



EDUCATION IN THE POST-LAKE VIEW ERA:

WHAT IS ARKANSAS DOING TO CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP?

Executive Summary



FEBRUARY 2008

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Arkansas Education in the 21st Century: Great Achievements But a Persistent Achievement Gap

Since the Arkansas Supreme Court's 2002 *Lake View* decision, the state of Arkansas has taken significant strides to improve its education system.

- The U.S. Department of Education has recognized Arkansas for its leadership in implementing rigorous curricular standards.
- Arkansas has raised teacher pay to rank 32nd in the nation.
- Arkansas has provided over \$100 million a year for quality preschool. The National Institute for Early Education Research ranks Arkansas among the nation's leaders in the quality of its early childhood educational standards.
- State per pupil funding for public education has increased dramatically since the *Lake View* decision and the state appropriated several hundred million dollars to improve school facilities.

More importantly, the benefits of the increased attention and investment to public education have already begun to manifest themselves.

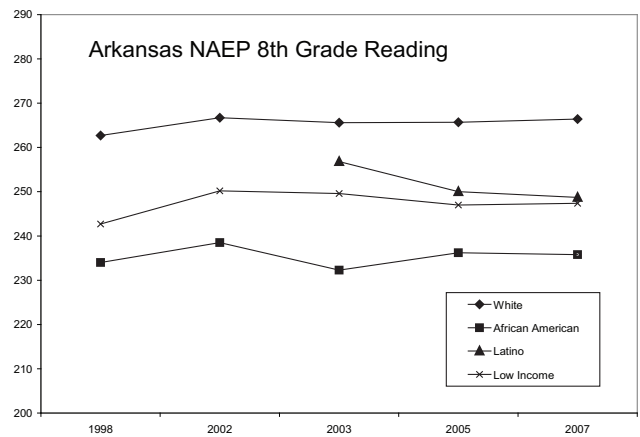
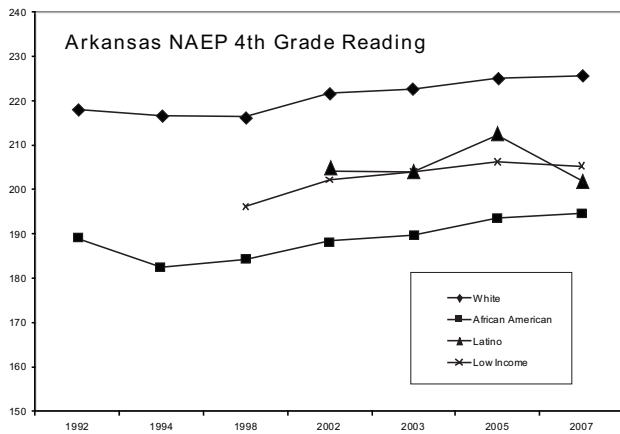
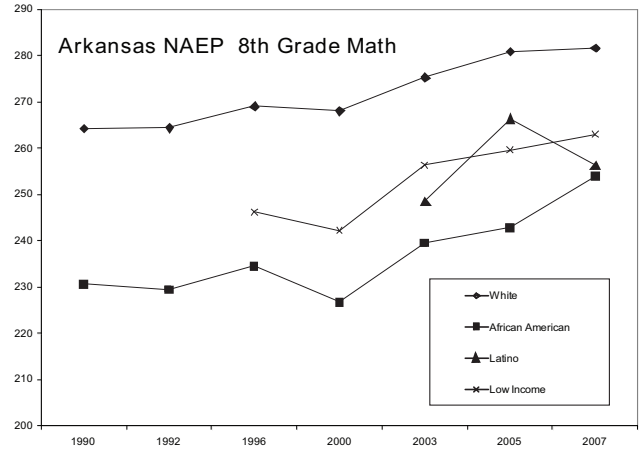
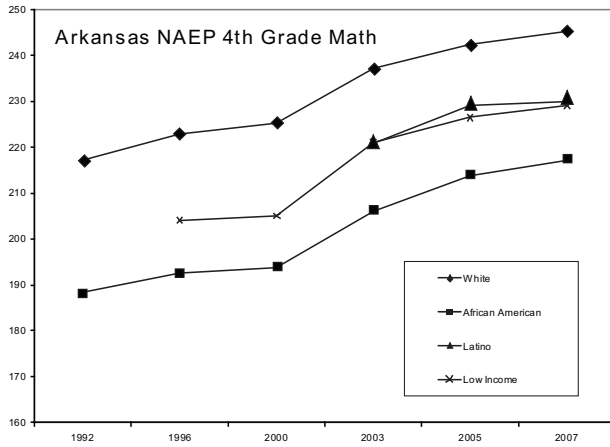
- *Education Week's* 2008 Quality Counts study ranked Arkansas 8th in the nation for overall educational quality.
- In 2001, just 42% of fourth graders scored at proficient levels on the math portion of the Arkansas Benchmark Exam. In 2007, 65% were proficient on an even more difficult test.
- From 2003 to 2007, Arkansas was one of three states to improve on three of the four National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests. These gains put Arkansas at or near national averages.
- The average ACT score for Arkansas students grew from 17 in 2001 to 21 in 2006, the most growth for any state testing at least half of its graduating seniors.

Despite these significant strides, major gaps remain among students of different racial and socioeconomic groups, as demonstrated by Arkansas's NAEP test scores over the past dozen years. By creating task forces focused on closing the achievement gap, the General Assembly and the Arkansas Department of Education have demonstrated an awareness of its importance.

Now that the *Lake View* reforms have been in place for several years, it is time to assess where we are in efforts to close the achievement gap. This report is a collaborative effort of Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families, the Arkansas Public Policy Panel, Hendrix College, and the University of Arkansas, Clinton School of Public Service. This report assesses whether the reforms Arkansas has adopted are likely to close the achievement gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students and between white and minority children in the state and identifies additional promising steps to close the achievement gap in future years. We hope this study will provide a menu of ideas to help state policymakers as they work to close our achievement gap.

The Achievement Gap Challenge

There are diverse and deeply rooted reasons for the gap in test scores and graduation rates between white students and African American and Latino students, as well as between middle class and low-income students. In his book *Class and Schools*, Richard Rothstein describes the many disadvantages in their home and family environment that poor and minority students must overcome to succeed in school, including language development, literacy development, self-confidence, health, and housing. Researchers have found that middle class children have vocabularies two to three times larger than low-income children, are praised more often, have significantly more non-school learning opportunities, move much less often, and have much lower rates of asthma, vision, and hearing problems.



The good news is that closing the achievement gap can be done. President Bill Clinton once said, “There is no problem facing America that has not already been solved somewhere in America.” In the 1970s, when the federal government targeted funds for poor students and these students attended increasingly integrated schools, the racial achievement gap was cut in half. Unfortunately, that progress did not continue through the 1980s.

In the past few years, many of Arkansas’s neighbors have proven that effective interventions exist and have reduced their achievement gaps. Oklahoma, West Virginia, Texas, and Tennessee have significantly smaller racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps than Arkansas.

Our Vision

We believe that only by thinking holistically about children and their environments can we hope to address the achievement gap challenge in Arkansas. Because the circumstances that create disadvantages for low-income and minority students are so diverse and deeply rooted in our state, we must support these children at every opportunity.

In the home, research shows that engaging parents, not only by teaching specific skills but also by encouraging them to be active in schools, leads to higher self-confidence, vocabulary, and persistence in their children. Parents who have made a choice and

a commitment to a specific, unique school are also more likely to be engaged in their children’s education.

In schools, research shows that children who spend more time in quality schools learn more, beginning as early as three years old. Research shows children who see, hear, breathe, and work without pain learn more. Children who are challenged to learn rigorous material by caring, well-trained, and well-supported teachers will learn faster and better.

In our communities, research shows that children who explore, socialize, and study with caring, trusted adults after school and during the summer will build on their school lessons more effectively and learn significantly more over the course of their lives.

How Can We Achieve the Vision?

Given how deeply rooted and diverse the circumstances are that create disadvantages for low-income and minority students, there is no silver bullet to close the achievement gap. Adopting a single program or approach will not eliminate disparities between African American and white children or between low-income and middle class children. Only a multi-pronged, comprehensive strategy that includes health agencies, local governments, universities, and community groups will succeed. Local activism and innovation as well as state support and guidance are both critical. To provide some guidance in this challenging work, we

examined the educational policy literature on the achievement gap to identify the interventions that have been proven to work in reducing achievement disparities and to highlight effective strategies that have already been adopted in Arkansas.

We find that Arkansas has already done a great deal to improve facilities, curriculum and instructional strategy. Because successful systems are already in place, we believe it is unlikely that new facilities enhancement or new curricular or instructional reform will have much additional impact on the achievement gap.

Opportunities for Enhancing Existing Successful Interventions

Arkansas has begun promising work and should deepen its commitments in early childhood education, teacher quality, and high-quality charter schools.

More than any other intervention, early childhood education has been proven to close the achievement gap. Arkansas has developed a high-quality pre-kindergarten initiative available to all needy families. We believe the crucial next step is to broaden participation in these programs. If all the families of three- and four-year-olds who are eligible for free preschool put them in quality pre-K programs, it would dramatically reduce the achievement gap. To achieve higher rates of pre-K attendance, we recommend a major public communications effort.

Educational research has also made it clear that teacher quality is the key to student achievement and that low-income and minority children tend to have less experienced, less well-qualified teachers. State policymakers in Arkansas should be applauded for raising teacher salaries and providing financial incentives for teachers to move to high-need school districts. Arkansas has also become a national leader in developing a longitudinal tracking system which allows the value added to students' learning to be calculated. We recommend the state aggressively implement the longitudinal tracking system and use this data to improve the way Arkansas teachers are educated, distributed, and developed in service.

The only elements of school choice that have shown any convincing evidence of success in closing the achievement gap are certain charter schools with distinctive traits: extended learning time, rigorous professional development, and strong school leadership. Such traits are found in the KIPP charter schools such as the one now in operation in Helena-West Helena. We recommend that any new charter schools be focused on reducing the racial and socioeconomic achievement gap. Moreover, we contend that the state board of education should review all charter school applications for evidence that they employ methods for closing the achievement gap that are backed by scientific research.

Significant Opportunities for New Interventions

Most importantly, we identify four extremely promising areas in which Arkansas has taken only first steps. We believe that serious new investments in the following areas will have the most

dramatic impact on the achievement gap.

Research shows that students with health challenges spend less time in school, resulting in lower levels of achievement, a greater likelihood of grade retention, and lower graduation rates. Because low-income, African American and Latino students are more likely to have health problems, student health programming should be a major component of a state achievement-gap reduction plan. We recommend Arkansas re-introduce state funding to support school-based health clinics for under-served students or promote their development through the Coordinated School Health Initiative.

Research tells us summer learning loss and unproductive time between 3 and 6 p.m. are key causes of the achievement gap. High quality after-school and summer programs can play an important role in closing the achievement gap. However, Arkansas lacks a statewide funding and quality assessment system. As a result, about one-fifth of Arkansas students are latchkey children and a much larger number lack access to academically rich experiences after school and in the summer. By creating task forces to develop policy frameworks, state policymakers have recognized the promise these programs have. We recommend the state aggressively implement any forthcoming recommendations of the Governor's Task Force on After-School and Summer Programs.

The research carried out on class-size reduction in Tennessee, a state with many demographic similarities to Arkansas, shows that class sizes of 13-17 students in the early grades significantly improved students' test scores and graduation rates, especially among African American students. While an expensive endeavor when embraced statewide, we recommend state funding for reduced class sizes targeted to schools with high proportions of students from low-income, African American, or Latino families.

Finally, programs that engage parents to become knowledgeable and engaged in their children's education, such as Arkansas's HIPPI program, have been proven to close the achievement gap. Through home visits and one-on-one training, children as well as parents gain self-confidence. Arkansas can build on these targeted successes to encourage broader community-based organization to build social capital among parents. We recommend the state sustain the successes achieved by Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation's 21st Century Programs.

Conclusion

Arkansas has done some great things in recent years to improve education for our children. However, there is much more to do. Those who have worked hard to reform Arkansas's education system in this decade cannot rest on their laurels. In this study, we have suggested several directions, some familiar and some new, to build on our recent successes. We hope this study will generate discussion and action among policymakers, parents, and citizens who are interested in improving educational outcomes for all children, regardless of their income, race, or geographic location.

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