



Executive Summary

The power of K-12 accountability systems comes from their ability to ensure everyone—educators, families, community stakeholders, policymakers—is aligned on what excellence is, what it takes to achieve it, and whether each school and district is reaching it. Arkansas is committed to a school and district accountability system that ensures rigorous academic outcomes, annual student progress, and workforce preparedness, while maintaining reasonable flexibility from over-burdensome requirements.

To deliver a school and district accountability system that meets these expectations as Arkansas implements the LEARNNS Act, the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) commits to:

- **Strengthen the system that measures how schools and districts are performing:** Ensure the accountability system signals excellence aligned to LEARNNS, integrates learning in kindergarten through postsecondary, and produces results that drive improvement and transparency by launching and facilitating a three-phase timeline to implement an updated accountability system, if desired by stakeholders and the legislature, by the 2024-2025 school year.

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Overview of LEARNNS Executive Order

On January 11th, 2023, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders published the Executive Order to prioritize Literacy, Empowerment, Accountability, Readiness, Networking, and School Safety (LEARNNS) in Arkansas. Included in this Executive Order is a call for the Secretary of the Department of Education to empower parents by establishing a process to review and update school and district accountability systems to ensure they incorporate rigorous academic outcomes, annual student progress that accurately reflects the learning in schools, workforce preparedness, and to ensure reasonable flexibility from over-burdensome requirements.

This report details the process for this review and considerations as ADE seeks to update its accountability system to align with LEARNNS.

Background & Current State

Arkansas's accountability system has evolved over time in response to community input and feedback from Arkansas stakeholders along with changes in state and federal requirements.

Every school in Arkansas receives an A-F letter grade annually and an associated report card to provide in-depth information about school performance to schools, parents, and the local community. These ratings not only meet state legal requirements but also satisfy the accountability and data requirements of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The ratings are currently based on four indicators: Achievement, Growth, Graduation Rate (high school only), and School Quality and Student Success (SQSS). These indicators are weighted to calculate each school’s ESSA School Index score, and A-F letter grades are determined based on the scale of the ESSA School Index.



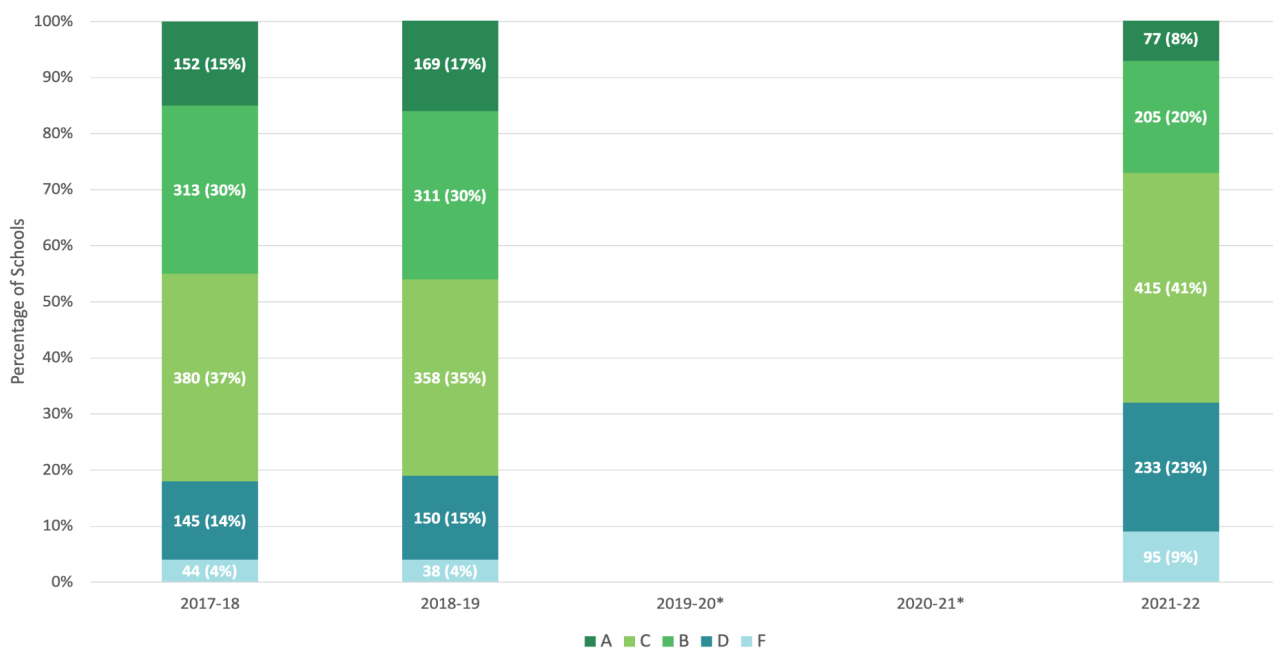
OVERVIEW OF INDICATORS INCLUDED IN SCHOOL INDEX SCORES AND LETTER GRADES

Indicator	Weight of Indicator for Elementary & Middle Schools	Weight of Indicator for High Schools
Weighted Achievement Indicator	35%	35%
Growth Indicator Academic Growth & English Language Progress	50%	35%
Graduation Rate Indicator Using both four-year and five-year adjusted cohort rates.	N/A	15%
School Quality & Student Success Indicator	15%	15%

The indicators included in Arkansas’s accountability system were developed through a review process as part of the approval of Arkansas’s ESSA plan. As part of that process, ADE ensured each indicator was grounded in evidence and aligned to the ADE’s priorities.

Every year, the ADE publishes a [public school report card](#) that includes detailed information on school performance. While performance declined overall in the years following the pandemic, school ratings are distributed across the letter grades with about half of schools earning either “B” or “C” ratings.

DISTRIBUTION OF LETTER GRADES, 2017-18 to 2021-22



* As a result of COVID-19, performance ratings were not published for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years.

Process to Review and Update Arkansas’s K-12 Accountability System

The current ACT Aspire assessments that inform school ratings will be discontinued after Spring 2023, and statewide assessments in grades 3-10 will transition to a new assessment by Spring 2024: the Arkansas Teaching and Learning Assessment System (ATLAS). The state is currently revising academic standards in Math and English Language Arts (ELA) to ensure that grade level standards are clear and concise, and Arkansas educators are involved in assessment item alignment and writing. Consequently, the school and district accountability system will need to be revised to take into consideration the new assessment system, ATLAS.

Commitments

The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) will ensure the accountability system signals excellence aligned to LEARNS, integrates learning in kindergarten through postsecondary, and produces results that drive improvement and transparency by launching and facilitating a three-phase timeline to implement an updated accountability system by the 2024-2025 school year. These three phases are:

- **Build the Framework:** By December 2023, the ADE will develop and publish a framework for the future of K-12 accountability grounded in stakeholder input;
- **Support the Transition:** Following the Spring 2024 administration of the new assessment system, the ADE will facilitate the transition to updated A-F ratings for K-12 schools; and,
- **Establish a New Baseline:** By no later than April 2025, the ADE will publish results for the 2023-24 school year as a new baseline with the new state assessment and the updated A-F ratings formula.

TIMELINE TO REVIEW & UPDATE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

Timeframe	Phase 1: Build the Framework	Key ADE Activities to Build the Framework
Spring 2023	Launch Review of the Accountability System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Evaluate the existing accountability system & engage stakeholders to get input on opportunities for refinement. ● Identify members of an ADE work group to review feedback and develop a draft framework for the future of the accountability system, aligned to the LEARNS Act and grounded in stakeholder input.
Summer 2023	Hold Initial Engagements Draft a Framework for the Future of Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Convene the ADE work group. ● Engage families, educators, stakeholders, and the broader community around the draft framework for the future of the accountability system.
Fall 2023	Publish Framework (by Dec 2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Continue engaging stakeholders on the draft proposal for the future of the accountability system. ● Update and finalize the framework for the future of the accountability system based on stakeholder/public feedback.
Timeframe	Phase 2: Support the Transition	Key ADE Activities to Support Transition
Spring 2024	Administer the ATLAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Begin statewide administration of the ATLAS.
Summer 2024	ATLAS results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Launch a process for assessment modeling and standard setting to incorporate the results of the ATLAS into the Arkansas



		<p>accountability formula.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vet policy shifts to incorporate ATLAS and the accountability framework with Arkansas families, educators, stakeholders, and the broader community
Fall 2024	Facilitate transition to updated A-F ratings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring necessary policy shifts to the Arkansas State Board of Education for approval. • Develop tools to support districts and schools with the transition (webinars, FAQs, rating calculators, updated policy guidelines, etc.). • Plan for needed changes to public school and district report cards.
Timeframe	Phase 3: Establish a New Baseline	Key ADE Activities to Establish a New Baseline
No later than Spring 2025	Implement Recommended Revisions in the A-F Ratings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calculate and publish 2023-2024 results using the updated accountability formula and ATLAS results by April 15, 2025. • Align supports across the ADE to expectations set and measured in the A-F ratings formula.
Fall 2025	Resume Annual Ratings Release in the Fall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish 2024-2025 reporting and ratings.

Considerations for Aligning the Accountability System with LEARNs

Arkansas’s students are capable of achieving academic excellence and deserve a world-class education. Transparent, effective, and rigorous state policies and reporting support schools in living up to their promise to deliver a quality education for every student. As Arkansas scales the ambitious education reform envisioned by Governor Huckabee-Sanders’ LEARNs agenda, the community deserves an accountability system that provides a clear picture of where students are, connects to what teachers are doing in the classroom, and incentivizes and sustains effective implementation in every school.

Through the process described above, ADE will explore opportunities to improve its accountability system based on feedback from key stakeholders, including input gathered over the course of implementation. Areas for exploration, aligned with the expectations in the Executive Order and new legislation, include:

- **Ensure the system is signaling academic excellence aligned to LEARNs.**
 - **Revising the SQSS measures to focus on academic outcomes that reflect rigorous expectations.** The School Quality and Student Success (SQSS) Indicator was developed in collaboration with and in response to Arkansas stakeholders. It now includes 11 measures that vary based on the grade configuration of students served.¹ ADE will review existing SQSS measures with the goal of streamlining the accountability formula where possible to better focus on student outcomes and the educational opportunities that have the most significant impact on student achievement. Further, ADE will identify

¹ Student Engagement, Science Achievement, Science Growth, Reading at grade Level, ACT, ACT Readiness Benchmark, GPA, Community Service Learning Credits, On-time Credits, Computer Science Course Credits, and AP/IB or Concurrent Credit Courses. More information is available here: https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2022.05.13_Arkansas_ESSA_Plan_PSA.pdf.

ways to recognize and reward current SQSS components, and other data points, that are not a primary focus of the accountability system.

- **Aligning approaches to measure and reward schools for student growth across the system to increase transparency and coherence.** Arkansas’ accountability formula currently uses a Value-Added Model (VAM) to measure student growth. The review process provides an opportunity to create coherence in the way growth is reported at the student, school, and district level to improve the accessibility of information about how growth is calculated and clarify the actions adults must take to best support each Arkansas student.
- **Ensure coherence by extending the system from kindergarten through postsecondary.**
 - **Emphasizing “Literacy” in the accountability formula to ensure academic outcomes are incorporated beginning in grades K-2.** Arkansas is deeply invested in aligning K-2 instruction with the science of reading. Additionally, Arkansas is building a high quality rating system for early childhood programs. However, the accountability system doesn’t include any measures of academic growth prior to third grade. ADE will explore whether to incorporate grades K-2 into the accountability system to better reflect the state’s key priority of improving students’ early literacy outcomes and ensure coherence with the early childhood system.
 - **Reviewing “Readiness” measures in the accountability formula to ensure workforce preparedness reflect the value of career-focused graduation pathways.** Arkansas SB 294 (2023) requires career-ready pathways for high school diplomas. These pathways create an opportunity to ensure the accountability formula equally values college, career, and military readiness for high school students. Most critically, the greatest measure of K-12 success is what happens once a student graduates. Arkansas is data rich with the ability to connect high school to postsecondary and career outcomes, and consequently the state should commit to better understanding student outcomes after graduation by school and district.
- **Ensure the results are used to drive improvement and transparency.**
 - **Prioritizing clear, simple, and accessible information for families, including A-F letter grades for both schools and districts.** Arkansas currently makes a large amount of data publicly available through its robust and comprehensive [data website](#). However, that amount of data is not user-friendly or easy to understand, and it can be overwhelming for a majority of end users. School and district report cards can elevate the information families care about most while continuing to allow for deeper data exploration. In particular, the state could make public each district’s curricular choices. (See the report on [curriculum transparency](#) for a review of the extent to which districts currently make such information available to families and the public.)
 - **Coordinating supports, consequences, and interventions to accompany revisions in the accountability expectations.** Prioritizing alignment and simplicity across incentives, rewards, and consequences, in addition to the ratings formula, will ensure that educators have the supports and resources needed to make the necessary shifts to improve academic outcomes for Arkansas students. For instance, ADE should review the Arkansas School Recognition program that rewards schools in the top 10% of student performance or growth. Any shifts in the ratings formula should also include pivots in the process for supporting struggling schools (e.g., identifying schools for intervention and state funding to support priorities) to ensure coherence across the expectations for Arkansas educators and the support they receive from ADE.



Conclusion

As Arkansas continues its post-pandemic recovery with the bold strategy in Governor Huckabee-Sanders’ LEARN agenda, state leaders have an opportunity to build on the strength of the current K-12 measurement system by making improvements to ensure that all students are prepared for success after graduation. The ADE will begin a review process in Spring 2023 to review the school and district measurement systems to ensure they incorporate ambitious academic outcomes, annual student progress, workforce preparedness, and to ensure reasonable flexibility from unnecessary accreditation requirements. While undertaking this review, the ADE is committed to engaging the broader Arkansas community to identify opportunities to better align the accountability system in support of students, planning for an intentional transition for key shifts, and aligning resources with the accountability formula to ensure that there is a clear path to excellence for Arkansas educators.