



LEARNING STANDARDS FOR ARKANSAS STUDENTS

What Should Arkansas Students Learn?

What and how students should learn has long been a legislative concern in Arkansas. Today’s academic standards have their roots in legislation passed in 1983 – the same year the national education report *A Nation at Risk* made headlines with its charge that the quality of education in the country had declined.

That was also the year that the Arkansas Supreme Court ruled that the state’s education funding system was inequitable (*Dupree v. Alma School District*). Act 445 of 1983 strengthened the requirements both for which courses schools were expected to teach *and* which of those courses students must complete to graduate. The State Board of Education approved the resulting Standards for Accreditation of Arkansas Public Schools the next year. Requirements were set as a minimum set of courses, but schools could choose to teach more.

After the Arkansas Supreme Court’s 2002 *Lake View* ruling, curriculum and graduation requirements were their most stringent, with 22 courses required for graduation and 38 units of courses each high school must teach.

Act 853 of 2015 changed the requirement from teach to offer by saying that schools must offer each of the required 38 courses but would not have to teach any for which no students enrolled.

Academic Standards Define What’s Taught

Act 930 of 2017 gives the state’s Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) responsibility to establish the required courses and also the content – “academic standards” – taught within those courses. Content areas for which academic standards have been created include Computer Science, English Language Arts, Fine Arts, Foreign Language, Library Media Services, Mathematics, Physical Education and Health, Science, Social Studies, English Language Proficiency, and Personal Finance. Each subject’s academic standards are revised every 5-6 years by a committee of Arkansas educators and other experts in that field.

Smart Core Graduation Track is Opt-Out

The state specifies two 22-credit graduation pathways – Core and Smart Core. Smart Core has been an option since the late 1990s and, in 2009 it became the default curriculum for all high school students. The state requires

parents to sign forms if they want to waive Smart Core for their children, in which case students must instead complete the Core requirements. Waivers are offered as early as 7th grade. Students with reported Smart Core waivers accounted for only 4% of Arkansas’s 7th-12th graders in 2018-19.

Advanced Courses Must Be Offered

The Standards for Accreditation require schools to offer advanced education courses in accordance with Arkansas laws and DESE rules. Arkansas Code §6-16-1204 stipulates that, beginning with the 2008-09 school year, each high school in Arkansas shall offer a minimum of four Advanced Placement courses, with one each in English, math, science and social studies. State statute allows for International Baccalaureate (IB) courses to be offered instead of AP courses.

The number of AP courses taught at schools during the 2018-19 school year ranged from one AP course taught at 17 different high schools to 33 at Little Rock Central High School alone.

Computer Science, Reading and Recess

Act 187 of 2015 required each public high school and public charter high school to offer a course “of high quality” in **computer science**. Enrollment in high school computer science courses has grown steadily in both traditional charter high schools, reaching almost 15,000 students in 2018-19.

A focus on raising **reading** scores started in 2017 with the Reading Initiative for Student Excellence (RISE), which incorporated the “science of reading” into professional development and the reading curriculum.

Act 641 of 2019 requires elementary schools to provide 40 minutes of **recess**. The 40 minutes are counted as instructional time.

Student-Focused Learning

Act 930 of 2017 introduced student success plans for all high school students to align with DESE’s goal for Arkansas to lead in student-focused learning. When implementing student-focused learning models, educators use multiple academic measures to determine if a student needs more support to be able to master content, or if he or she can work at an accelerated pace. Students’ interests and as well as educational and career-oriented goals are considered in the planning process.