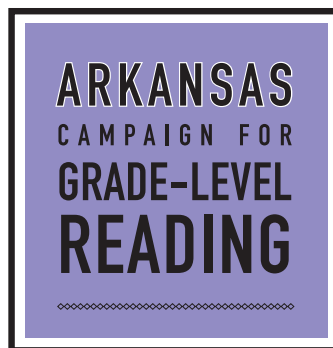


MAKING SURE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS: UNDERSTANDING ESSA AND SCHOOL REPORT CARDS

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EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS

Recent changes at the state and federal level have had a big impact on how Arkansas supports and measures the performance of students and schools. This year, all public schools are following Arkansas's plan to comply with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA replaces No Child Left Behind, which had required high-stakes testing for students and penalties for low-performing public schools.

Under Arkansas's new ESSA plan, the state's long-term goal is for 80 percent of all students to be proficient in reading and math by 2029. Short-term goals include:

Goal
1

PREPARED GRADUATES

Each student will meet or exceed educational milestones along pathways to graduate prepared for college, career, and community engagement.

Goal
2

STUDENT GROWTH

Each student will meet or exceed his/her expected individual growth annually.

Goal
3

PERSONAL COMPETENCIES

Each student will develop and apply personal competencies that promote learning and success in life.

Goal
4

STUDENT SUCCESS

Each student will be actively engaged in college, career preparation, military service, and/or competitive employment one year after graduation.

Goal
5

CUSTOMER SERVICE

The Arkansas Department of Education will build the capacity of each team member to provide efficient and effective customer service that benefits students, respects taxpayers, and serves all stakeholders.

Source: Arkansas Department of Education

Another goal of ESSA is to make information about schools easier for families to find and understand. The Arkansas Department of Education has done a great job of involving parents, teachers, and community members in developing its ESSA plan and making more data and resources available on its website. However, it's still not always easy for parents to figure out what this all means. This document contains a few of the top things you need to know.

Grades K-2	Students in K-2 must take one of three state-approved assessments from Renaissance, Istation, or Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA).
Grades 3-10	Students in grades 3-10 must take the ACT Aspire exam in English, math, and science. The 2018-19 school year is the fourth year the state has required schools to give the ACT Aspire.
Grade 11	Students in 11th grade must take the ACT college entrance exam, whether they plan to apply for college or not. If applying to college, students can submit their score on the state-required assessment, which is paid by the state.
Grades K-12	All students with special needs must take the same assessments above for their grade level. However, students with significant disabilities may use alternative assessments, such as portfolios of their work.
Grades K-12	English language learners must take an assessment to measure their growth in English proficiency. Schools must use these scores to help students move more quickly from ELL classes to regular classrooms.

A close-up photograph of a female teacher with curly hair, wearing a red top and a floral scarf, smiling as she helps a young boy with his schoolwork. The boy is wearing a dark blue polo shirt and is looking down at his work. In the background, other students are seated at their desks, slightly out of focus.



These higher standards are intended to better prepare students for scoring well on the ACT college entrance exam in 11th grade.

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE RATINGS

Each fall, the Arkansas Department of Education uses a complicated formula known as the ESSA School Index to calculate schools' "performance ratings" based on these five main measures from the previous school year:

1. Overall academic achievement
2. Growth in achievement over time
3. Growth in English proficiency for English Language Learners
4. Graduation rates for high schools
5. School Quality and Student Success indicators, including:
 - Reading at grade level
 - Achievement and growth in science
 - Chronic absenteeism, defined as the number of students missing 10 percent (18 days) of school, whether excused or unexcused
 - The number of high school graduates earning one or more Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate, or concurrent course credits through local colleges
 - Community service learning, such as volunteering at a local nonprofit organization

A school's performance rating is mostly based on standardized tests: Academic achievement is 85 percent of the performance rating for schools serving grades K-8 (35 percent for overall achievement and 50 percent for growth in achievement since the previous school year).

School Quality and Student Success indicators are a new way for the state to try to measure school quality beyond test scores. These measures vary by the grade levels served by the schools. For example, concurrent credit only applies to high schools.

The Importance of Growth Scores

The new emphasis on measuring growth is important, because it shows how much the school has helped improve achievement for the student population it serves. This is particularly important for schools with high percentages of low-income students, who tend to underperform state averages on standardized tests. However, despite this new emphasis, schools with high achievement and low growth still score higher than schools with low achievement and high growth. For that reason, several stakeholders (including Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families) now recommend that the state give an even greater weight to growth in future school ratings.¹

For example, Parson Hills Elementary School in Springdale serves a student population that is 95 percent low-income and 91 percent non-white. It earned an overall 69.22 index score—a C grade—for 2017-18. Although its achievement score was better than only 24 percent of elementary schools in Arkansas (53.96), its growth score was better than 97 percent of schools statewide (86.64).² (Parson Hills also happens to be making great progress in reducing chronic absenteeism, which may account for some of its improvement.)³

In contrast, Forest Heights STEM Academy in Little Rock serves a lower percentage of disadvantaged students: 46 percent low-income and 67 percent non-white. It received an “A” grade overall. However, while its achievement score was better than 90 percent of elementary schools in Arkansas (82.08), its growth score was better than only 21 percent (78.85). Its school quality and success score was 65.94.

SUPPORT & ACCOUNTABILITY

The Department of Education emphasizes that a low performance rating is not intended to be a punishment, but rather an encouragement for schools to use data to improve. The state will provide extra support and accountability for schools most in need of improvement, including:

- The lowest-performing 5 percent of schools in the state overall;
- The bottom 1 percent of all low-income Title I schools with one or more subgroups of students “consistently underperforming” on standardized tests for the three previous school years; and
- High schools with four-year graduation rates of less than 67 percent.

If a district does not improve within three years, the Arkansas Department of Education may determine how the school spends money, require more training, remove ineffective school employees or local school boards, or convert a traditional public school to a charter school.

1 Howell, C. (2018, November 25). [“Arkansas schools stressing on grades; a lot hinges on their A-F marks.”](#) Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

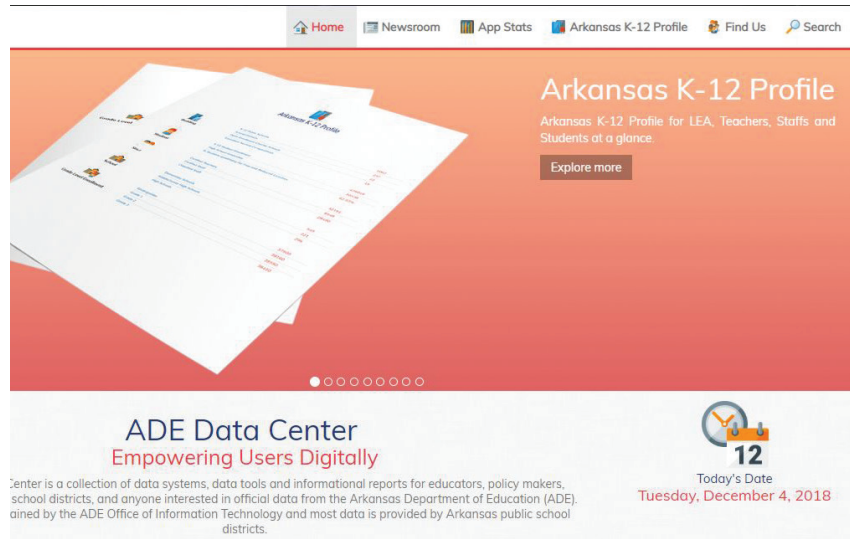
2 See the Office for Education Policy’s website for more school-level data: <http://www.officeforeducationpolicy.org>

3 Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. [“Bright Spot: Making Every Day Count at Parson Hills Elementary.”](#)

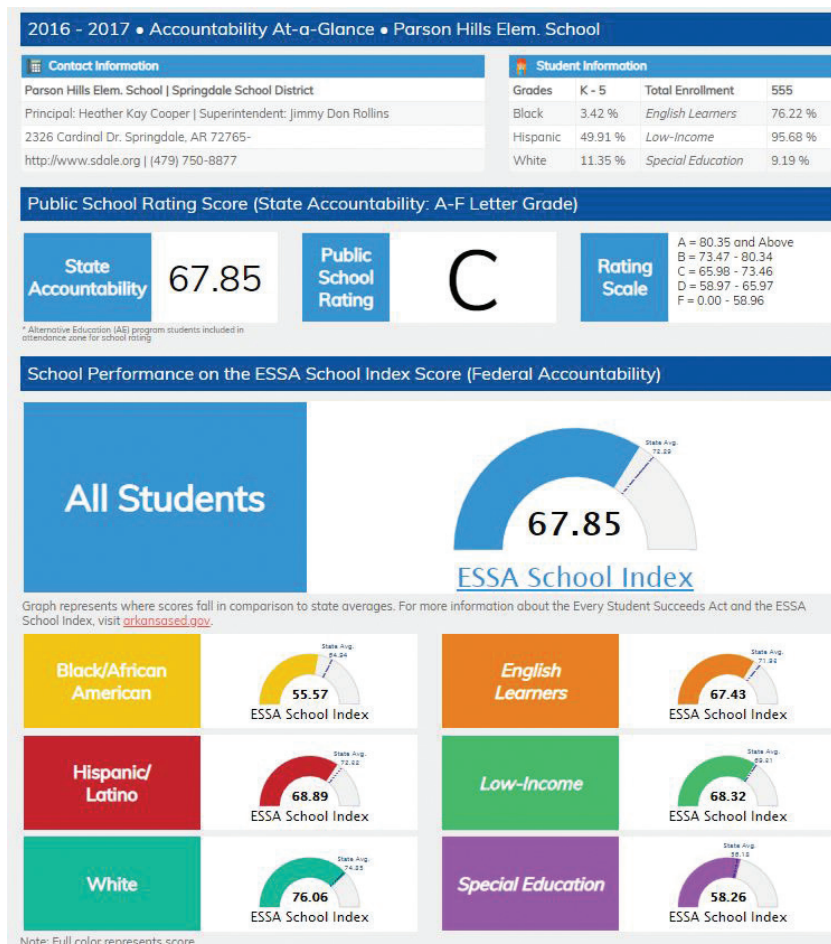


SCHOOL LETTER GRADES

Each fall, the state publishes report cards for all schools based on their school performance rating. The new 2017-18 report cards for schools and districts are now available on the Arkansas Department of Education's online Data Center under "[My School Info.](#)"



Source: Arkansas Department of Education



Source: Arkansas Department of Education

It's important to remember that a low letter grade does not necessarily mean that a school is "bad." Research shows that academic achievement is strongly correlated with poverty; in other words, the more low-income students a school has, the lower its standardized test scores tend to be. The Office for Education Policy at the University of Arkansas found again this year that "schools serving a lower percentage of students who participate in Free/Reduced Lunch (FRL) generally get better grades than schools who serve a more disadvantaged population."

However, a low grade over many years should not be ignored. Students in poverty are certainly as capable as their more advantaged peers, and schools must do all they can to make sure these kids have everything they need to learn and thrive.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Arkansas's ESSA plan is a welcome shift from the one-size-fits-all accountability model of No Child Left Behind. We are hopeful that ESSA will help give parents and communities the information and support they need to help all kids perform on grade level and help close achievement gaps that have lingered for far too long.

RESOURCES

- Arkansas Department of Education resources on [ESSA and school report cards](#). See also:
 - Video: [“How to View the Accountability At-A-Glance for Your School”](#)
 - Video: [“How to View the School Report Card”](#)
 - Video: [“How to View the ESSA School Index Report”](#)
- Office for Education Policy: [Data visualizations](#) of school letter grades statewide
- [“Helping Your Child Succeed in School: A Guide for Parents,”](#) by Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families and the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign



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