



## Arkansas's Learning Expectations for Students

Educators since the beginning of time have had to decide which material they deem most important for their students to learn. Likewise, what and how students should learn has long been a legislative concern in Arkansas as well. Once referred to as “curriculum frameworks,” the state’s expectations for what students will learn and be able to do are contained within the Arkansas Academic Standards. Additionally, course requirements for graduation and additional courses that schools offer or teach have embodied the state’s academic hopes and expectations for its students.

### Four Decades of Standards

In 1983, the same year the national education report A Nation at Risk made headlines, the state significantly strengthened statewide curriculum requirements through Act 445. The State Board of Education approved the resulting Standards for Accreditation of Arkansas Public Schools the next year. These moves were part of the state’s response to the *Alma v. Dupree* Supreme Court case, in which the court found the state’s system of funding public schools to be unconstitutionally inequitable.

The new standards specified what each public school must teach. If schools didn’t teach the required courses, their district would risk annexation or consolidation with another school district. The standards addressed the inequality of not all students in the state having access to the same basic courses. For instance, of the state’s 363 school districts in 1983, only 147 offered physics, 268 offered chemistry, 159 offered art, 194 offered music and 176 offered a foreign language.

The 1984 Standards outlined subjects to be taught in grades K-4, 5-8 and 9-12, with the high school offerings to include 38 units that must be taught at least

every other year. While these course and curriculum requirements have been tweaked and sometimes added to over the years, the “required 38” have served as the academic framework in Arkansas for more than 30 years.

### From “Teach” to “Offer”

Act 853 of 2015 introduced one of the most significant changes to implementation of the “required 38” as it changed the decades-old mandate for schools to teach each of the listed courses to requiring only that they be offered each year. If no students enroll, the course no longer has to be taught.

### 2018 Standards for Accreditation

Another significant change to the required 38 occurred with the May 2018 approval of new Rules Governing the Standards for Accreditation. Since 1984, the required courses to be taught (then offered) were listed within the rules themselves. With the 2018 revision, the list of specific courses has been removed and the rules call for schools to follow a separate required course list to be posted annually on the Arkansas Department of Education website, [arkansased.gov](http://arkansased.gov).

### Arkansas Academic Standards

Act 930 provides ADE with the responsibility “to establish academic standards that define what students shall know and be able to demonstrate in each content area.” Instruction in all of the state’s public schools is to be based on these standards to “prepare students to demonstrate the skills and competencies necessary for successful academic growth and high school graduation.” For instance, one social studies learning standard calls for 7<sup>th</sup> grade students to be able to “[e]xplain primary, secondary, tertiary and quaternary economic activities.” The academic standards are to be reviewed and revised periodically.

### Advanced Placement Courses

State law requires each high school to offer a minimum of four Advanced Placement courses, with one each in English, math, science and social studies. These advanced level courses taught by specially certified teachers delve deeper into subject matter than regular courses. Though the law only required that AP courses be *offered*, 75% of Arkansas’s traditional high schools – representing all but two school districts -- *taught* at least one AP course during the 2016-17 school year. Twelve of 18 charter high schools did.

### Computer Science

Act 187 of 2015 required each public high school and public charter school to offer a course “of high quality” in computer science. During the fall of the 2016-17 school year, 140 traditional high schools in 121 school districts taught classroom-based computer science courses and 11 charter high schools did. Meanwhile, 113 traditional high schools in 103 school districts taught digital-learning computer sciences courses, while 6 charter schools did.

### Student-focused Learning

Beginning with the 2017-18 school year, Act 930 called for the Department of Education to collaborate with school districts as they transitioned to a system of student-focused learning with the goal of supporting success for all students. In the student-focused learning model, educators are to use multiple academic measures to determine whether a student needs additional support or is able to work at an accelerated pace. Student success plans for all high school students are an integral aspect of the student-focused learning model.