



Bureau Brief

TO : Members of the House and Senate Committees on Education
FROM: Policy Analysis and Research Section, Bureau of Legislative Research
DATE : November 3, 2015
SUBJECT : **The Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment, and Accountability Program (ACTAAP)**
PROJECT # 16-001-23

WHAT IS ACTAAP?

The **Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment, and Accountability Program (ACTAAP)**, A.C.A. § 6-15-401 *et seq.*, was enacted in 1999 as the statutory framework for the state's academic assessment and district and school accountability programs. ACTAAP builds upon the repealed Competency Based Education Act of 1983 (Act 54), by focusing on greater accountability for public schools and districts. ACTAAP's main purpose is "to provide the statutory framework necessary to ensure that all students in the public schools of this state have an equal opportunity to demonstrate grade-level academic proficiency through the application of knowledge and skills in core academic subjects consistent with state curriculum frameworks, performance standards, and assessments."

Since the federal **Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)** was reauthorized as the **No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)** in 2001, the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) has modified many of ACTAAP's provisions to meet the federal law's requirements. Both federal and state statutes require the State Board of Education (SBOE) to identify schools in need of improvement and provide them with additional guidance and resources.

ASSESSMENT

The centerpiece of ACTAAP is the **Arkansas Comprehensive Assessment Program**, a testing system designed to measure students' proficiency in reading, math, and other subjects. Every public school and student in Arkansas is required to participate.

Benchmark Exams

From the time that ACTAAP was enacted in 1999 until the 2013-14 school year, ADE has required schools to administer the **Arkansas Benchmark exams** each year. The Benchmark exams measured school readiness for kindergarteners and literacy and math achievement for students in grades 3-8, as well as science achievement for students in grades 5 and 7. ACTAAP also required **End-of-Course (EOC) exams** for students in Algebra I, Biology, Geometry, and 11th Grade Literacy. Schools were also required to administer the pre-ACT EXPLORE exam for 8th graders and the PLAN exam for 10th graders.¹ Based on the results of these exams, schools were required to develop **academic improvement plans (AIPs)** for all students who did not meet certain performance measures in reading, writing, or math.

¹ See §§ 6-11-105, 6-15-441, 6-16-601 *et seq.*, 25-15-201 *et seq.*, and Act 1073 of 2013.

PARCC

In 2014-15, the state transitioned from the Arkansas Benchmark exams to a new national assessment known as the **Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)**. PARCC is a consortium of states that worked together to create online assessments in literacy and math for 3rd-11th grade students that were aligned with the **Common Core State Standards (CCSS)**. In October 2015, ADE released statewide results for the PARCC exams in 9th and 10th grade English Language Arts (ELA), Algebra I, and Geometry, as summarized below. ADE later clarified that “Students who score at Level 4 met grade level expectations, and those who score at Level 5 exceeded expectations. These students are likely to be prepared for success in college and careers. Students who score at Level 3 are approaching college and career academic expectations for the knowledge and skills tested at the grade level; however, they will need support to reach Level 4 or 5.”² Only 36% of 9th graders and 37% of 10th graders met or exceeded expectations in ELA; 28% met or exceeded expectations in Algebra I; and 21% met or exceeded expectations in Geometry.

SUBJECT	Total Students Tested	Students at Level 1	Students at Level 2	Students at Level 3	Students at Level 4	Students at Level 5	TOTAL STUDENTS AT LEVEL 4 AND ABOVE
ELA Grade 9	35,325	5,285 (15%)	7,596 (22%)	9,554 (27%)	10,803 (31%)	2,087 (6%)	12,890 (36%)
ELA Grade 10	33,529	7,079 (21%)	6,348 (19%)	7,697 (23%)	9,440 (28%)	2,965 (9%)	12,405 (37%)
Algebra I	34,433	3,651 (11%)	10,108 (29%)	10,904 (32%)	9,554 (28%)	216 (1%)	9,770 (28%)
Geometry	32,611	2,408 (7%)	11,530 (35%)	11,838 (36%)	6,338 (19%)	497 (2%)	6,835 (21%)

District and student-level PARCC results for elementary and middle schools are expected to become available later in November 2015. In the meantime, ADE rules for ACTAAP and the **academic distress program** (described in a later section) require schools to use 2013-14 test data, previous student records, and other measures in developing students’ AIPs for this school year, which they can modify as additional data become available.³

During the 2015 legislative session, the legislature enacted Act 1074, prohibiting the SBOE from renewing the state’s participation in PARCC or entering into any assessment contract or agreement beyond one year after 2015-16. In June 2015, in response to recommendations by Governor Hutchinson’s **Council on Common Core Review**, the Governor then requested the SBOE to withdraw the state from PARCC in 2015-16 and adopt the ACT Aspire as the statewide assessment beginning that year. Although the SBOE initially denied the Governor’s request, it ultimately voted in favor of transitioning to the ACT Aspire in 2015-16 (see below). As of November 2015, only 9 states now plan to administer PARCC in 2015-16, down from 24 states a few years ago.⁴

² See ADE’s press release, “Arkansas Department of Education Releases 2014-15 Statewide PARCC Assessment Results,” from October 8, 2015: http://www.arkansased.gov/public/userfiles/news/2015/Press_Release_ADE_Releases_PARCC_Results.pdf

Statewide scores and cut score ranges approved by the SBOE are available on ADE’s website at <http://www.arkansased.gov/divisions/learning-services/student-assessment/testscores/year?y=2015>

³ ADE Commissioner Memo # LS-15-058, “Fall 2015 Academic Improvement Plans,” March 23, 2015: <http://adecm.arkansas.gov/ViewApprovedMemo.aspx?Id=1479>

⁴ *Education Week*. (July 22, 2015). “As PARCC Sheds States, Is the Common-Core Test Toast or Tougher Than it Looks?” Retrieved October 22, 2015, from

ACT Aspire

Beginning in 2015-16, schools will be required to administer the **ACT Aspire** to all students in grades 3-10 in English, reading, math, science, and writing. This online, **criterion-referenced test (CRT)** is expected to take a total of 4 to 4 ½ hours, compared to the PARCC assessments, which can take between 8-10 hours. Accommodations also may be provided for students with special needs. Schools with inadequate technology for online testing may apply to ADE for a waiver allowing paper-based assessments. Schools may administer online interim assessments and classroom quizzes throughout the year as well.

According to ACT, the ACT Aspire exam is based on the ACT College Readiness Standards as well as the CCSS. Proponents of the ACT Aspire claim that one of its benefits is that the scores for 9th and 10th grade students may be used to predict their ACT college-entrance exam scores, long before they take the ACT in 11th or 12th grade. Under the Voluntary Universal ACT Assessment program (VUAA) (Act 881 of 2007), schools already have the option of administering the ACT for 11th graders, using their National School Lunch (NSL) funding. In 2015, 26,995 (93%) of Arkansas's graduating class took the ACT.⁵

Schools will also continue administering the Qualls Early Learning Inventory for kindergarteners and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills for 1st and 2nd graders, among other alternate exams for students with special needs.⁶

Because Arkansas changed its state assessments from the Arkansas Benchmarks to PARCC in 2014-15, it is not possible to accurately compare recent performance or growth in student achievement. Furthermore, it may take several more years to be able to compare Arkansas students' performance on the ACT Aspire with those of many other states: only two other states, Alabama and Hawaii, administered the ACT Aspire to 3rd-8th grade students in 2014-15.⁷ It is unclear how many other states may choose to administer the ACT Aspire in 2015-16 and beyond.

According to ADE, the state's estimated cost for administering the ACT Aspire in 2015-16 is \$6.68 million, compared to \$8.5 million spent on the PARCC in 2014-15. ADE estimates that the total cost of administering the ACT for 11th graders in 2015-16 is \$1.4 million.

NAEP

ACTAAP rules also specify that selected schools shall participate in the **National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)** each year. NAEP is a **norm-referenced test (NRT)** that measures students' general knowledge compared to that of students in other states, regardless of their states' curricula. BLR will release its analysis of Arkansas students' recent performance on the NAEP, as well as state assessments, at the adequacy meeting in February 2016.

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2015/07/parcc_common_core_testing_shifting_strategy_and_landscape.html

See also PARCC's website at <http://www.parcconline.org/about/states>

⁵ ACT. (2015). "The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015--Arkansas." Retrieved October 3, 2015, from <http://www.act.org/newsroom/data/2015/states/pdf/Arkansas.pdf>

⁶ For the state's complete testing schedule for 2015-16, see ADE's website at http://adecm.arkansas.gov/Attachments/The_following_testing_calendar_for_the_2015.pdf

⁷ See ACT's website at <https://www.act.org/research/policymakers/cccr15/resources.html>

SCHOOL RATING SYSTEM

ACTAAP's testing requirements are used to hold schools accountable for student achievement through a ratings program based on their students' annual performance, academic growth, graduation rate (for secondary schools), and any other criteria required by law or rule of the ADE. Prior to Act 1429 of 2013, schools received a **school performance rating** of 1 to 5 in annual improvement (also known as the **gains** rating) and in annual performance (also known as the **status** rating). These categories were different from the school improvement labels given to schools under the federal NCLB law as well as Arkansas's **ESEA Flexibility Plan**.⁸ Act 1429 eliminated much of the statute regarding school performance ratings and dropped the 1 to 5 rating scale.

Act 696 of 2013 required ADE to develop a formula for giving all schools an annual letter grade instead, beginning in 2014-15. Each school's score must be published annually by the ADE and district and posted on their respective websites.⁹ Schools' letter grades are based on performance in the four categories below and factor in achievement gaps between all students and **Targeted Achievement Gap Group (TAGG)** students, defined as students in any or all of the following subgroups under the ESEA: Economically Disadvantaged, English Learners (EL), or Students with Disabilities (SWD).

- 1.) **Weighted Performance Score:** Gives points for each student scoring at the following levels in math and literacy: Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic, with higher points awarded for students scoring Proficient or Advanced;
- 2.) **Improvement Score, with ESEA Options:** Gives points for meeting **Annual Measureable Objectives (AMO)** for proficiency in math and literacy for all students, as well as TAGG students;
- 3.) **Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate:** Gives points for the number of students who graduate within four years; and
- 4.) **Adjustments for Achievement and Graduation Gaps:** Gives points based on test score and graduation gaps between TAGG and non-TAGG students.

In the first year of this new A-F rating system, only 162 schools received an A (15%). The chart below provides a breakdown of all schools' letter grades.

LETTER GRADES	TOTAL SCHOOLS (N=1,050)
A	162 (15%)
B	322 (31%)
C	365 (35%)
D	158 (15%)
F	43 (4%)

⁸ See BLR's September 2015 "Adequacy Highlights: Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Arkansas Flexibility Plan," available at [http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/education/K12/AdequacyReports/2016/2015-09-15/03-Highlights%20ESEA-NCLB%20Flexibility.%20BLR%20\(9\).pdf](http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/education/K12/AdequacyReports/2016/2015-09-15/03-Highlights%20ESEA-NCLB%20Flexibility.%20BLR%20(9).pdf)

⁹ See ADE's Agency Rule # 005.19. "Arkansas Department of Education Rules Governing the Public School Rating System On Annual School Report Cards (Emergency Rule) – Effective March 9, 2015." Retrieved October 27, 2015, from <http://www.sos.arkansas.gov/rulesRegs/Arkansas%20Register/2015/march2015/005.19.15-001E.pdf>

Act 1429 of 2013 (§ 6-15-2107) also amended the **Arkansas School Recognition Program** to provide financial rewards to public schools with high student performance, academic growth, and graduation rates. Based on Benchmark exam results for 2013-14, 109 public schools were identified as being the top 10 percent of schools in November 2014, making them eligible for a \$90 per student reward. Another 106 public schools were identified as being in the top 11 to 20 percent, making them eligible for \$45.10 per student.¹⁰ A total of \$7 million from General Improvement Fund (GIF) was allocated for eligible schools for use in 2014-15.

ACSIP

ACTAAP also requires public schools and districts to develop an **Arkansas Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (ACSIP)**, designed to ensure that all students demonstrate proficiency on all portions of state assessments. ACSIPs must include strategies to address any achievement gap between groups of students. See BLR's 2015 report on the ACSIP for more information.¹¹

ACADEMIC DISTRESS

ACTAAP also establishes the **academic distress program** under which schools or school districts can be sanctioned for continued low student achievement. The SBOE must determine the criteria for putting schools in academic distress; the Board has incorporated provisions of the state's ESEA Flexibility Plan for that purpose. A February 2016 report from BLR will provide further details on academic distress criteria, consequences, and support for schools.

RESOURCES

ADE's Division of Learning Services

- **2014-15 test scores:** <http://www.arkansased.gov/divisions/learning-services/student-assessment/test-scores/year?y=2015>
- **ACT Aspire:** <http://www.arkansased.gov/divisions/learning-services/assessment/act-aspire>
- **2015-16 Testing Calendar**¹²: <http://adeqm.arkansas.gov/ViewApprovedMemo.aspx?Id=1602>

ACT Aspire

<http://www.discoveractaspire.org>

¹⁰ For a complete list of schools, see ADE's website at <http://www.arkansased.gov/divisions/public-school-accountability/school-performance/reward-schools>

¹¹ BLR. (September 2015). "Changes to ACSIP: Providing School Improvement Resources Where the Need is Greatest," available at [http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/education/K12/AdequacyReports/2016/2015-09-15/04-ACSIP,%20BLR%20\(37\).pdf](http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/education/K12/AdequacyReports/2016/2015-09-15/04-ACSIP,%20BLR%20(37).pdf)

¹² ADE Commissioner's Memo #LS-16-003, "Assessment for 2015-2016 and Testing Calendar," July 16, 2015.