



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

JAN 08 2009

The Honorable T. Kenneth James
Director
Arkansas Department of Education
Four State Capitol Mall, Room 304 A
Little Rock, Arkansas 72201-1071

Dear Director James:

As we approach our seventh year of implementing the accountability provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, I want to take a moment to thank you and your colleagues for all your hard work to help realize the goals of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) which has led to real and meaningful improvements in student achievement. These outcomes are due, in no small part, to the efforts of the dedicated educators in your state. We have seen an increased attention on high expectations for every child, an improvement in student performance across the board and a decrease in achievement gaps.

As Secretary Spellings is fond of saying, "what gets measured, gets done." With that in mind, I want to take this opportunity to update you on the status of some NCLB cornerstones with respect to Arkansas. Detailed information on specific components of your state's assessment and accountability system is contained in an attachment to this letter.

- Assessment system: An assessment system that produces valid and reliable results is fundamental to an accountability system that holds schools and districts accountable for educating all students. Please accept my congratulations on Arkansas' standards and assessment system meeting all statutory and regulatory provisions required for reading/language arts and mathematics as of 2007-08.
- Accountability components: The Department's new Title I regulations provide for greater scrutiny to states' accountability systems, including establishing a uniform and more accurate measure of calculating high school graduation rates that is comparable across states and requiring that states ensure that statistical measures maximize the inclusion of students and student subgroups in accountability determinations. Hence, the regulations also require that all states submit portions of their Accountability Workbook for peer review. In the attachment to this letter you will find information on Arkansas' minimum group size, annual measurable objectives, confidence interval, full academic year definition, and graduation rate.
- Departmental flexibilities: Over the past several years, the Secretary has offered several flexibilities to states, such as growth model and differentiated accountability pilots, assessing students with disabilities and recently arrived limited English proficient students, and discretionary grant programs, such as the Teacher Incentive Fund, Enhanced Assessment Grants, and State Longitudinal Data System Grants. I am pleased to note that Arkansas is participating in several of these endeavors.
 - Differentiated Accountability: Arkansas is approved to implement its differentiated accountability model as part of its system of interventions beginning in the 2009-10 school year through the 2012-13 school year. Through this pilot, Arkansas has also been approved to flip the order of services that schools in their first year of improvement are required to offer students, providing supplemental educational services before public school choice.

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The Department of Education's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.

- Growth Model Pilot: The Department first approved Arkansas to use its growth model in making AYP determinations in March 2007 and on December 22, 2008 granted a four year extension for use of the growth model through 2011–12.
- Statewide Longitudinal Data System Grant: Arkansas received a statewide longitudinal data system grant in the amount of \$3,328,503.

In addition, for your information, I am enclosing a file that provides information across all states on the current assessment status, participation in flexibilities offered by the Department, AYP information, and discretionary grants. I wish you continued success in raising the achievement in Arkansas. NCLB has focused our attention on closing achievement gaps and increasing the awareness of those students who have often been left behind: economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient, and students with disabilities. I have enjoyed the opportunity to work with you and all your colleagues across the country on such important issues.

Sincerely,



Kern L. Briggs, Ph.D.

Enclosures

cc: Governor Mike Beebe
Heather Gage

Assessment System

Arkansas' assessment system met the requirements to be considered *Fully Approved*. This means Arkansas' assessment system includes academic content standards in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science; student achievement standards in reading/language arts and mathematics; alternate achievement standards for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in reading/language arts and mathematics; and assessments and alternate assessments in each of grades 3 through 8 and one grade in high school in reading/language arts and mathematics. I encourage you to consider whether there are any areas in which the Department can provide or facilitate technical assistance to Arkansas in meeting the statutory or regulatory requirements or as you consider changes to your current assessment system.

- Arkansas' science assessments are not yet fully compliant.
 - In 2007–08, the Department required that the state meet four minimal criteria related to the content area of science: have science content standards; have a general and alternate science assessment; include all students in one of the science assessments (i.e., either the general or alternate); and report the results of the science assessments. Arkansas appears to have met these requirements. Arkansas will need to submit the evidence stated in the letter from the Department on July 21, 2008.
 - In 2008–09, the Department will conduct peer reviews of science assessments and expects the assessments to be fully compliant. Beginning with the 2008–09 school year, science assessments will be included in the states' assessment status. For additional detail, please see the enclosed fact sheet.
 - Since Arkansas did not submit evidence regarding its science assessments for peer review in October 2008, it must submit evidence in March 2009.

Accountability System

- Minimum group size (the state-defined minimum number of students necessary to have valid and reliable AYP determinations): Arkansas' minimum group size is 40. (The average across all states is approximately 30 students.)
- Annual measurable objectives (AMO) (the yearly target for the percentage of students required to be proficient or above for a school to make AYP):
 - 2008–09: Arkansas' goal for this year is 64 percent of students in grades 3-5 and 60 percent of students in grades 6-8 and high school scoring proficient in reading/language arts; and, 63 percent for students in grades 3-5 and 56 percent for students in grade 5-8 and high school in mathematics.
 - AMO type: Arkansas set its AMOs consistent with the statutory requirements, using an annual increase method.
- Confidence interval: The state applies a confidence interval of 95 percent to the percentage of students scoring proficient or above in the school.
- Full academic year definition (for purposes of determining whether a student's score must be included in AYP determinations): In Arkansas, a student must be enrolled on or before October 1 of a school year in order to be included in AYP determinations.
- Graduation rate:
 - Currently, Arkansas is using a graduation rate that multiplies the dropout rate for the previous four years, multiplied by 100.
 - As required by the recently issued Title I regulations, states must report graduation rate data, in the aggregate and disaggregated by subgroup, using the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate beginning with report cards providing assessment results for the 2010-11 school year.
 - The graduation rate target Arkansas requires for the district or school to make AYP is one standard deviation below the state mean (86.7 percent) or improvement from the previous year.

- According to the National Governor's Association 2008 report *Implementing Graduation Counts: State Progress to Date, 2008*, Arkansas was able to report the NGA Compact four-year graduation rate in 2006.