



## Opinion Editorial

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette  
April 4, 2014

### The Grades Are In: News Mixed in State Report Card

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At the end of each grading period, students across the state take their report cards home to their parents. All of the hard work, late nights, and science-fair projects are boiled down into just a few letters: A's, B's, C's, and hopefully not too many D's and F's.

Likewise, at the Office for Education Policy, we think it is important for our home state, Arkansas, to have a report card of its own. Since 2006, we have released a concise report card that is a one-stop shop for all of the publicly available data about how our state has performed over the past year.

Just yesterday, we released the [2013 Arkansas Report Card](#) on our website. This report card aggregates the achievement of 470,000-plus students and 33,000-plus teachers across the state, as well as the policies put forward by state lawmakers and implemented by principals and superintendents.

How did we do? Not surprisingly, our report card has some good news and some not-so-good news. We present graphs and tables on key outcomes of interest such as the Benchmark exams (focused on Arkansas' state standards), the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (focused on general academic skills), and the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP (which allows for cross-state comparisons).

It is certainly good news that, since we released our first Arkansas report card in 2006, we have witnessed numerous improvements for Arkansas students. For example, in 2005, only one-third of our state's eighth-graders earned a proficient score on the state math exam; today, two-thirds of eighth-graders are proficient in math. On the rigorous national NAEP exam, only 14 percent of Arkansas fourth-graders scored at proficient in math in 2000; today, nearly 40 percent score at this level and Arkansas scores roughly at the national average.



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How about our high school students? In 2005, fewer than half (46 percent) of the state's 11th-graders earned scores of proficient or better; today, seven of 10 Arkansas high school juniors are proficient in literacy. These are all solid improvements.

Of course, we realize that test scores are not the only important metric for our education system. Indeed, policymakers and researchers have long understood the importance of ensuring our students earn at least a high school degree. In that light, we present data on high school graduation rates in the state.

Nationwide, there has been a growing interest in calculating the graduation rate correctly. With these new and more accurate measures in hand, we can confidently say that Arkansas graduation rates have improved over the last year. Moreover, while our test scores continue to fall just below national averages, the high school graduation rate in Arkansas is above the national average; about 84percent of the students who entered ninth grade in Arkansas schools in the fall of 2009 graduated on time in the spring of 2013.

Alongside the many positive signs in the most recent report card are a few areas of concern. First, over the past few years, the aforementioned improvements on standardized assessments have slowed a bit. Moreover, Arkansas student scores on the nationally norm-referenced Iowa Test of Basic Skills have experienced decreases in 2012-13. These examples of stagnation or even decreases may be due to "ceiling effects" on the state exams, or to the current misalignment between the Benchmark exams and the new (and hopefully improved) Common Core State Standards. In any event, these less-inspiring results should serve as a reminder to Arkansas educators that this is no time to become complacent!

Perhaps most importantly, there is clear evidence across the nation and in our home state that our schools still do not, across the board, foster the success of traditionally disadvantaged subgroups of students.



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For example, as the OEP report card shows, while all students in Arkansas boast a graduation rate of 84 percent, the rate for economically disadvantaged students in Central Arkansas stood at only 72 percent. We also see that only 28 percent of Arkansas eighth-graders scored at proficient or better on the NAEP math exam in 2013. While this result is disappointing, the fact that fewer than 10 percent of our black eighth-graders reached this level is far more troubling. In fact, the persistent racial and economic achievement gaps in Arkansas are the focus of an ongoing OEP report that will be released this June.

Overall, we at the OEP believe that the 2013 report card is more optimistic than gloomy, but there is obviously still much work to be done. We need new strategies to serve our traditionally underserved students and more innovation to encourage greater improvements for all students across the state. For this reason, we added a “Spotlight” section to this year’s report card so that we can highlight new educational programs that have the potential to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for Arkansas students.

We hope that you have the time to visit [www.officeforeducationpolicy.org](http://www.officeforeducationpolicy.org) to view the report card and learn more about how our state’s schools are doing.