSE INTERIM COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND  
THE SENATE INTERIM COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION**



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## **INTRODUCTION: WHY HOLD SCHOOLS ACCOUNTABLE?**

Every two years, the Joint Education Committee of the Arkansas Legislature is charged with considering all elements regarding adequacy and equity for public education. This is an important exercise for legislators, as this is the time committee members gather the information and understanding necessary to update the definition of adequacy, should they so choose, and make evidence-based changes to the education “matrix” to maximize current research and best practices in education for Arkansas students.

For context, the state’s current definition of adequacy is as follows:

- 1. The standards included in the state’s curriculum framework, which define what all Arkansas students are to be taught, including specific grade level curriculum, a mandatory thirty-eight (38) Carnegie units defined by the Arkansas Standards of Accreditation to be taught at the high school level, and opportunities for students to develop career readiness skills;**
- 2. The standards included in the state’s testing system. The goal is to have all, or all but the most severely disabled, students perform at or above proficiency on these tests; and**
- 3. Sufficient funding to provide adequate resources as identified by the General Assembly**

Part of the biennial in-depth look is an evaluation of the state’s accountability system for public schools and school districts. In 2017, the Arkansas General Assembly passed Act 930, creating a new school accountability system for the state called the Arkansas Educational Support and Accountability Program (AESAP). This new system replaced the accountability system that Arkansas had operated with since 1999, and, in keeping with what some in the education world have called “next generation accountability,” it veered away from the sole reliance on standardized test scores that characterized most accountability systems in the states – including Arkansas’s. Now that AESAP has been in operation for two-plus years, data are available for analysis. This report will support the Joint Education Committee’s evaluation by examining:

1. What is school accountability?
2. How is AESAP implemented?
3. How does “soft accountability” work and what is its impact?
4. How are Arkansas schools performing on academic measures important to adequacy as defined in the Lake View decision?

The ultimate goal, of course, is for the information and analyses provided in this report to provide Arkansas legislators with the facts they need to determine if AESAP supports the state’s efforts to provide an adequate and equitable education for all Arkansas students -- or if any changes are needed. The Bureau of Legislative Research will be glad to provide any other information legislators might wish to help them in this task.

## WHAT IS SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY?

School accountability systems have been designed at both the national and the state levels for the past several decades. Accountability systems are the means of measuring, reporting and spurring school progress. Accountability systems are generally expected to:<sup>1</sup>

- Set clear expectations for schools to raise the achievement of ALL students.
- Communicate whether schools are meeting those expectations.
- Celebrate schools that are meeting or exceeding those expectations for all groups of students while prompting action in those that are not.
- Direct additional resources and support to struggling schools to help them improve.

### FEDERAL BACKDROP: FIRST GENERATION ACCOUNTABILITY

It's a stretch to remember now, but only a few decades ago, no nationwide accountability system existed to expose public schools' performance – or lack thereof. For years, accountability of education at the federal level largely dealt with civil rights and equity issues. Then came the transformative No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2002, the reauthorization of the much revamped 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. NCLB not only focused the lens on student performance at each school in the country, but it also zoomed in with laser-like precision on the performance of subpopulations, such as African-American, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged and special education students. What's more, the law required 100% of students to score at the "proficient" level or higher by 2014.

NCLB – now sometimes referred to as "first generation accountability" – gave birth to brand new terms like "high-stakes testing" and "high-stakes accountability" during the early 2000s. The underlying belief was that all students could learn to proficient levels as determined by state standards<sup>2</sup> – an ideal many educators, business people and politicians alike lauded.

The sore point that festered as time went on, however, was the fact that schools faced labels and sanctions every year they missed the "percent-proficient" target set by their states. As 2014 neared and NCLB's goal of 100% proficient loomed unattainable for most of the nation's schools, the U.S. Department of Education started allowing states to obtain waivers from some facets of No Child Left Behind, instituting what became known as ESEA Flexibility.

This more flexible approach to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act remained in place until Congress again reauthorized the law – this time dubbed the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, for short – in 2017.

### FEDERAL BACKDROP: NEXT GENERATION ACCOUNTABILITY

According to a literature review of ESSA-related articles, many working in the realm of education policy saw ESSA as an opportunity to reimagine what accountability should look like, to envision the next generation of school accountability – and it bore little resemblance to No Child Left Behind. By the end of its run, many people -- educators especially -- disparaged the 2002 federal mandate as a one-size-fits-all system that was too focused on standardized test scores, the concept of proficiency and imposing consequences on schools with too many students scoring below expectations.

"Exclusive focus on these limited outcomes is insufficient to improve student learning," according to the Center for Assessment, a nonprofit organization founded to address changes in

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<sup>1</sup> "New School Accountability Systems in the States: Both Opportunities and Perils," The Education Trust, retrieved at <https://edtrust.org/new-school-accountability-systems-in-the-statesboth-opportunities-and-peril/>

<sup>2</sup> "The Big Idea of School Accountability," William McKenzie and Sandy Kress, The Bush Institute, February 5, 2015.

educational assessment and accountability. “Effective accountability systems must address both a broader set of outcomes and the processes implemented to produce those outcomes.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition, instead of *proficiency*, accountability’s new goal, according to nonpartisan education think tank The Learning Policy Institute, should be *college and career readiness* because it “is a significantly more challenging vision that sets our schools on a path well beyond test score proficiency. This new vision emphasizes the cognitive and noncognitive competencies expected for success in a postindustrial society and economy.”<sup>4</sup>

**“The economy has added 11.6 million jobs since the recession bottomed out — 11.5 million, or 99 percent of them, have gone to workers with at least some college education.”** –*Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown*

ESSA, to the applause of many in education, provided states with more flexibility to design accountability systems that fit their needs while assuring the needs of the lowest performing schools were identified and addressed with support from the district and state. Even so, some viewed this as a mixed opportunity as “[s]tates are already under lots of pressure to water down their accountability systems... . States will be pressured to include lots of measures that make all schools look good, to give as many schools as possible high rankings (even if they’re failing to serve some of their students) and to require as few schools as possible to take steps to improve.”<sup>5</sup>

Both The Learning Policy Institute and the Center for American Progress, a nonpartisan, progressive-leaning policy institute, urged states to use their flexibility under ESSA to recognize that schools do not begin on equal footing, so they should be held accountable – and provided support -- with that fact in mind. “One desired outcome of K-12 education is college and

career readiness for all students. However, states’ short-term goals -- or outputs – for college and career readiness should differ by school and context. Some schools may need more aggressive targets for student growth or for improving how safe and nurtured students feel on campus – commonly referred to as school climate – than other schools. On the other hand, baseline expectations for long-term outcomes should be the same for all schools.”<sup>6</sup>

In other words, all students are able and expected to reach high expectations for learning, but the baseline for where they begin may differ greatly and therefore the supports and time they and their schools need could differ as well.

## **ACCOUNTABILITY IN ARKANSAS, 1983 TO NOW**

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Several states were ahead of the nation and NCLB in addressing school accountability, and Arkansas was one of them. In Arkansas, in fact, the idea of holding schools accountable for student performance dated back to 1983. That year, the Arkansas Supreme Court handed down its *Dupree v. Alma School District No. 30*<sup>7</sup> decision that found the state’s school funding system to be unconstitutional.

In response, the state legislature increased school funding, but it also put laws in place to make sure schools were making proper use of those additional dollars. Act 445 of 1983 mandated standardized testing of students in 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. Failure to meet the new standards for accreditation could result in a district being dissolved or annexed into another district.

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<sup>3</sup> “Federal, State, and Local School Accountability: The Ways in Which Each Group Plays a Part in Improving Student Learning,” The Center for Assessment, December 2018.

<sup>4</sup> “Next Generation Accountability: A Vision for School Improvement Under ESSA,” Learning Policy Institute, February 2017.

<sup>5</sup> “New School Accountability Systems in the States: Both Opportunities and Perils.”

<sup>6</sup> “A New Vision for School Accountability,” Center for American Progress, March 2017.

<sup>7</sup> 279 Ark. 340, 651 S.W.2d 90 (1983).

Meanwhile, Act 54 of 1983 called for 85% of a school's tested students to pass the mandated Minimum Competency Test or to enter into a school improvement program with the Arkansas Department of Education.

The state's accountability efforts grew even stronger with the passage of Act 999 in 1999. The new law created the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment and Accountability Program (ACTAAP), which addressed components across the education system – everything from professional development requirements for teachers to curricular and graduation requirements for Arkansas students.

Assessment of student learning to help judge school performance was an important part of ACTAAP as well, and one change the 1999 law mandated – which also helped the state to comply with federal requirements – was more testing. Students in grades 3-8 would be tested in English language arts and math with additional tests in science at grades 5 and 7, end-of-course exams for geometry and Algebra 1 students and a literacy exam for all 11<sup>th</sup> graders. Students' scores fell into below basic, basic, proficient or advanced categories. Initially, school districts would be labeled as being in academic distress – and face a spectrum of severe sanctions – if 75% or more of their students scored in the below basic category.

Even with the efforts made during the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state lagged near the bottom of national education rankings, a fact cited in the landmark 2002 Lake View ruling by the Arkansas Supreme Court.<sup>8</sup> This time, the court chastised the state's school funding system for failing to meet constitutional standards because it did not ensure access to an adequate and equitable system of education for all students. The decision did credit the state for having ACTAAP and called for continued strong implementation of the program. When the court finally gave the state a stamp of approval for resolving the Lake View-related issues in 2007,<sup>9</sup> the status of ACTAAP contributed to the state's being deemed in compliance with constitutional standards.

ACTAAP continued to be the law of the state until 2017, although it was tweaked over the years. For instance, in 2014, statutory changes and new rules approved by the State Board of Education tightened up requirements by applying the academic distress label and related sanctions to both schools *and* school districts that failed to have more than 49.5% of its students score proficient or higher on the state's standardized tests. (The test itself transitioned from the Arkansas Benchmark Exam to a test created by a consortium of states to the current ACT Aspire.)

Under ACTAAP, schools or school districts labeled as being in academic distress had five years to meet the 49.5% proficient threshold and resolve any other issues identified by the State Board of Education. If they failed, they would face consolidation, annexation or reconstitution of the school or district – *unless* a majority of the State Board found they were unable to meet the criteria due to factors beyond their control. In the 2016-2017 school year, 15 schools, one school district and one charter school system were labeled as being in academic distress because they did not meet the 49.5 percent proficiency level.

Leading up to 2017, the Arkansas Department of Education worked with a multitude of stakeholders on its plan to comply with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. At the same time, the department also created a new system of state accountability for Arkansas's schools. As has been the trend nationwide, Arkansas's new system provides schools and school districts with:

- more autonomy and flexibility
- more support from the state (as opposed to labels and sanctions)
- multiple measures by which to prove their success with students

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<sup>8</sup> *Lakeview Sch. Dist. No. 25 v. Huckabee*, 351 Ark. 31, 91S.W.3d 472 (2002)

<sup>9</sup> *Lakeview Sch. Dist. No. 25 v. Huckabee*, 370 Ark. 139, 257S.W.3d 879 (2007)



These changes were codified in Act 930 of 2017, which repealed ACTAAP and replaced it with the Arkansas Educational Support and Accountability Act.

While Arkansas’s new accountability system incorporated many of the elements of “next generation accountability” described above, one noticeable difference in Arkansas’s approach is that while the majority of states have a definition of college and career readiness as their educational goal for students, Arkansas is not recognized to have such a definition.<sup>10</sup> For instance, the legislative intent for Act 930’s establishment of AESAP does not explicitly mention college and career readiness. However, in regard to academic aspirations for Arkansas students, it does say:

- **It is the state’s responsibility to provide the statutory framework necessary to ensure that all students in the public schools of this state have a substantially equal opportunity to achieve and demonstrate academic readiness, individual academic growth, and competencies through the application of knowledge and skills in core subjects, consistent with state academic standards through a student-focused learning system. (ACA 6-15-2902(3))**

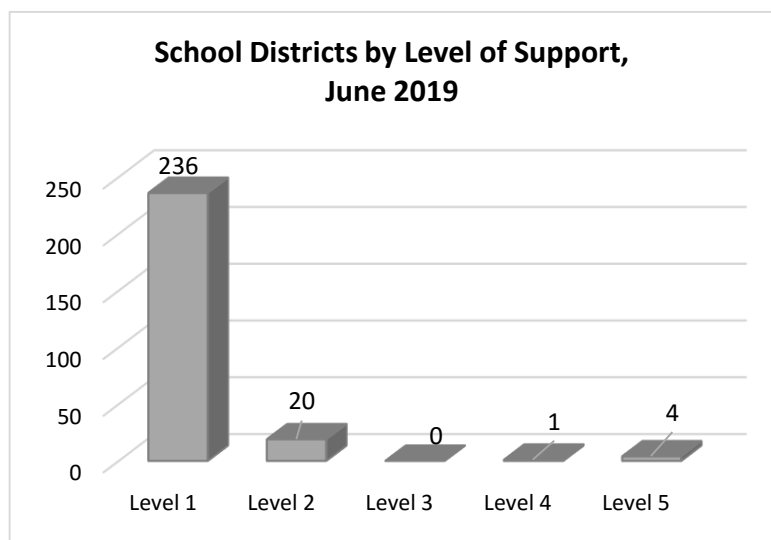
College readiness is not a term used in the adequacy definition, either, though the completion of the required 38 courses implies that condition and a clause has been added in recent years concerning career readiness.

## **HOW IS AESAP IMPLEMENTED?**

### **EMPHASIZING SUPPORT**

Under AESAP, the state is intended to provide needed support for school districts so they in turn can assist their schools in improving student performance. To that end, each school district is considered to require one of five “levels of support,” either because the district has requested a certain amount of assistance from ADE or ADE has determined through some other means that the district needs it. The five levels range from Level 1 – General, which is the basic support provided to all districts, to Level 5-Intensive.

**Originally, no specific criteria placed schools into a certain level of support,** much in the spirit of next generation accountability. Instead, beginning with the 2018-2019 school year, ADE was to review “data for all students and defined subgroup populations to determine the level of support the Department will recommend to address the district’s needs.”<sup>11</sup> In doing so, according to the rules for AESAP, ADE considers schools’ ESSA designations, which are determined by the ESSA School Index score,<sup>12</sup> fidelity of district



<sup>10</sup> Overview: State Definitions of College and Career Readiness, American Institutes for Research, September 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Arkansas Department of Education Rules Governing the Arkansas Educational Support and Accountability Act,” Effective Sept. 1, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> The four indicators included in the ESSA School Index score are Weighted Achievement, Growth, Graduation Rates, and School Quality and Student Success.

implementation of school-level improvement plans and district support plans, school- and district-level data in the department's data systems, and fidelity of implementation of Department directives. ADE officials say the department also looks at such things as a school district's ability to assist its schools and a school district's desire for state support.<sup>13</sup>

While ADE's current rules governing AESAP list no specific benchmarks for designating a school district as in need of a certain level of support. Legislation passed in 2019 changes that and will be discussed further below. (Please see Appendix A to view ADE's working document regarding the Levels of Support for districts.)

At the end of the 2018-19 school year, all but 25 of the 260 school districts and charter school systems were considered by ADE to be in need of **Level 1 – General** support. According to ADE, districts in Level 1 support have the capacity to help their schools improve and are able to take advantage of ADE assistance through the tools provided to all schools and school districts, such as information on the ADE website, web-based data tools or phone calls to their designated ADE specialists.

The only districts and charter school systems receiving **Level 2 – Collaborative** support as of June 2019 were the 20 that have schools receiving federal 1003 school improvement grants. Providing this level of support is required to comply with federal guidance. (Three additional districts that have schools with 1003 grants are classified in Level 5.) According to ADE's website, "Section 1003 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) requires that State Education Agencies allocate funds to local education agencies to support Title I schools identified for improvement to close the educational gap through goals in their school improvement, corrective action and/or restructuring plans and thereby improve student performance." At Level 2, ADE works with districts to provide schools with minor or temporary technical assistance.

No districts at the end of the 2018-2019 school year were considered to be in need of **Level 3 - Coordinated** support. At this level, ADE's technical assistance is coupled with closer monitoring of a district's major systems. This will change because Act 1082 of 2019 requires that ADE is to provide Level 3 support to any school district in which 40% to 50% of its students scored "in need of support" for reading, beginning with on the state's spring 2019 standardized exam. These scores are still being finalized, but once they are, ADE predicts that approximately 50 school districts and charter school systems will be considered in Level 3 support.

One district – Marvell-Elaine, at its own request – is currently receiving **Level 4 – Directive** support from the department. This level of support involves direct guidance from ADE for the development and implementation of school improvement plans. Again, the passage of Act 1082 of 2019 means that about 20 more districts and charter school systems will begin receiving Level 4 support districts as the law calls for any district with 50 percent or more its students scoring "in need of support" on the state's reading test to receive Level 4 support from the state.

ADE officials say that school districts receiving Levels 1-4 support may not receive the same level of support for the entire school year. For instance, if ADE begins working with a district placed in Level 3 because of its reading scores and finds additional issues in other areas of district operation, ADE may opt to provide Level 4 support instead.<sup>14</sup>

Four districts are currently in **Level 5 – Intensive** support, with a fifth – Lee County – receiving that level of support by all intents and purposes, according to ADE officials, though it is not yet so designated.<sup>15</sup> Two of these districts – Little Rock and Dollarway -- landed in Level 5 because

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<sup>13</sup> ADE interview, June 10, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Meeting with Dr. Ivy Pfeffer, Deputy Commissioner, and Deborah Coffman, Assistant Commissioner for Public School Accountability, Sept. 3, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> ADE interview, June 10, 2019

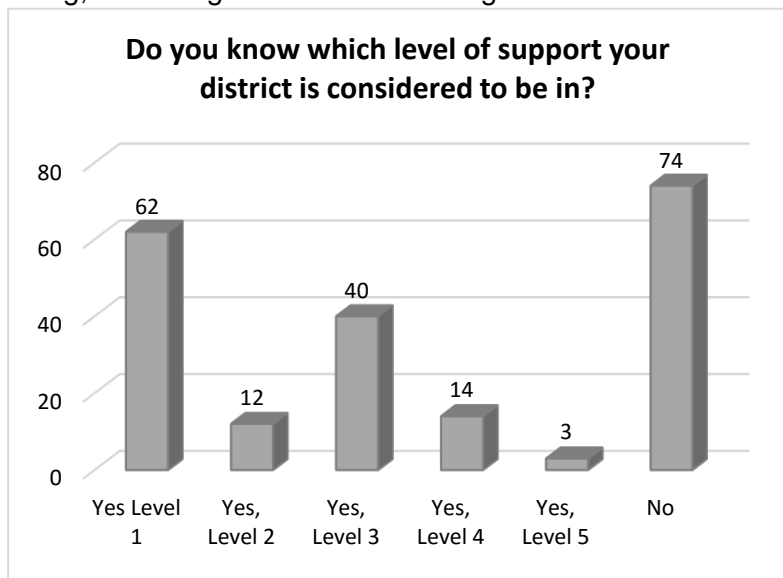
they were already under state control under the state’s former accountability system. Pine Bluff was designated as in need of Level 5 support by the department earlier this year. Earle, already under state control because of fiscal reasons, requested in spring 2019 that the department begin providing Level 5 support to the district for academic reasons.

**A significant consequence of Act 1082 is that there are now specific, quantitative criteria that can determine a district’s status in terms of support levels, much like test scores were the determining factor for a school or school district being labeled “in academic distress” under the state’s former accountability system. This was not the case before the new law.**

One other note about the state’s approach to holding schools accountable – while the current federal accountability system under ESSA has specific designations for low performing schools that are differentiated by whether all students or subsets of students (black, English language learners, economically disadvantaged, etc.) are performing at low levels in terms of achievement and/or growth, the state’s accountability system does not apply any additional labels at the school level, and it does not apply any specific benchmarks for the performance of subgroups.

Meanwhile, many superintendents do not seem to have a clear understanding about the level of support their school districts are receiving, according to the Bureau of Legislative Research’s most recent survey of superintendents. (Each biennium, the Bureau surveys superintendents, principals and teachers as well as makes site visits to a random sample of about 75 schools as part of its efforts to provide information to the legislature regarding the current state of education in Arkansas schools.)

Superintendents were asked on the survey this summer about the level of support they are considered to be in, and 74 of the 206 superintendents who had responded by Aug. 29 replied that



they “do not know.” Others reported the wrong level. For instance, while ADE reported that no school districts received Level 3 support this year, 40 reported that they were Level 3 districts. (Half of those districts may receive Level 3 support next year due to Act 1082, so that may explain their response even though their school districts were not considered to be receiving Level 3 support at the time of the survey.)

One of the stated goals in Act 930 of 2017 is that the Arkansas Department of Education – sometimes with others, such as education cooperatives or approved vendors – will provide support to each district so that it can help its schools build the capacity they need to educate their students. In practice, ADE personnel may still focus improvement efforts at the school level, according to the department. When that happens, district personnel are always consulted and included so they know how to continue the improvement efforts once ADE leaves.<sup>16</sup>

According to the BLR adequacy study survey, the overwhelming majority of superintendents answered the question “**Have you experienced more or less support from the Arkansas**

<sup>16</sup> ADE interview, June 10, 2019.

**Department of Education at the district level under the new accountability system than you did under the old (the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment and Accountability Program, or ACTAAP)?”** by indicating they received as much or more support from ADE than previously. Of the 214 respondents, 100 said they received somewhat or much more support while 92 said there was no difference. Only nine indicated they received less support from ADE under the new system.

## **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANS & DISTRICT SUPPORT PLANS**

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Each school in the state is required under Act 930 to develop a school-level improvement plan by May 1 of each year. This is no longer considered the Arkansas Comprehensive School Improvement Process (ACSIP) that had a mandated web-based planning tool for schools to use in their planning processes. By the end of the 2019 legislative session, all mentions of ACSIP – which also was a required reporting topic under the adequacy report statute – had been deleted from Arkansas code.

Now, a school can select the planning process and format it likes most. The school-level plan is to be submitted to the district and posted on the district website by Aug. 1 of each year. (Many districts place these under the statute-required link called “State-Required Information.”) The law also requires all school districts to continually monitor and assess their schools’ improvement efforts.

School districts are to incorporate school improvement plans into their strategic planning for the school year, but not all have to develop an actual support plan. For instance, school districts considered in need of Level 1 support – currently the vast majority of districts – do not have to create a district support plan. Districts receiving support categorized as Level 2 and higher, however, must develop district plans of support by Sept. 1 and post them on their websites within 10 days.

Most districts that have to create support plans also have to turn them into ADE. The only districts receiving Level 2 support that must submit their plans to ADE are the ones that the Commissioner specifies. All school districts receiving Levels 3, 4 or 5 support must submit their plans to ADE. ADE personnel are integrally involved in the creation of support plans for districts in Level 5.

A look at a few district websites shows that most have school improvement plans posted. Of those that have district support plans posted, the level of detail varies greatly. For instance, North Little Rock’s district support plan for 2018-19 consisted of two sentences: “The NLRSD district administration will evaluate each individual school plan quarterly to ensure that goals and timelines are being met. Any discrepancies will be discussed and addressed with the individual schools and administration.” The Mena School district support plan, on the other hand, is a 13-page action plan. (Found at <https://www.menaschools.org/o/mena-school-district/page/acsip-plans>.)

## **LIFE IN LEVEL 5**

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School districts in Level 5 support are the only ones that face serious consequences along with receiving assistance from the state. Four districts are currently receiving Level 5 – Intensive support from ADE: Little Rock, Dollarway, Earle and Pine Bluff. The State Board of Education must approve a district’s being considered in need of Level 5. Little Rock and Dollarway were already under state control for academic reasons when Act 930 was passed, and, during the summer of 2017, the State Board voted for them to be considered in need of Level 5 support. The State Board voted to place Pine Bluff in Level 5 earlier this year at the request of ADE, though it voted to do the same for Earle this spring at the request of the Earle School District. (At the time, Earle’s superintendent had been appointed to the role by ADE from his position in the school improvement division of ADE.)

In many ways, consequences for districts receiving Level 5 support look a lot like what happened when districts were taken over by the state for being in academic distress under the state's former accountability system. Level 5 designation can mean removal of the superintendent and/or local school board.<sup>17</sup> The district then has up to five years to address the problems and meet the exit criteria set by the state before facing one of three outcomes outlined in the law: consolidation with another district, annexation into another district or reconstitution of the district.<sup>18</sup> (The old accountability law also added the option of a majority vote by the State Board to allow more time to address issues if districts' lack of success could be attributed to circumstances outside their control. That possibility was eliminated with the passage of Act 930.) In addition, students attending a school in a Level 5 support district have a "school choice" option available to them so that they may attend a school in a district that is not considered to need Level 5 support.<sup>19</sup>

At Level 5, ADE is very involved in creating, implementing and monitoring the districts' support plan in addition to the underperforming schools' improvement plans. ADE's plans for supporting the districts focus on six systems ADE says are integral to well-performing schools:

- Academic
- Student Support
- District Operations and Fiscal Governance
- Human Capital
- Facilities and Transportation
- Stakeholder Communications/Family and Community Engagement.<sup>20</sup>

While this framework remains consistent for each school district, in line with the goals of second generation accountability, the plans of action vary according to districts' needs. For example, improving student and staff attendance and student discipline receive a good deal of focus in Pine Bluff's support plan, while Earle's plan places greater attention on instructional practices and professional development for teachers. ADE provides the State Board of Education with quarterly reports on progress with the support plans for schools in Level 5 – Intensive support.

While the support plans are tailored to individual district situations and needs, the three exit plans that have been created (for Little Rock, Dollarway and Pine Bluff – Earle's is under development) are identical, both in terms of qualitative and quantitative expectations. This too is somewhat aligned with the approach of second generation accountability, which calls for the same long-term outcomes.

ADE staff say the exit plans' qualitative criteria are modeled after the High Reliability Schools framework developed by Dr. Robert Marzano, nationally recognized for his 40 years of

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<sup>17</sup> See Ark. Code Ann. § 6-15-2916(2) (allowing the State Board of Education to assume authority of a public school district and permitting the state board to remove permanently, reassign, or suspend on a temporary basis the superintendent of the school district; remove permanently or suspend on a temporary basis some or all of the current public school district board of directors; remove on a temporary basis some or all of the powers and duties granted to the current public school district board of directors; require the annexation, consolidation, or reconstitution of the public school district; waive certain provisions of Title 6 and the corresponding rules of the state board; require reassignment of some or all of the administrative, instructional, or support staff; require a public school to institute and fully implement a student curriculum based on academic standards; require a public school to provide certain professional development; remove one (1) or more public schools from the school district's jurisdiction; require reorganization, closure, or dissolution of one (1) or more public schools in the school district; and take any other necessary and proper action that is allowed by law).

<sup>18</sup> See Ark. Code Ann. § 6-15-2917(c).

<sup>19</sup> See Ark. Code Ann. § 6-15-2915(d) ("A student attending a public school district classified as in need of Level 5 -- Intensive support may transfer under the Arkansas Opportunity Public School Choice Act of 2004, § 6-18-227, to another public school district that is not classified as in need of Level 5 -- Intensive support.").

<sup>20</sup> ADE interview, June 10, 2019.

educational research. High reliability organizations, according to Dr. Marzano, should be those that can't afford to make many mistakes (think nuclear reactors or air traffic controllers).<sup>21</sup>

The exit plans include qualitative indicators under these five headings:

1. Collaborative teams regularly interact to address common issues regarding curriculum, assessment, instruction, and the achievement of all students.
2. The school is aware of and monitors predominant instructional practices.
3. The school provides teachers with clear, ongoing evaluations of their pedagogical strengths and weaknesses that are based on multiple sources of data and are consistent with student achievement data.
4. The school curriculum and accompanying assessments adhere to state and district standards.
5. The school manages its fiscal, operational, and technological resources in a way that directly supports teachers to provide a safe, supportive and collaborative culture and increase student achievement.

The quantitative criteria in the exit plans (which do not appear in statute or rule) call for all schools in the district that earned Fs to score at least 80 points on the Growth measure of the ESSA School Index. A score of 80 points, according to ADE's business rules for the ESSA School Index, means that students' scores, on average, are meeting expected growth. In addition, schools that earned Fs must have fewer students scoring in the "In Need of Support" classification of standardized test scores than the combined total of students scoring in the upper three categories of "Close," "Ready" and "Exceeding."

For this school year, the Little Rock School District is the only one of the four that will face the consequences the new law poses for districts who are still in Level 5 support at the five-year mark: annexation, consolidation or reconstitution. In fact, the State Board of Education faces a January 2020 deadline to either release the Little Rock School District from Level 5 support (which would include placing the district in Level 4 support for a year, according to ADE's rules) or to annex, consolidate or reconstitute it. Statements to the press by State Board chair Diane Zook indicate that consolidation or annexation are "probably not viable options," leaving reconstitution.<sup>22</sup>

According to the preliminary ACT Aspire scores released in July 2019, the Little Rock School District did not hit the required goal of having fewer students in all eight of its F schools scoring "in need of support" than in the other categories combined. In 2017-18, none of the schools met that standard for English Language Arts scores while in 2018-19, six of the schools did. In math, four schools met that standard both years, though one school moved into the group while one of the schools that previously met the mark missed it in 2018-19. Test scores are still subject to appeals, so are not yet considered final. Growth scores, the other qualitative indicator in the exit criteria, will be calculated this fall.

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<sup>21</sup> Marzano High Reliability Schools video retrieved at <https://www.marzanoresearch.com/hrs/high-reliability-schools>.

<sup>22</sup> "3 forums set on LR schools" by Cynthia Howell, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Aug. 16, 2019.

## SOFT ACCOUNTABILITY AND LETTER GRADES

In addition to providing districts with various levels of support, ADE also provides the public with a plethora of data about schools and school districts. ADE refers to this as “soft accountability,” and this approach aligns with the concept of next generation accountability because it shines the light on a variety of data points parents and communities can use to assess their schools. This information is publicly available through ADE’s “My School Info” feature on [arkansased.gov](http://arkansased.gov). One of the first pieces of information listed on each school’s landing page – right after the district name and school local education agency (LEA) number – is the letter grade for the school.

Schools’ letter grades are derived from their ESSA School Index scores (calculated for federal accountability purposes), which incorporate four major components to comply with federal guidance:

- **Weighted achievement** (an equation for a school that based on current performance with extra weight applied for students with higher scores)
- **Growth** (compares each student’s performance on the current year standardized test with his/her expected score based on their past test score trend; also includes language acquisition performance of English language learners)
- **Graduation rates** (both 4-year and 5-year graduation rates)
- **School Quality and Student Success** indicators (includes a number of indicators considered important to student success such as percent of students reading on grade level, percent of students with chronic absences and percent enrolled in Advanced Placement classes)

The screenshot shows the 'My School Info' page for Fayetteville High School. At the top right are buttons for 'Custom Report', 'Select for Compare', and 'Export'. The school name 'Fayetteville High School' and 'Fayetteville School District' are displayed, along with LEA 7203020 and a 'State Grade' of 'A'. A dropdown menu shows the school year '2017-2018'. Below this are tabs for 'Information', 'Statistics', 'School Rating', and 'Report Card'. The 'Information' tab is active, showing a table with school details.

School District	Fayetteville School District - 7203000	County	Washington
Grades Served	9 - 12	Congressional District	Arkansas's 3rd Congressional District
Enrollment	2,568	Co-op	Northwest Ark. Education Co-Op - 7221000

The use of single index scores and their associated letter grades – though called for by Arkansas statute<sup>23</sup> -- veers from the intent of some next generation accountability thinkers because the single score can mask the differences of both the inputs and outputs of school performance.<sup>24</sup> (This will be explored more fully later in the report.).

<sup>23</sup> See Ark. Code Ann. § 6-15-2103 and 6-15-2105.

<sup>24</sup> The Learning Policy Institute’s paper, “Next Generation Accountability,” points to four limitations of composite indicators: 1) Poor conceptual alignment; 2) Hidden variation in student performance; 3) Misleading accounts of student growth; 4) The absence of explanatory evidence for making sense of school outcomes;

In addition, while the letter grades originally were intended for reporting purposes only, they have come to have more ramifications, especially for school districts receiving Level 5 support. This too will be discussed further later in this report.

## **ESSA INDEX SCORE COMPONENTS AND VARIOUS CORRELATIONS**

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Test scores have long been found to be correlated with the demographics of students – race and socio-economic situation, for instance.<sup>25</sup> This is not because skin color or household income themselves determine a student’s ability to achieve, but research has shown demographic groups are often associated with factors that do have an impact on brain development and emotional, mental and physical health.<sup>26</sup>

These factors include such things as little to no access to nutritious meals or health care, living in violent neighborhoods, and less availability of stimulating learning opportunities outside the classroom. Therefore, demographics are input measures that for the most part are not within the schools’ control, yet, under NCLB, those relationships were largely ignored when labels and sanctions were applied.

According to the literature, one goal of next generation accountability is to design systems that take into consideration the different range of student backgrounds that schools work with and ensure that schools are doing what it takes to help all of those students meet common high standards. That goal was part of the motivation for moving beyond the use of test scores alone for measuring schools’ success. In Arkansas, those additional

### **What’s a correlation?**

Correlations are mathematic calculations that show how closely two indicators are related. The formula to determine correlations always results in a number between -1.0 and 1.0. A correlation of 1.0 means that when one indicator moves in a positive direction, the other moves in the same direction at a consistent rate. A correlation of -1.0 means that when one indicator increases, the other decreases at a consistent rate. A correlation of 0 indicates there’s no relationship at all.

According to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Professor Emeritus Philip Meyer, “If two things vary together – that is, if one changes whenever the other changes – then something is connecting them. ... Either one variable is the cause of changes in the other, or the two are both affected by some third variable..” (*Precision Journalism*, Fourth Edition, 2002)

An example: Eating a candy bar every day could mean a gain of a pound a week. Two candy bars a day could mean a gain of two pounds a week. So there would be a positive relationship – or correlation – between candy bars eaten and weight gained. Common sense helps you know that candy bars led to the weight gain rather than weight gain leading to candy bar consumption.

Another powerful piece of information correlations provide is that they can sometimes tell you how much one indicator impacts another. In statistics, this is often called “variance explained” or “predictive power.” Take the above example – knowing the number of candy bars eaten each day helps predict how many pounds of weight are gained because the candy bar is consumed before the body’s weight increases.

If the amount of candy were all that affected a person’s weight, you would have a correlation of 1.0 and 100% of weight change could be explained by the number of candy bars consumed. But candy bars are just one component of what causes a **person’s** weight to fluctuate. So the correlation may actually be lower – say .3. In that case, we would say candy bar consumption explains 9% (.3 squared, or .09) of weight gain.

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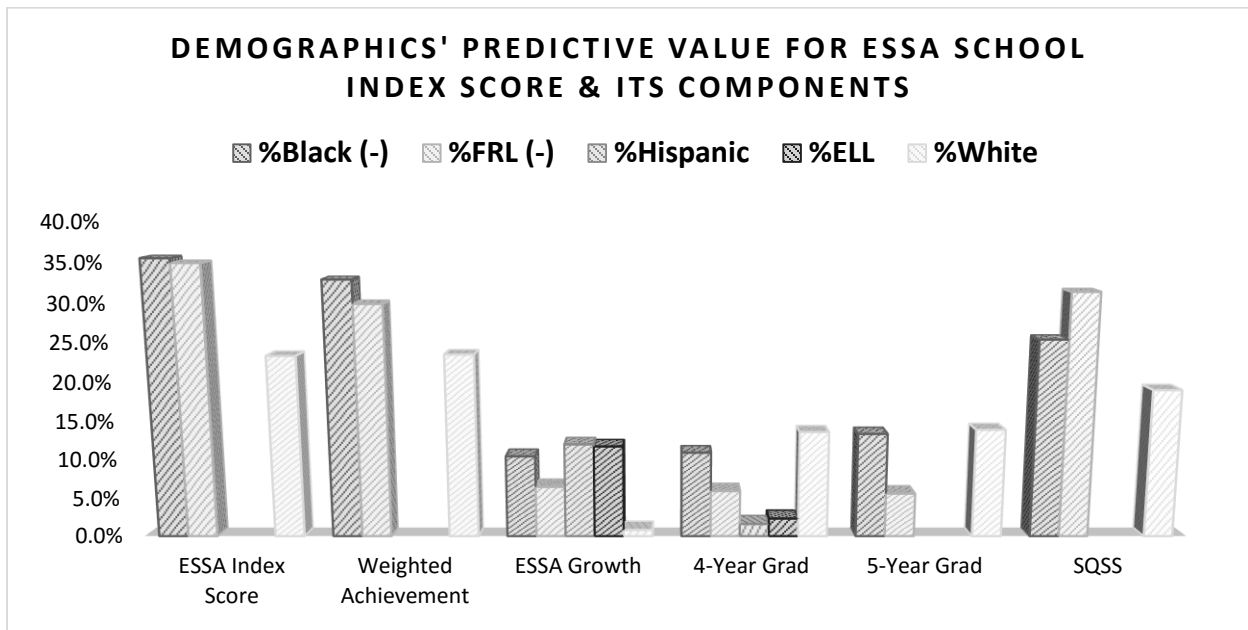
<sup>25</sup> For instance, please see “Falling Behind” by Roland G. Fryer and Steven D. Levitt, *Education Next*, 2004; “The Effects of Poverty on Children” by J. Brooks-Gunn and G. Duncan, *The Future of Children* published by Princeton University, 1997 and “A Reading Crisis, Black kids struggle with literacy” by Michael Nellums, special to the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, April 27, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Please see articles at <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/> or [https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2005/05/Stress\\_Disrupts\\_Architecture\\_Developing\\_Brain-1.pdf](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2005/05/Stress_Disrupts_Architecture_Developing_Brain-1.pdf)



measures – growth (content and English acquisition), graduation rates and the school quality and student success indicators – are rolled up with the achievement indicator into the single ESSA School Index score. *While these scores play a small role in determining a school district's level of support from the state, they do play a prominent role in the state's soft accountability system applied at the school level.* Additionally, the scores – and the letter grades associated with them – are much more accessible to the public than is information about the level of support districts are provided, with the possible exception of school districts in Level 5 support.

As the following chart shows, the demographic make-up of a school's student body often still is statistically significantly correlated with the ESSA Index Score, although it is less correlated with some of its components.



Where there is no bar, no statistically significant relationship exists between the two variables. The values in the chart are calculated individually for each group, so it's important to remember that often there can be overlap among groups. For instance, many but not all English language learners in Arkansas schools are Hispanic, and students in all race and ethnicity categories may also be included in the free-and-reduced-price-lunch category.

As explained in the previous text box, when you square the correlation value you calculate the percentage of variance that can be explained because of the “independent” variable, which in this case is the demographic characteristic. The bars in the chart represent the percent explained – or predictive value -- for each demographic group.

Analyzing Arkansas student scores shows that moderately negative correlations<sup>27</sup> exist between the ESSA School Index score and its components and the percentage of black students (-.595) and the percentage of free-and-reduced-lunch students (-.59). No statistically significant relationship showed up between those achievement indicators and the percentage of English Language Learners (ELL) or the percentage of Hispanic students, however, and a positive correlation shows up with the percentage of white students and most of ESSA School Index components.

<sup>27</sup> Table 5.6 Rule of Thumb for Interpreting the Size of a Correlation Coefficient (found in *Applied Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences*, Third Edition, by Dennis E. Hinkle, William Wiersma and Stephen G. Jurs, 1994) calls a correlation between -.5 and -.7 “moderately positive” while Philip Meyer in *The New Precision Journalism* (1991) writes that “in social science, anyone who can explain as much as 10 percent [variance] [a correlation of .222] usually feels pretty good about it.”

The components that are least associated with demographics are the growth score and the 4-year and 5-year graduation rates. The percentages of Hispanic and English language learner students in a school population correlate positively with the growth score. That could be because growth on language acquisition exams accounts for a portion of the overall growth scores.

The percentage of white students has a very low correlation with growth scores, though the correlation is higher with graduation rates. The proportions of black and free-and-reduced-lunch students in a student body have negative correlations with both growth scores and graduation rates, though the correlations are much smaller than with the overall index score or the other two components of the index.

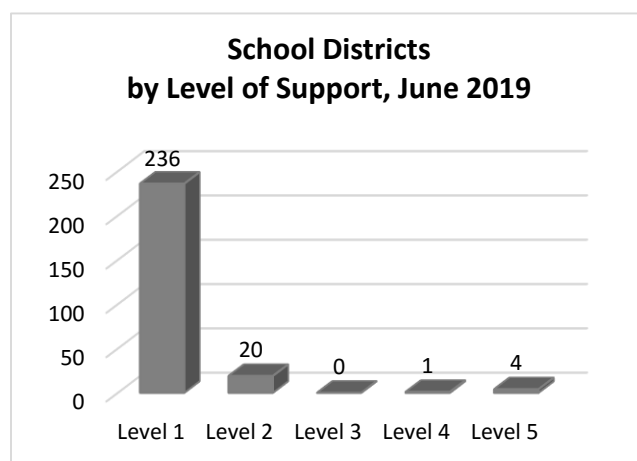
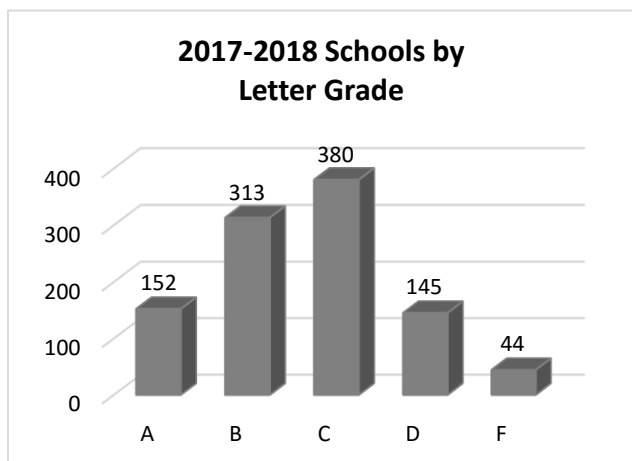
Because the growth score accounts for 50% of the ESSA School Index score – and therefore the letter grades -- for schools with K-8 grades, it helps negate the influence students' demographics have on a school's letter grade. The same is true with high schools where growth accounts for 35% of the index score and graduation rates account for 15% because the correlation between demographic background and graduation is either non-existent or explains a small percentage of the variance.

### **THE IMPACT OF SCHOOLS' LETTER GRADES AS ACCOUNTABILITY TOOLS**

When AESAP was initially conceived and put into operation, the letter grades that resulted from a school's ESSA School Index Score had little more than informational impact for a school. In 2017, ADE leaders often referred to this as soft accountability. The letter grades, along with a plethora of other detailed information about student performance and school characteristics, were made publicly available so that school leaders, parents and communities could see the data that would prompt needed improvements at schools.

While a school's letter grade would provide one piece of information for ADE to use in determining the level of support to provide to the district serving that school, AESAP was not written for the letter grades to carry any specific weight or directives concerning the level of support the state would provide.

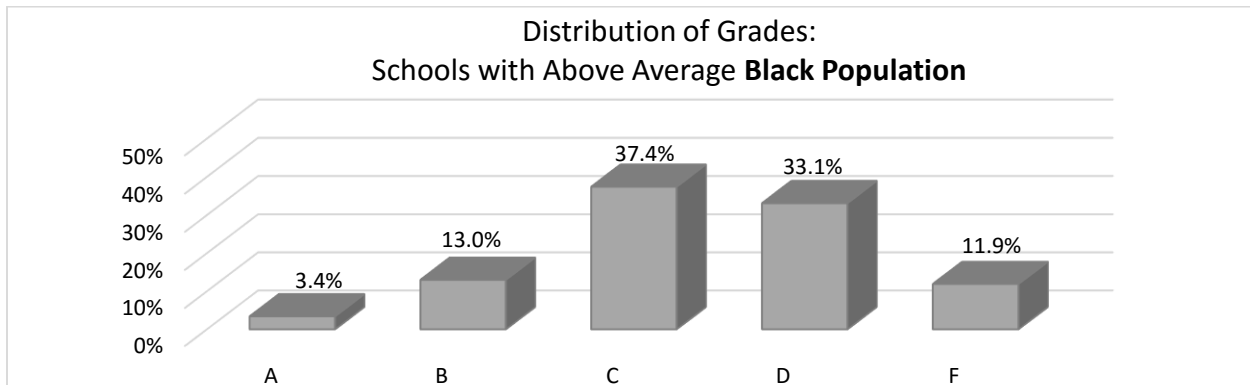
That explanation could be one reason why the pattern of schools by grade differs greatly from the pattern of school districts by level of support.



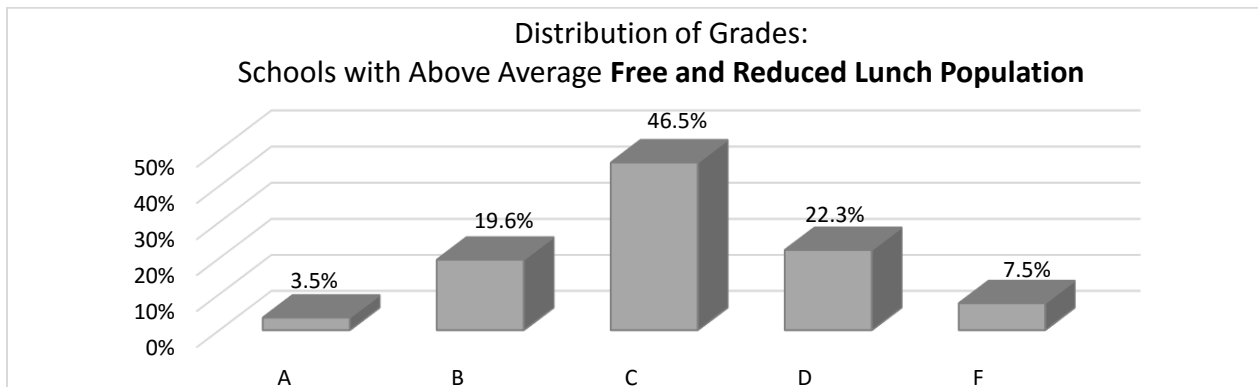
Schools' letter grades, however, have come to be used for more than just reporting as the new state accountability system has aged. What happens at F-graded schools makes up the quantitative criteria for a Level 5 district's exit plan – and the district's ability to meet that criteria in order to exit Level 5 support. And Act 754 of 2019 added the option of school choice to all

students attending schools with an F grade to exercise school choice to attend elsewhere. Therefore, it's important to look at what exactly letter grades convey about schools.

As noted in the previous section, even the new ESSA School Index scores correlate to a statistically significant extent with some student body demographics. Therefore, schools' letter grades are influenced by these as well, as illustrated in the following charts using the demographic variables with the largest correlations to the ESSA School Index score. Notice how the patterns in those charts differ from the normal curve with its slight skew to the positive side in the chart above. The first one shows the distribution of schools that have student populations with higher than average percentages of black students (20.21% or more).



The second one looks at schools with higher than average percentages of free-and-reduced-lunch students (63.48% or more).



Schools with a lower than average percentage of black students are six times as likely to receive As than schools with larger than average percentage of black students. That same comparison with low-income students shows that schools with lower than average percentages of free-and-reduced-lunch students are almost eight times as likely to receive As than are schools with higher than average percentages of students in that category. (The impact of this shows up again when looking at Arkansas's Rewards Program, which is discussed in a later section.)

In the BLR survey, Superintendents were asked: **“The new accountability system involves assigning a letter grade to each school based on the school’s ‘ESSA Index Score.’ How well do you feel the grades assigned to the schools in your district represent the quality of the school?”** Of the 218 respondents, 62.4% said letter grades reflected their schools “not well” (51) or “somewhat not well” (85) with a common explanation being similar to this one: “The grades do not reflect the outside variables that each individual school must start with. None of us start out on equal footing or at the same starting block.”

In addition to the possibility of being skewed because of demographics, some education researchers assert that reporting a single grade for a school is not in line with the next

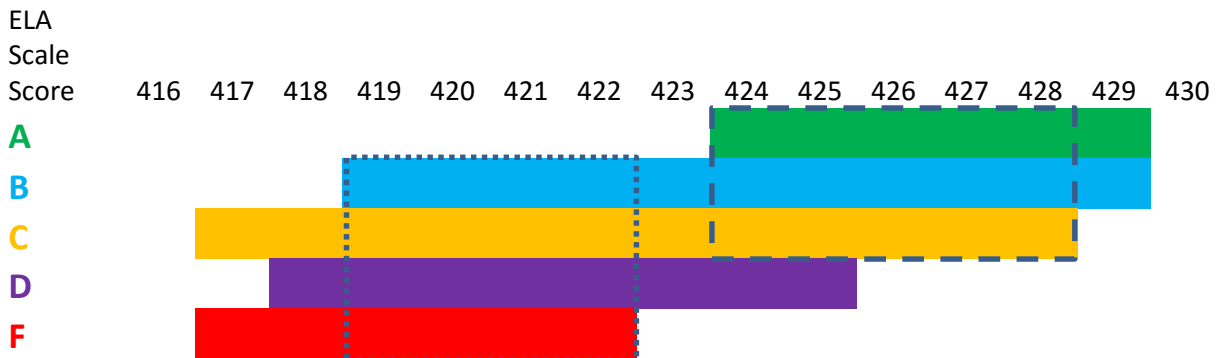
generation accountability goals of the ESSA era because it creates a bigger sense of difference between schools than may actually exist.

For instance, after evaluating Oklahoma’s A-F grading system for communicating school performance, The Learning Policy Institute found that “[w]ith composite indicators, we lose sight of the fact that the grade does not reflect the performance of many students within the schools. Many students in D and F schools did not perform as poorly as the grade suggests; they had reading scores as high, or even better than, some students in A and B schools. Additionally, a large percentage of students in A and B schools scored lower than the students in B and C schools, and many students in B and C schools scored lower than students in D and F schools.”

In Arkansas, analyses show that applying a composite grade to schools has similar implications. The scale scores in the graph below are based on the average English Language Arts score of sixth graders for each school that has a sixth grade. The schools are grouped by their letter grades, and the color band represents the range of average scale scores for the schools receiving that grade. Therefore, a scale score of 424 marks the lowest average score for an A school while 429 marks the highest.

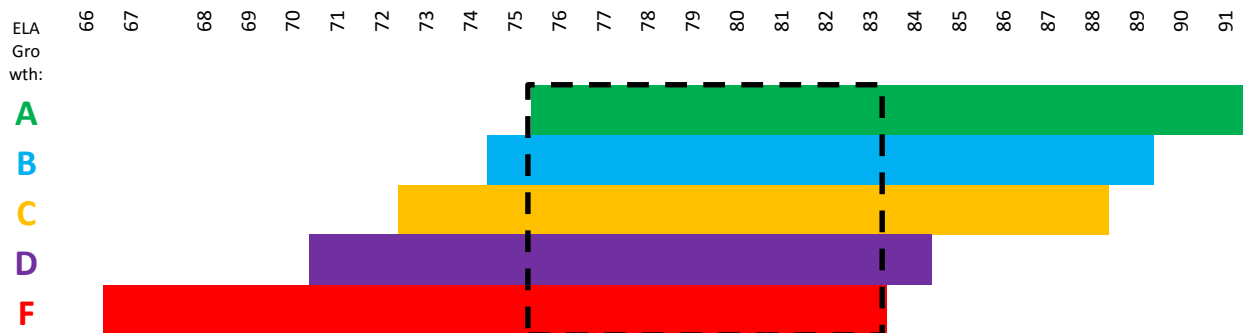
Remember that these scores are averages, so they represent a range of scores by students within each school. Yet a parent sending his or her child to an A school may believe that, in regard to English language arts, a school is performing well above what a B or C school in the area is doing, while that might not be the case. As the graph shows, a great deal of overlap occurs in 6<sup>th</sup>-grade ELA scores with schools scoring A through C, and a similar result is revealed at the lower end of the scale when looking at schools with grades B through F.

**Range of 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Average ELA Scale Scores for Schools Earning A, B, C, D or F**



The same overlapping occurs when looking at ELA growth scores for all schools. Some students in A schools may be growing at smaller rates than some students in B, C, D or F schools.

**Range of Average ELA Growth Scores for Schools Earning A, B, C, D or F**



## Holding Arkansas Schools Accountable

Another way to look at how the letter grades may not reveal accurate information about how well a school is helping its students achieve is to look at its expected scores based on demographics. This is done with a statistical operation called regression.

Regressions are like correlations in that they measure relationships. The regression formula<sup>28</sup> tells you exactly how to use the value of the predictor variables – in this case, the student body's percent black or the percent free and reduced lunch have the largest correlations – to predict the value of the outcome variable, the weighted achievement score. The regression calculation does this by considering the relationship between each school's student population percentages and its weighted achievement score. Then, the weighted achievement score that is predicted for a school based on the demographic makeup of its student body can be compared with the school's actual weighted achievement score to determine if schools are performing better or worse than predicted.

Because receiving an F now has implications for both students' ability to utilize school choice and for districts to successfully exit Level 5 without repercussions, it's helpful to examine what is happening with F-graded schools. When looking at the 44 Arkansas schools that scored Fs, you see that 13 actually actual weighted achievement scores that were higher than predicted, which could indicate that something happening at the school is adding value to students' learning.

As noted earlier, Act 754 of 2019 added the option of school choice to all students attending schools with an F grade. For students who exercise that option, there's a chance that they may leave a school where students are performing above expectations for one where that is not happening, even though it has a higher grade.

<b>ACTUAL WEIGHTED ACHIEVEMENT - PREDICTED WEIGHTED ACHIEVEMENT: "F" schools</b>					
<b>School Name</b>	<b>Black Pct.</b>	<b>FRL Pct.</b>	<b>Wtd. Ach.</b>	<b>Pred. Ach.</b>	<b>Actual Minus Pred.</b>
J.F. Wahl Elementary (Helena/West Helena)	92.20%	97.90%	37.5	29.6	7.9
Boone Park Elementary (North Little Rock)	87.60%	97.10%	39.2	31.7	7.4
Marvell-Elaine Elementary (Marvell-Elaine)	83.40%	98.40%	39.7	32.4	7.2
Retta Brown Elementary (El Dorado)	85.40%	98.00%	39.1	32.1	7.1
Wonder Elementary (West Memphis)	98.00%	85.10%	39.1	32	7
Pine Bluff Lighthouse Elementary Charter	96.20%	91.30%	37.5	30.9	6.6
Earle Elementary (Earle)	97.10%	96.00%	35.4	29.3	6.1
Weaver Elementary (West Memphis)	99.10%	84.20%	37.6	32.1	5.5
Thirty-Fourth Street Elementary (Pine Bluff)	97.90%	91.10%	33.2	30.6	2.6
Southwood Elementary (Pine Bluff)	97.50%	91.20%	33.2	30.6	2.5
Eudora Elementary (Lakeside - Chicot)	92.90%	92.00%	33	30.8	2.2
Coleman Elementary (Watson Chapel)	79.10%	77.10%	40.4	39.8	0.6
Stewart Elementary (Forrest City)	89.30%	87.00%	34.7	34.7	0
Romine Interdist. Elementary (Little Rock)	79.40%	87.90%	35.2	35.4	-0.3
Gardner-Strong Elementary (Strong-Huttig)	72.40%	96.30%	33.9	34.3	-0.4
Matthews Elementary (Dollarway)	88.60%	96.20%	30.5	31.1	-0.6
Seventh Street Elementary (North Little Rock)	89.80%	96.00%	30.1	30.7	-0.6

<sup>28</sup> The regression formula is Expected Weighted Achievement Score = 131.682 - .715(%black) - .336(%free and reduced lunch) - .490(% white) - .502(%Hispanic). The variance explained is 32.7% using %black alone; 45.8% using %black and %free and reduced lunch; 46.4% using %black, %free and reduced lunch and %white; and 47.5% when using %black, %free and reduced lunch, %white and %Hispanic.

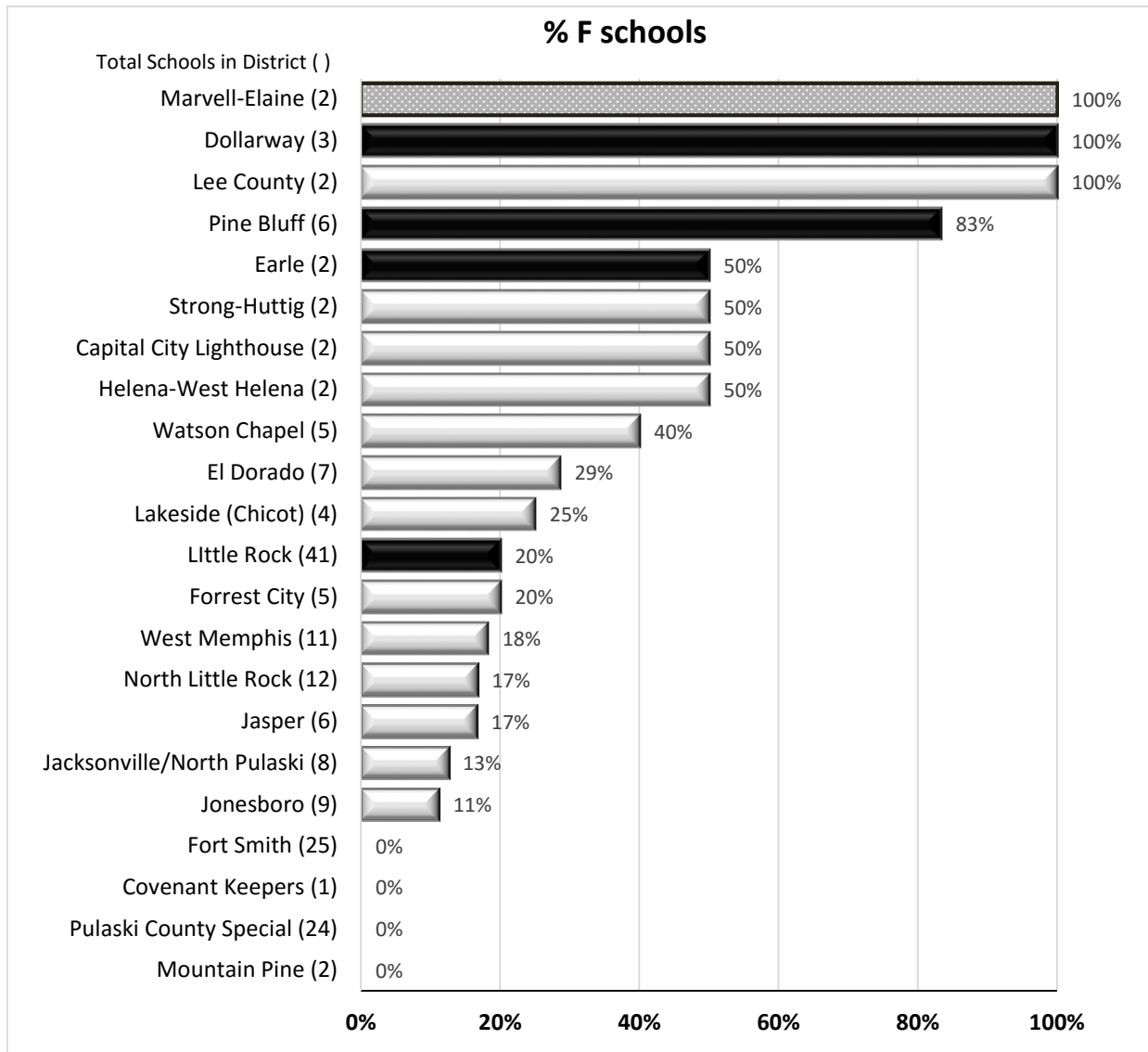
<b>ACTUAL WEIGHTED ACHIEVEMENT - PREDICTED WEIGHTED ACHIEVEMENT: "F" schools</b>					
<b>School Name</b>	<b>Black Pct.</b>	<b>FRL Pct.</b>	<b>Wtd. Ach.</b>	<b>Pred. Ach.</b>	<b>Actual Minus Pred.</b>
Capital City Lighthouse Lower Academy Charter	92.10%	77.00%	36.2	36.8	-0.6
W. T. Cheney Elementary (Pine Bluff)	94.70%	84.90%	33.2	33.9	-0.7
Lafayette County Elementary (Lafayette)	59.90%	86.90%	40.8	41.6	-0.8
Broadmoor Elementary (Pine Bluff)	96.70%	94.10%	28.7	29.7	-1
Stephens Elementary (Little Rock)	90.40%	81.40%	34.9	36.1	-1.1
Anna Strong Learning Academy (Lee)	85.60%	94.10%	30.7	32.2	-1.5
Bale Elementary (Little Rock)	76.40%	88.00%	35.6	37.8	-2.2
L. L. Owen Elementary (Watson Chapel)	80.70%	84.30%	34.5	37.3	-2.8
Washington Magnet Elementary (Little Rock)	93.10%	88.80%	29.3	33.2	-3.9
Microsociety Magnet (Jonesboro)	64.70%	94.10%	34.5	39	-4.6
Yocum Elementary (El Dorado)	61.40%	84.70%	36.1	43.2	-7.1
Robert F Morehead Middle (Dollarway)	95.70%	92.90%	22.9	30.3	-7.4
Marvell-Elaine High (Marvell-Elaine)	93.70%	96.00%	21.9	29.9	-8
Warren Dupree Elementary (Jacksonville No. Pulaski)	58.10%	85.10%	35.2	45.1	-9.9
Dollarway High (Dollarway)	91.40%	90.00%	20.5	32.8	-12.2
Cloverdale Middle (Little Rock)	63.80%	86.90%	26.8	39.2	-12.5
Quest Middle School of Pine Bluff Charter	91.90%	93.90%	18.9	31.4	-12.6
Gurdon Primary (Gurdon)	24.50%	76.90%	38.7	52.7	-13.9
Sparkman Elementary (Harmony Grove -- Ouachita)	12.50%	70.50%	42.6	56.6	-14
Oark Elementary (Jasper)	0.00%	82.30%	40.9	55.6	-14.7
Lee High (Lee)	90.40%	86.90%	17.9	33.6	-15.7

**SCHOOLS IN DISTRICTS RECEIVING LEVELS 2 AND 5 SUPPORT**

As illustrated earlier, schools' letter grades are not strongly influential in determining the level of support their districts receive from ADE. Indeed, ADE officials say the department considers a number of factors when determining what level of support school districts should receive.

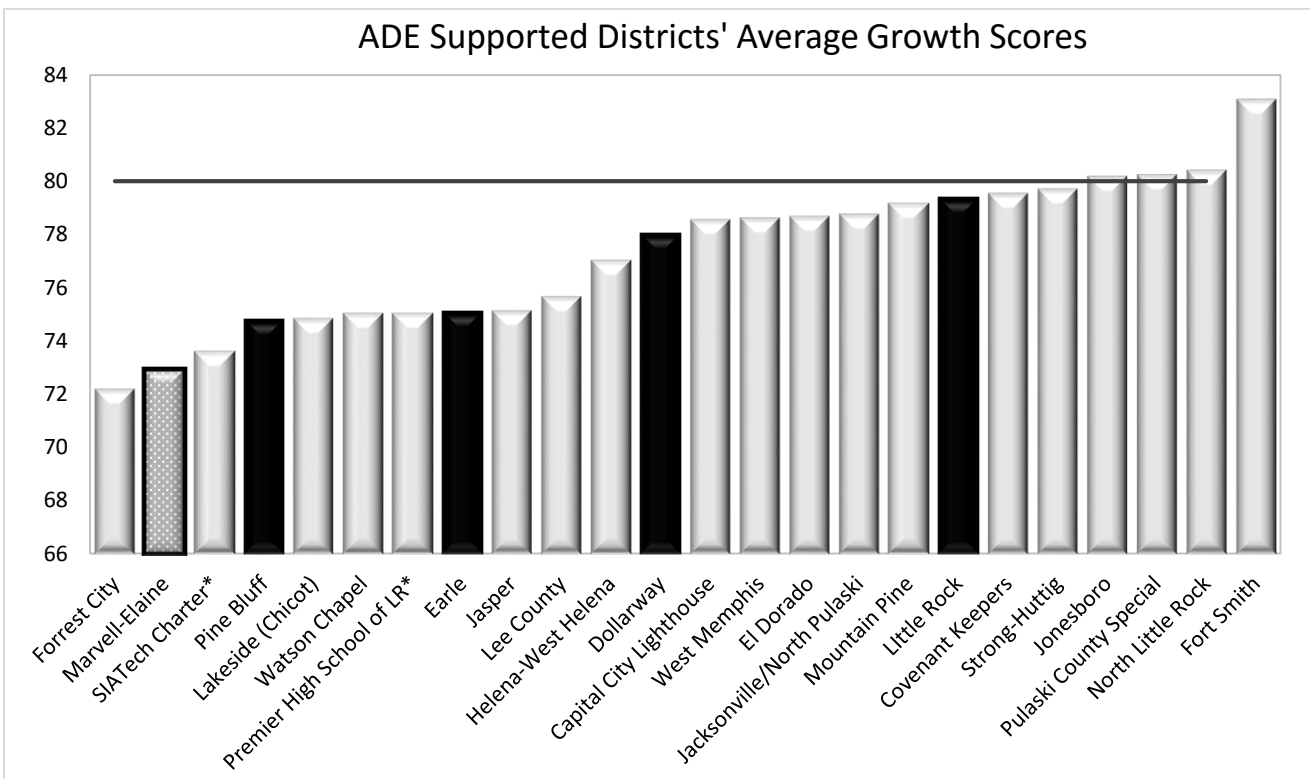
Schools' letter grades do come into play with school districts receiving Level 5 support, however. These districts must meet quantitative exit criteria based on the performance of students in the districts' F-graded schools before they are able to exit Level 5 support. If districts don't exit Level 5 within five years, they face consolidation, annexation or reconstitution.

Therefore, it is interesting to note that the differences between Level 2 and 4 school districts and Level 5 school districts is not as striking as might be expected. (The school districts are compared this way because all other districts are Level 1 school districts.) For instance, the percentage of schools that earned Fs in Level 5 districts range from 20% to 100%, while that same percentage ranges from 0% to 100% in Level 2 school districts, as noted in the chart below. The black bars denote the Level 5 districts while the gray bars denote the Level 2 and 4 districts.



(Light gray bars represent Level 2 school districts; the patterned gray bar represents the Level 4 district; black bars represent Level 5 school districts; the four with no bars are Level 2 school districts with no schools with an F grade.)

Schools with F grades in Level 5 districts must score at least an 80 Growth score (80 indicates that students are scoring as well as predicted) for their districts to exit that level of support. Again, when comparing the average of schools' scores in each school districts receiving Level 2 and Level 4 support with the average of those in school districts receiving Level 5 support, the average growth scores for Level 5 districts' schools fall within the range of average score of schools in the districts receiving Level 2 and Level 4 support. In fact, when averaging the growth scores, only four of the school districts in Levels 2, 4 and 5 surpassed an 80 growth score in the 2017-2018 school year. Average growth scores in the Level 5 districts ranged from 74.81 to 79.39 that year, while the average growth score in Level 2 and 4 districts ranged from 72.26 to 83.08.



\*Serves a non-traditional population and does not receive a letter grade. The light gray bars represent school districts receiving Level 2 support, the patterned gray is the school district receiving Level 4 support and the black bars represent districts receiving Level 5 support. The horizontal bar marks the growth score of 80, which indicated that students on average are scoring as predicted.

Again, there's a policy allowing students in Level 5 school districts may exercise school choice to attend school in another district that is in Levels 1-4. The above charts comparing districts in Level 2 and 4 and in Level 5 indicate the possibility that a student leaving a Level 5 school districts may not find him- or herself in a district with better average growth scores, though.

## REWARD SCHOOLS

Part of an accountability system is rewarding schools that perform well. The Arkansas School Recognition Program provides monetary rewards to schools, if funds are available, based on two measures, Performance (based on weighted achievement scores) and Growth and Graduation (based on schools' growth scores and, where applicable, high school graduation rates). Arkansas Code § 6-15-2107 outlines the program, which allocates \$100 per student to schools in the top 5% of each category and \$50 per student to schools in the top 6% to 10% of schools in each category. Last year, ADE distributed just under \$7 million to schools for their respective scores.<sup>29</sup> Several schools earned reward money in both the performance and growth categories.

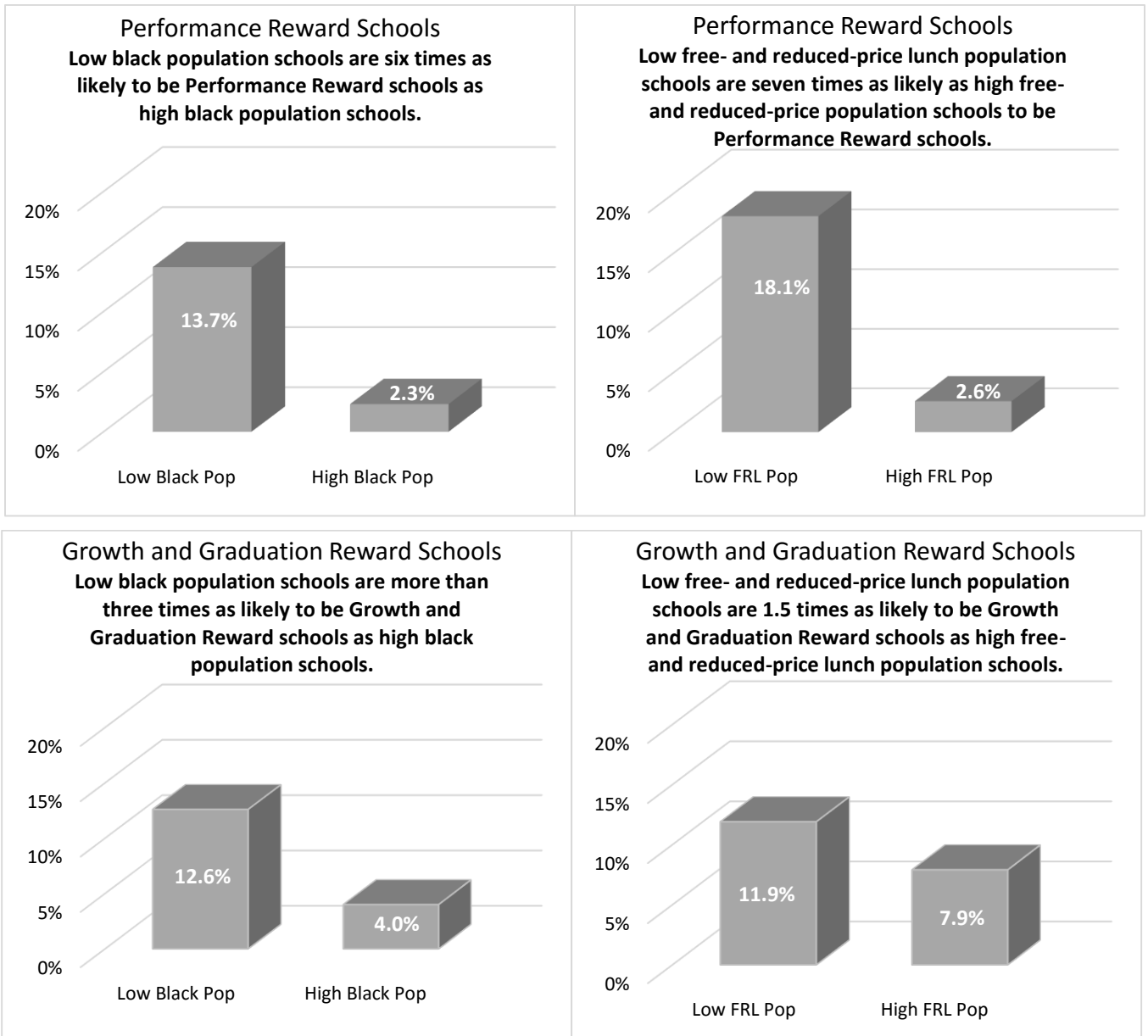
Because of the relatively strong correlation between weighted achievement scores and the demographic makeup of student bodies, the Performance rewards tend to be given to schools with lower populations of black and free-and-reduced-lunch students. Likewise, the same is true with the Growth and Graduation Reward schools, though to a lesser extent – as would be

<sup>29</sup> Under § 6-15-2107(e), school recognition awards shall be used for nonrecurring bonuses to the faculty and staff; nonrecurring expenditures for educational equipment or materials to assist in maintaining and improving student performance; or temporary personnel for the school to assist in maintaining and improving student performance.



## Holding Arkansas Schools Accountable

expected due to the lower correlations with demographic variables. For instance, 13.7% of schools with student body populations containing a lower than average percentage of black students earned Performance Rewards, while only 2.3% of schools that had higher than the average proportion of black students in their enrollment did. Consider the following graphs:



## ADEQUACY OUTCOMES RELATED TO EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

In the Arkansas Supreme Court's 2002 order declaring the state's school funding system unconstitutional, the justices agreed with the lower court's assessment that the "State has a remarkably serious problem with student performance." The lower court's assessment, written by Pulaski County Circuit Court Judge Collins Kilgore, based its conclusions on a range of educational and economic statistics. For the past several adequacy studies, the BLR has attempted to identify the likeliest sources of data that were cited in the 2001 Kilgore decision, then determine the state's progress on those indicators based on the most recent comparable data.

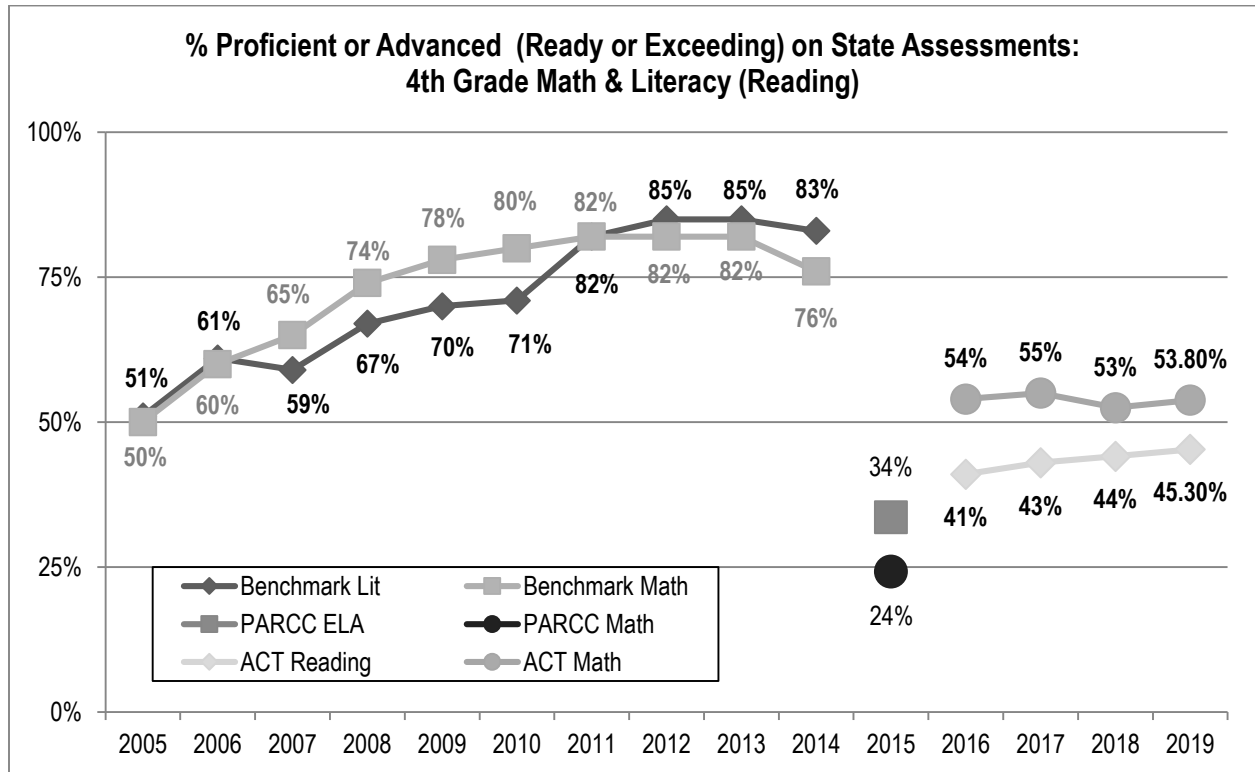
This section will examine the indicators related to academic performance, as that is the aspect most closely related to educational accountability. It is important to keep in mind that some statistics from 2001 and earlier are difficult to compare with current statistics due to different calculation methods and changes in tests.

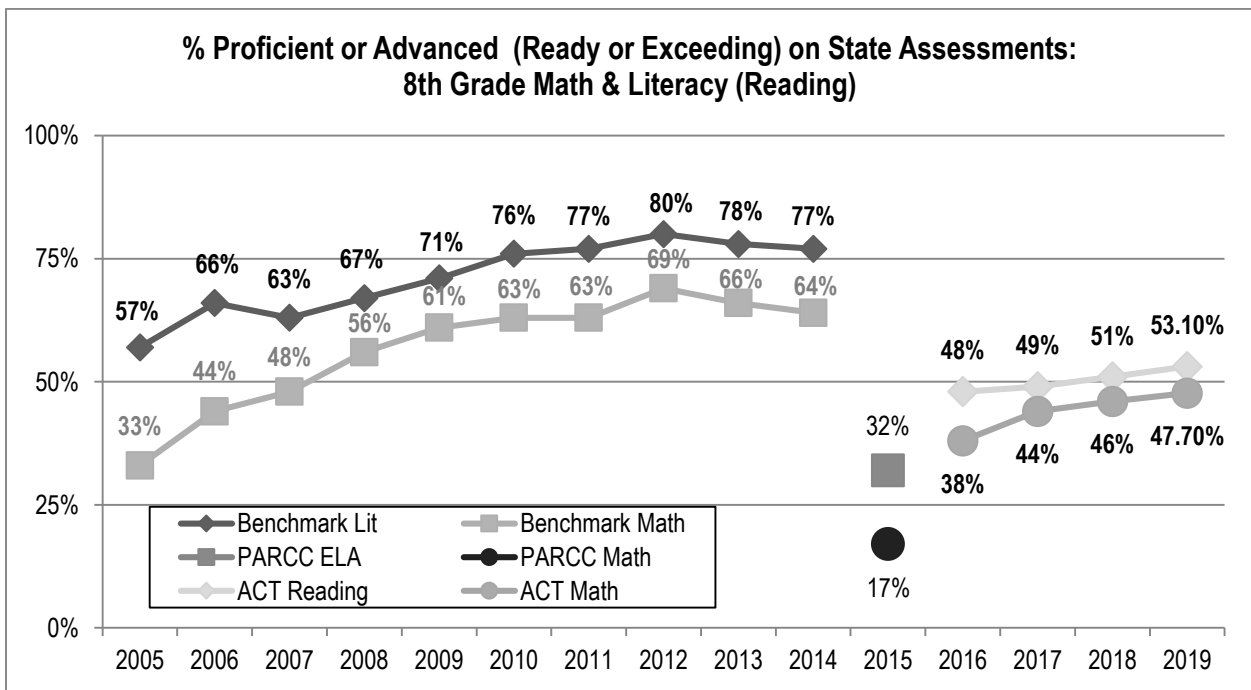
**STATE ASSESSMENT SCORES**

***2001 KILGORE DECISION: “The first set of scores on the ACTAAP test showed that only 44% of the fourth graders were proficient in reading and only 34% of the students were proficient in math.”***

***NOW: The most recent set of scores on the ACT Aspire shows that 45.3% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders were “ready” or “exceeding” in reading (indicating proficiency with grade-level standards) in 2019 (preliminary scores), and 53.8% were “ready” or “exceeding” in math.***

Since the state assessment has changed multiple times in the last few years, results are not completely comparable. Results from the Benchmark assessments from 2005 to 2014 show increases in math and literacy among 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment was administered in 2015 and shows less than 35% of 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students scored proficient or advanced in math and literacy. In 2016, the ACT Aspire assessment began to be administered. The preliminary 2019 ACT Aspire scores show a slight increase in 4<sup>th</sup> grade students scoring ready or above in math and reading from the previous year. There were also increases in the percentages of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students scoring ready or above in both math and reading.

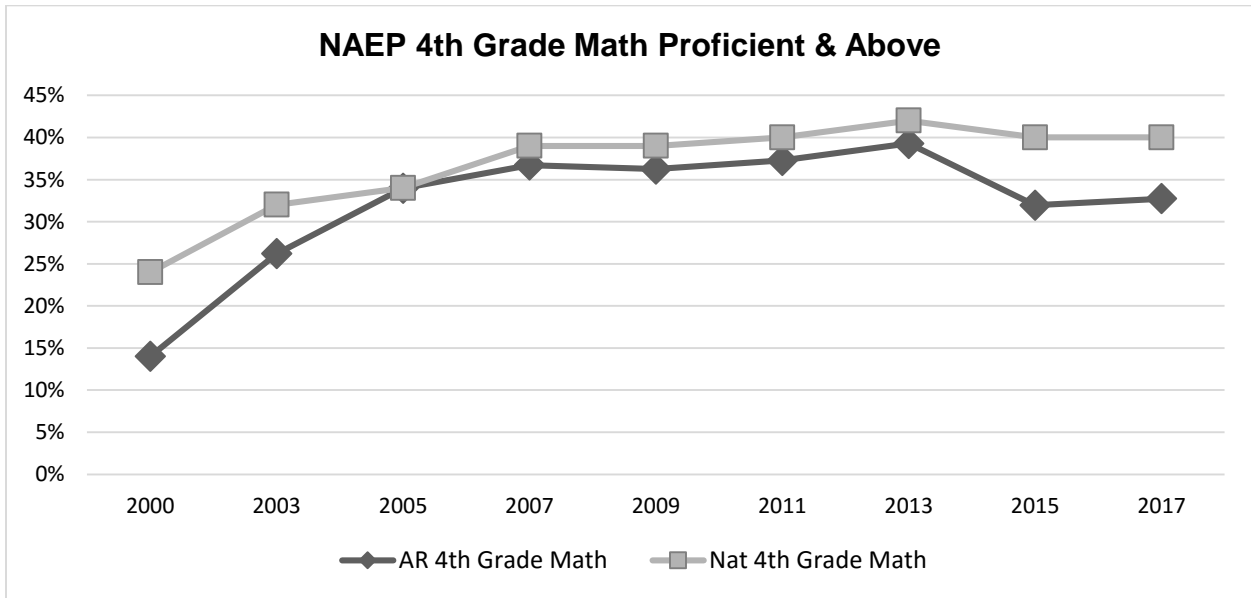


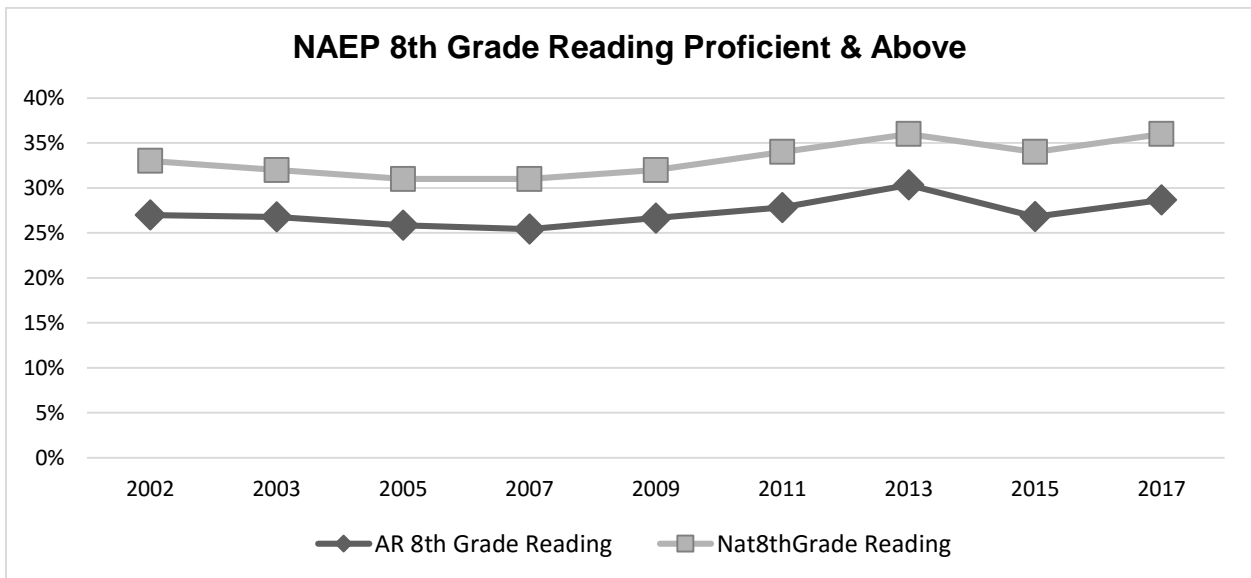
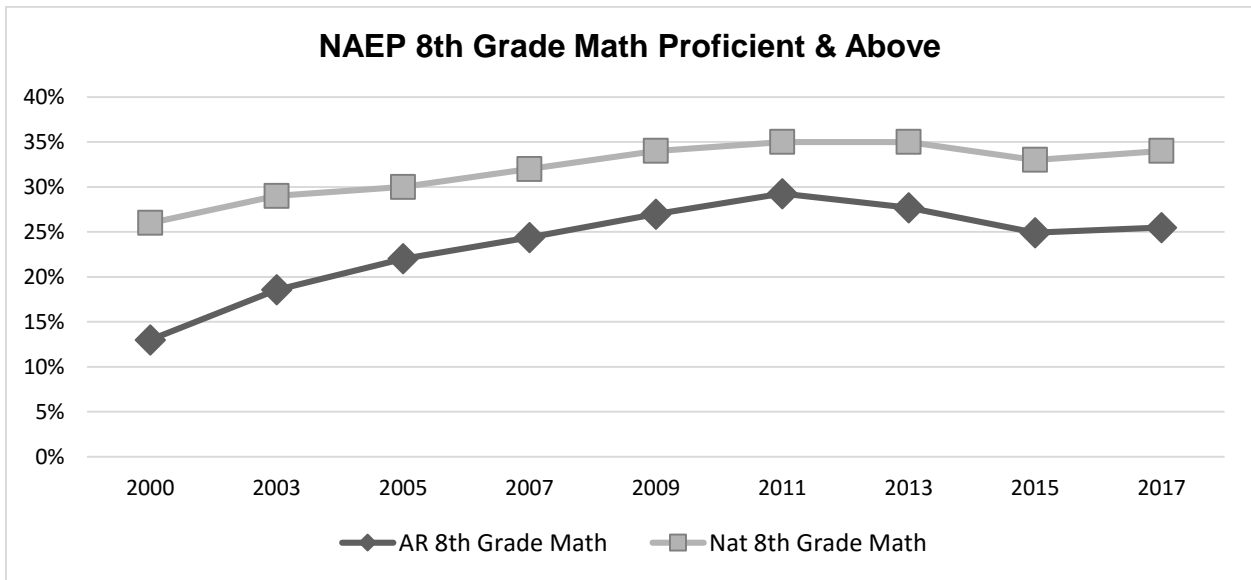
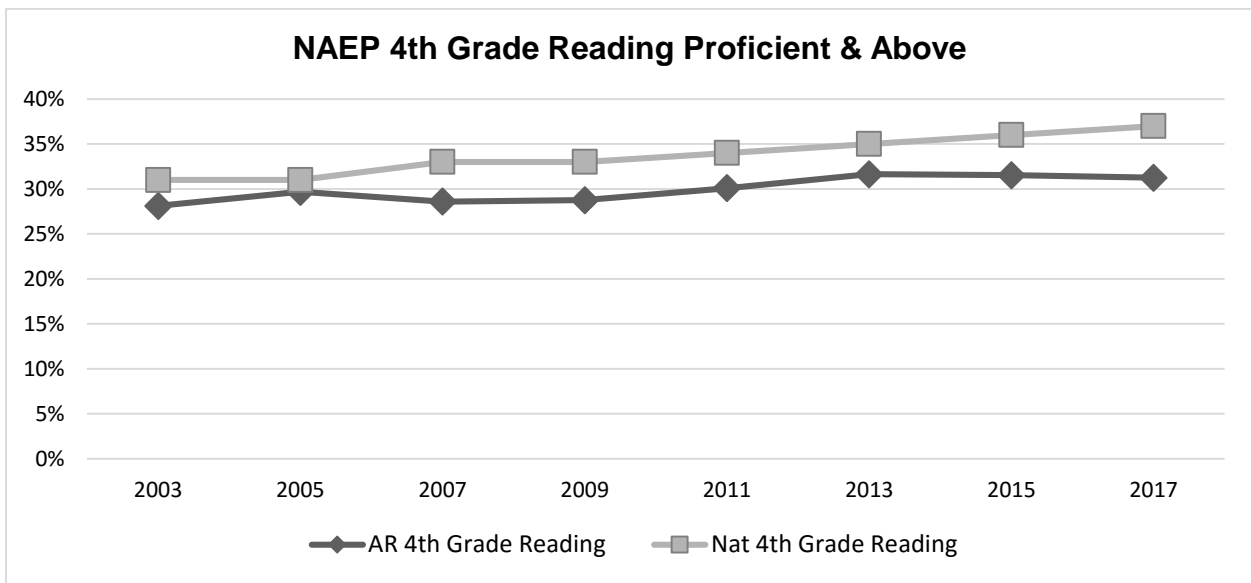


### NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS SCORES

***2001 KILGORE DECISION:*** “Arkansas’ fourth and eighth grade students do not rank at or above the national average for proficiency in math, reading, science or writing as measured by the Southern Regional Education Board’s State Analysis of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) test scores.”

***NOW:*** Arkansas’s 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students have made some progress on the NAEP assessments since the 2001 Kilgore decision. However, Arkansas students still trail behind the national average in math and reading, and the gaps between the state and national scores in those subjects for the most part have grown larger in recent years.



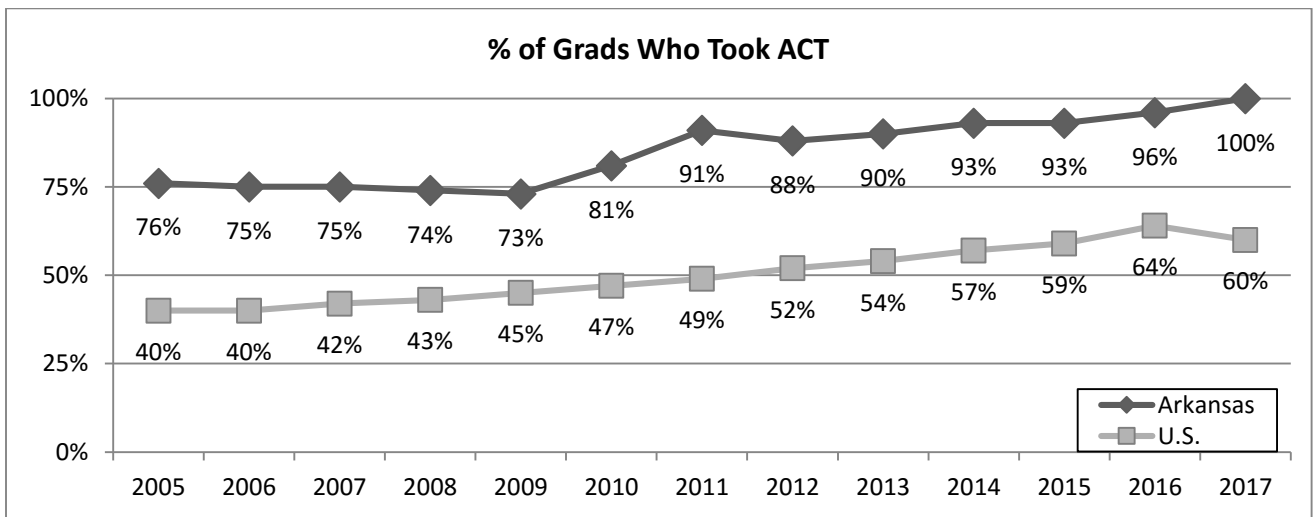
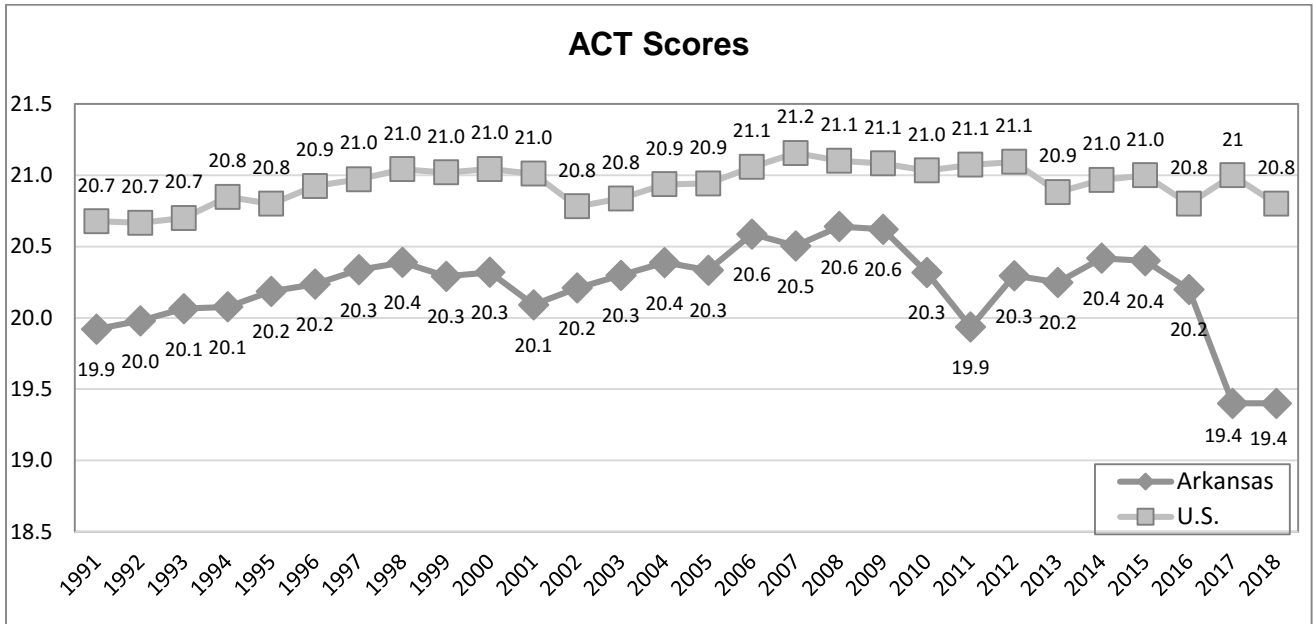


**AVERAGE ACT COMPOSITE SCORES**

**2001 KILGORE DECISION:** “Arkansas students scored several tenths below the national average on the ACT from 1990 to 1999.”

**NOW:** Arkansas students continue to score below the national average on the ACT. However, the percentage of students taking the ACT increased significantly and far surpassed the national average.

Since 2001, the average composite ACT score for Arkansas (and the U.S.) has remained relatively flat. However, in 2017, Arkansas’s average composite score dropped from 20.2 in 2016 to 19.4, about a point and a half below the national average in 2018. That said, the percentage of students in Arkansas taking the ACT increased from 38% in 2001 to 100% in 2017, far surpassing the national average of 60%. This may be due to the ACT testing fee being waived for Arkansas students in grades 9-12.

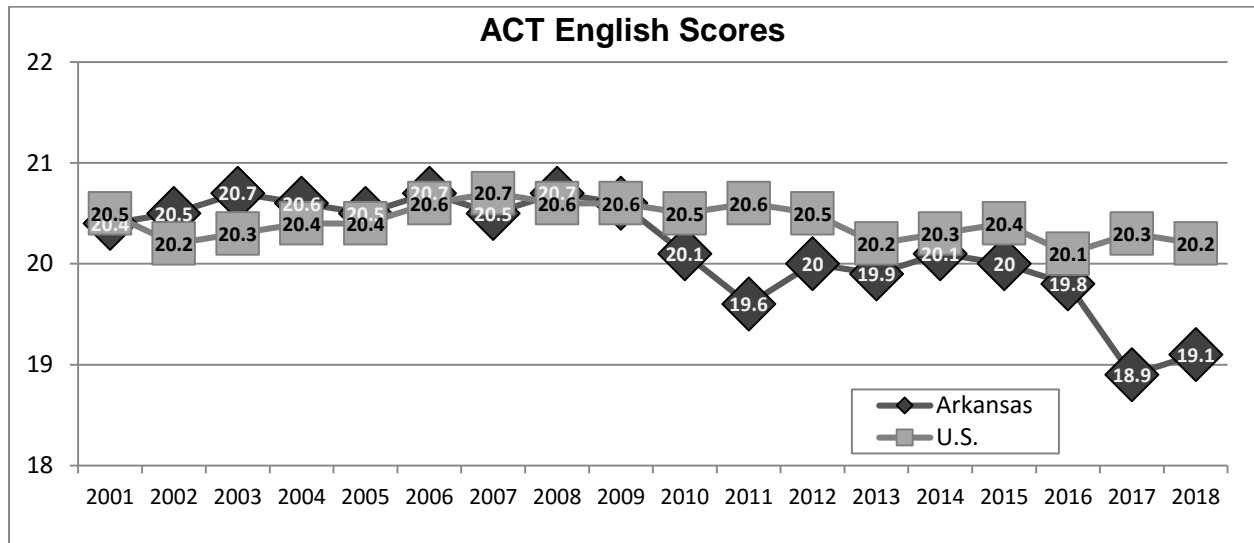


**AVERAGE ACT SCORES IN ENGLISH**

**2001 KILGORE DECISION:** “On the ACT test in English, Arkansas students exceed the national average.”

**NOW:** The average ACT English score for Arkansas dropped from 20.4 in 2001 to 18.9 in 2017 but rose slightly to 19.1 in 2018. Arkansas students now score below the national average ACT score in English.

From 2002 to 2006, Arkansas students slightly outperformed the national average on the ACT test in English. Arkansas students remained close to the national average until 2010 when it dropped about one point over the course of two years. In 2012, the state began to close the gap with the national average until 2017, when Arkansas’s average score dropped again. The decreases in the average ACT English score may be due, in part, to more students taking the exam, as seen on the previous chart.



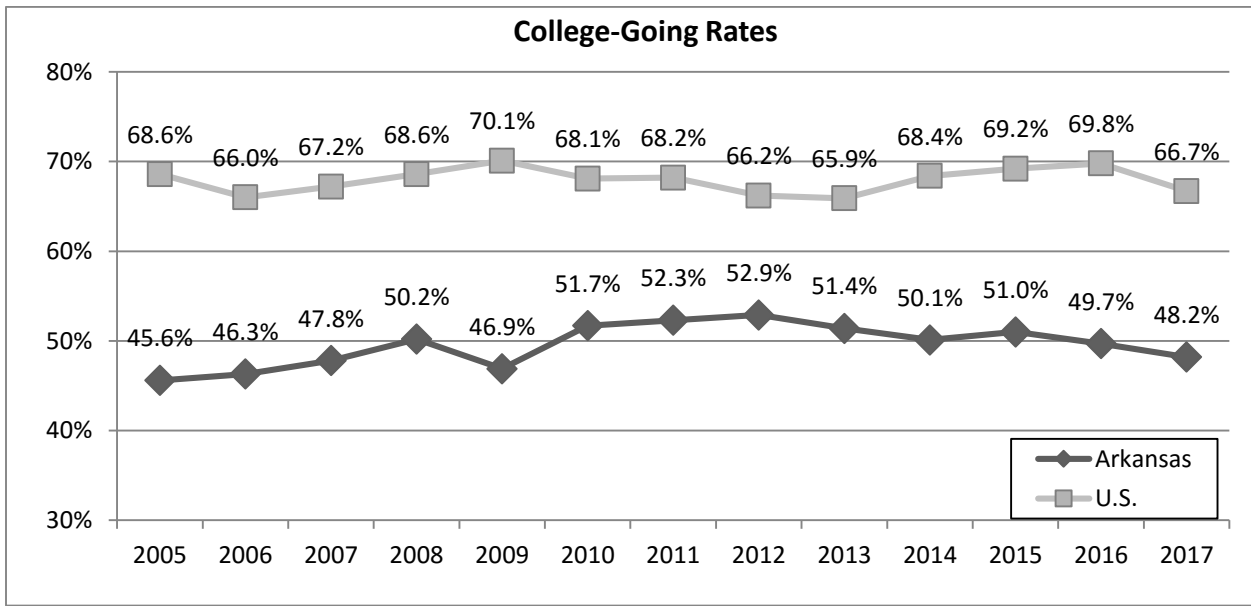
**COLLEGE GOING RATES**

**2001 KILGORE DECISION:** “For the period 1996 through 1998, the percentage of Arkansas high school graduates attending college is approximately 53%.”

**NOW:** The college-going rate is calculated differently from the methodology used in the late 1990s, which makes comparisons difficult. However, the most recent data still show that about half of Arkansas’s graduating students go on to postsecondary education.

The college-going rate cited in the Kilgore decision was calculated using a different methodology than the one currently used. Beginning in the 2009-10 school year, the new methodology is a College-Going Rate (CGR) calculation for Arkansas public high school graduates only and does not include graduates from private schools.<sup>30</sup> According to the Arkansas Department of Higher Education’s (ADHE) 2017 Comprehensive Higher Education Annual Report, Arkansas’s CGR reached a high of 52.9% in 2012 and was 48.2% in 2017, nearly 5 percentage points lower. In comparison, the national CGR increased from 65.6% in 1998 to 69.8% in 2016, though it fell to 66.7% in 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Arkansas Department of Higher Education. *Comprehensive Arkansas Higher Education Annual Report*. 2011. Retrieved from: [https://static.ark.org/eeuploads/adhe/6-CollegeGoingRate-ANNUAL\\_2.pdf](https://static.ark.org/eeuploads/adhe/6-CollegeGoingRate-ANNUAL_2.pdf)

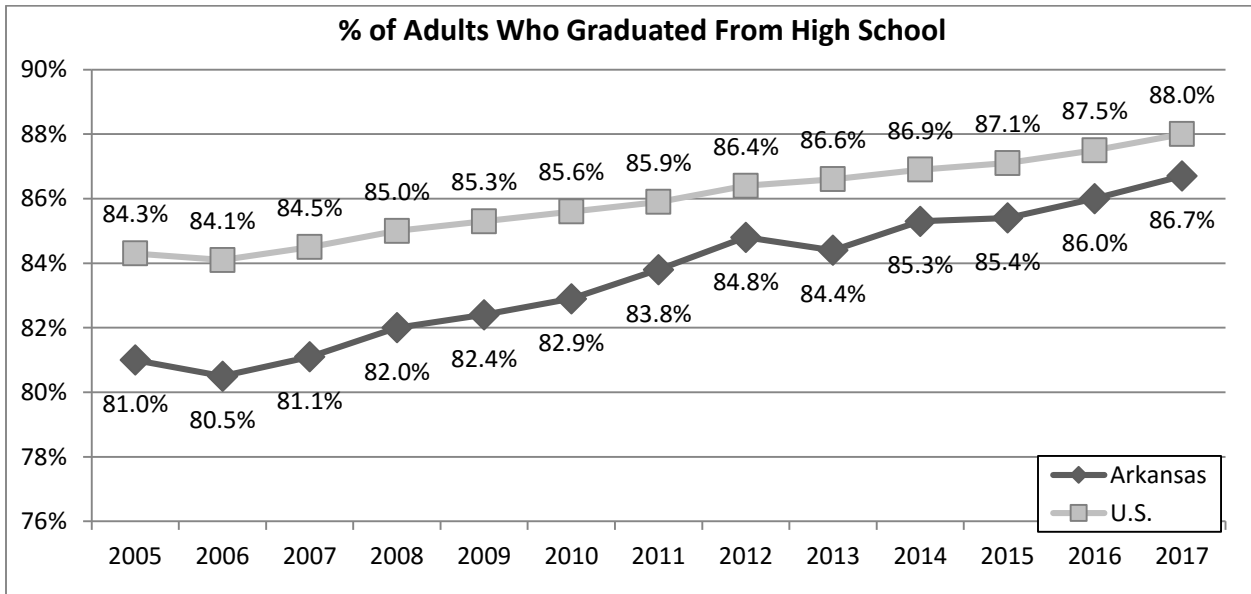


**% OF ADULTS WHO GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL**

***2001 KILGORE DECISION: "Arkansas ranks lower than the national average for percentage of adults ages 25 years and older who have graduated from high school."***

***NOW: While Arkansas still ranks below the national average, it has increased the percentage of adults who have graduated from high school and narrowed the gap.***

The 2000 U.S. Census found that Arkansas ranked **46<sup>th</sup>** among the 50 states and the District of Columbia in the percentage of adults aged 25 years and older who graduated from high school, at 75.3% (tied with Alabama), compared to the national average of 80.4%.<sup>31</sup> According to the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau from the American Community Survey (a different survey source from the 2000 Census data), in 2017, Arkansas ranked **43<sup>rd</sup>** among the states and the District of Columbia (down from 42<sup>nd</sup> in 2016) at 86.7%, compared to the national average of 88%.



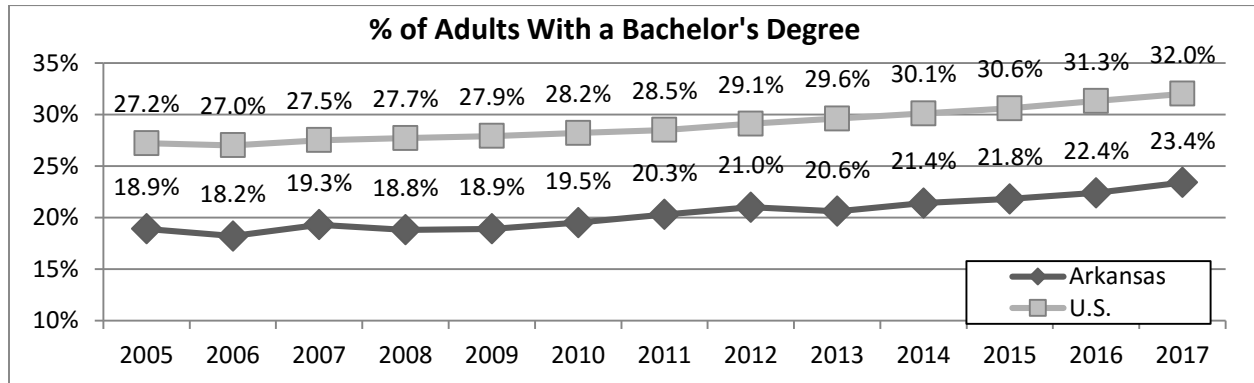
<sup>31</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: 2000, Census 2000 Summary File 3, DP-2

**% OF ADULTS WITH A BACHELOR'S DEGREE OR HIGHER**

***2001 KILGORE DECISION:*** “Arkansas ranks 49<sup>th</sup> in the nation in percentage of the population age 25 years or older with a bachelor’s degree or higher.”

***NOW:*** Arkansas has increased its percentage of adults with at least a bachelor’s degree but continued to rank 49<sup>th</sup> among the 50 states and the District of Columbia in 2017.

According to data from the 2000 Census, Arkansas actually ranked 50<sup>th</sup> among the states and the District of Columbia in the percentage of adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher, at 16.7%, compared to the national average of 24.4%.<sup>32</sup> According to the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau (the American Community Survey, a different survey source from the 2000 Census data), in 2017, Arkansas ranked 49<sup>th</sup> on this measure at 23.4%, compared to the national average of 32%.

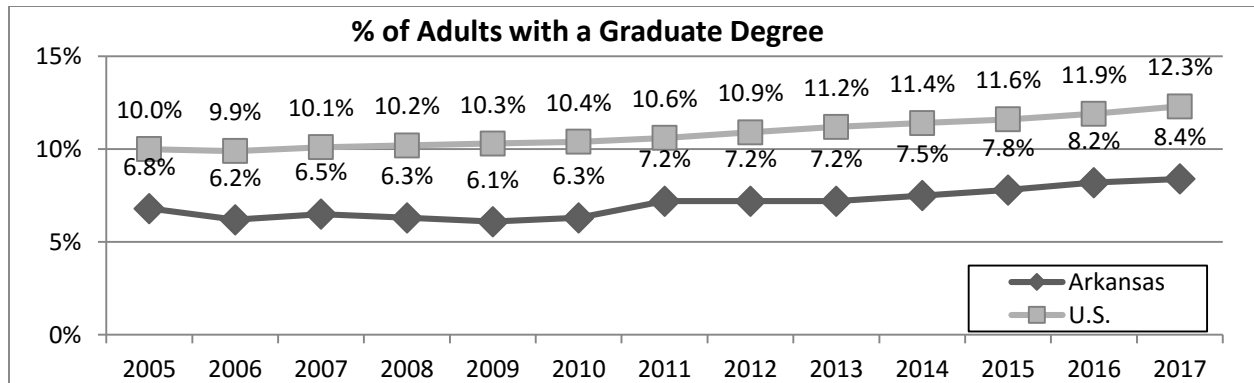


**% OF ADULTS WITH GRADUATE DEGREES**

***2001 KILGORE DECISION:*** “Arkansas ties for last place in the nation in percentage of adults with graduate degrees.”

***NOW:*** In 2017, Arkansas ranked 47<sup>th</sup> among the 50 states and the District of Columbia in the percentage of adults with graduate degrees. Arkansas still trails the national average.

According to data from the 2000 Census, Arkansas ranked 50<sup>th</sup> among the states and the District of Columbia in the percentage of the population age 25 years or over with a graduate degree, at 5.7%, compared to the national average of 8.9%.<sup>33</sup> According to the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau (the American Community Survey, a different survey source from the 2000 Census data), in 2017, Arkansas was ranked at 47<sup>th</sup> on the measure at 8.4% (tied with Nevada), compared to national average at 12.3%.



<sup>32</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: 2000, Census 2000 Summary File 3, DP-2

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: 2000, Census 2000 Summary File 3, DP-2



**APPENDIX A: ARKANSAS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION WORKING DOCUMENT FOR DISTRICT LEVELS OF SUPPORT**

	<b>Level 1</b>	<b>Level 2</b>	<b>Level 3</b>	<b>Level 4</b>	<b>Level 5</b>
<b>General definition</b>	General support provides guidance and tools to assist LEA	Collaborative support provides minor or temporary technical assistance or personalization of a Department initiative or state expectation	Coordinated support provides technical assistance and monitoring.  District support plan required.	Directed support includes directly guiding the development and implementation of the school-level plans, district support plan, allocation of resources, monitoring and evaluation.	Districts are classified for intensive support by the State Board of Education based on Commissioner's recommendation
<b>District initiated</b>	Contacts for general questions and assistance regarding daily operations	District request for short term assistance	District request for long term assistance	District request for long-term guidance	District request for intensive guidance
<b>ADE initiated</b>		1003 planning grants	ACT 1082 - district in which 40% or more of students score in need of support on the prior year summative assessment for reading	ACT 1082 - district in which 50% or more of students score in need of support on the prior year summative assessment for reading	SBE directed support
<b>ADE requirement</b>	School improvement plans including literacy plan	School improvement plans including literacy plan  District support plan - upon request from ADE	School improvement plans including literacy plan  District support plan including district literacy plan - shall be approved by ADE	School improvement plans including literacy plan  District support plan including district literacy plan - shall work with ADE - plan shall be approved by ADE	School improvement plans including literacy plan  District support plan including district literacy plan - shall work with ADE - plan shall be approved by SBE