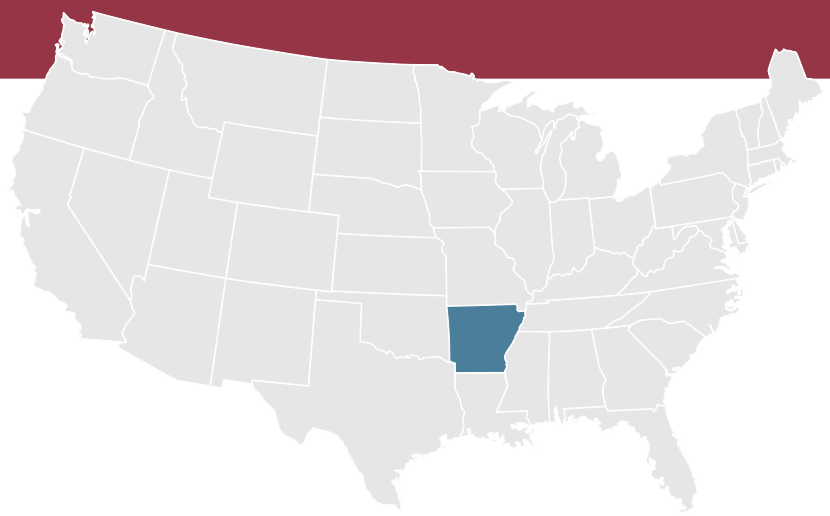


An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



Arkansas

Project Overview

Bellwether Education Partners, in partnership with the Collaborative for Student Success, convened an objective, independent panel of accountability experts to review ESSA state plans. We sought out a diverse group of peer reviewers with a range of political viewpoints and backgrounds, and we asked them to review each state's accountability plan with an eye toward capturing strengths and weaknesses.

We aimed to provide constructive feedback to the states, and to serve as a source of straightforward information to the public so that they are better able to engage policymakers if and how they see fit. Inherently, this independent process could not take into account the numerous political and situational challenges that occur in every state. We are in no way attempting to diminish those challenges, but the scope of this review was to compare the rigor and comprehensive nature of state accountability plans.

Peers worked in small teams to review the plans that states formally submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. After reviewing independently, the peers met for two days to discuss their individual reviews and work together on the collaborative draft you'll see below. The teams were asked to use their discretion and expertise to respond to and score each rubric item, and those scores were normed across states and peers.

Each state was given the opportunity to review the draft peer analysis and to provide substantive additions and corrections. Still, the reviews should be considered a snapshot of state plans as of September–November 2017, and we anticipate that states will continue to update their plans going forward.

To read more about the project, as well as a list of the expert peer reviewers, visit the Bellwether website [here](#).

Overall Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths: What are the most promising aspects of the state’s plan? What parts are worth emulating by other states?

Arkansas submitted a clear, data-rich plan. The state has modeled a number of its decisions, including how many student subgroups would be included at various minimum thresholds and the distribution of school scores on each of the various accountability indicators.

The state is placing a strong emphasis on student achievement and growth, including balancing an emphasis on grade-level proficiency with growth over time. In particular, the state’s weighted achievement indicator balances incentives for grade-level proficiency alongside incentives to help students advance performance levels no matter where they start out. The state deserves additional credit for an innovative list of school quality measures, including a focus on college and career readiness at the high school level.

Finally, Arkansas has presented a clear vision, robust theory of action, and model for continuous improvement, and the state appears to have built extensive stakeholder consultation and feedback into its plan development process.

Weaknesses: What are the most pressing areas for the state to improve in its plan? What aspects should other states avoid?

While Arkansas has built out a robust list of school quality indicators, the number and the specific calculations behind them may confuse parents and educators, and the model may prove too complicated over time. Similarly, the state plans to combine school-wide student growth with growth on English language proficiency, which may have the effect of obscuring the performance of English learners. The state is also not planning to build subgroup performance directly into school ratings and will instead perform back-end checks to identify schools with underperforming subgroups. However, the state has not yet provided data estimating the effects of those rules on schools. Moreover, Arkansas states that it will not identify schools with consistently underperforming subgroups until 2020-21, but it does not provide a justification for this (and it appears in conflict with federal requirements).

While Arkansas has a well-defined theory of action around school improvement, it places a lot of emphasis on districts to take the lead. It’s not clear when, or if, the state would step in with more directed actions and evidence-based interventions in the event of continued low performance. The shift from directly intervening in schools in need of support to empowering and enabling districts to harness local, state, and federal resources for those schools in need of support needs to be carefully monitored. Finally, the state’s exit criteria for schools identified for improvement rely heavily on the state’s future definition of the phrase “upward trend.” Arkansas could strengthen its plan by clarifying what exactly it means by that and how it would know when schools had made sufficient progress.

Plan Components

Each state’s plan has been rated on a scale of 1 (“This practice should be avoided by other states”) to 5 (“This could be a potential model for other states”).

Goals: Are the state’s vision, goals, and interim targets aligned, ambitious, and attainable? Why or why not?



Arkansas’ vision is to “lead the nation in student-focused education so that every student graduates ready for college, career, and community engagement.” In addition to student-focused goals, the state also includes an internal goal for its department of education to “provide efficient and effective customer service that benefits students, respects taxpayers, and serves all stakeholders.”

The state aims for 80 percent of its students to reach grade-level proficiency within 12 years. Despite recently changing statewide assessments, Arkansas used results from the previous assessment to gauge how much progress is possible at different performance levels. However, Arkansas has not set annual goals to reach its long-term target—instead opting for “checkpoints” every three years—and it has not set performance targets for particular subgroups of students. Instead, it appears to set three-year “checkpoints” based on schools at various percentiles of performance. Those checkpoints do expect faster progress for lower-performing students, but the state does not explicitly include goals for subgroups like black or Hispanic students, English learners, or students with disabilities. The plan and future reports would be strengthened by including tables depicting expected subgroup progress in order for parents and educators to understand and monitor student progress.

Arkansas takes the same approach to graduation rates, aiming for a 94 percent four-year graduation rate by the year 2028. It also sets a separate goal of 97 percent for its five-year graduation rate.

Arkansas plans to allow up to seven years for English learners to demonstrate language proficiency, which is on the high end. The state is switching to a new English language proficiency assessment, but the state has indicated it will use performance at the 75th percentile of current performance to establish the aspirational percentage for all students to reach in 12 years.

Standards and Assessments: Is the state’s accountability system built on high-quality standards and assessments aligned to college and career readiness? Why or why not?

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Arkansas provides a number of assessments for college and career readiness that are aligned to state standards. The state recently updated its standards and switched to the ACT Aspire assessment around the same time. This helps align the state’s K-12 schools with its public colleges and universities, which predominantly use the ACT for college placement and remediation decisions. The state uses the ACT Aspire assessments in grades 3-10, and it allows for measurement of both achievement and growth in English language arts, mathematics, and science. Arkansas also requires all 11th graders to take the ACT test. This creates vertical alignment within the state, and the ACT will be familiar to Arkansas families; however, the state could strengthen its plan by offering additional context for whether all of its assessments are fully aligned to its state standards. Additionally, while offering the ACT as the state’s official test offers many benefits, some of those key benefits may not extend fully to all students who require accommodations and may not receive college-reportable scores.

Arkansas currently uses the Multi-State Alternative Assessment to assess students with the most severe cognitive disabilities, although it is considering switching to a new one, Dynamic Learning Maps, in 2018. The state could strengthen its plan by providing the steps it will take to ensure that it does not exceed the 1 percent cap on participation in the alternate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Also, the state could strengthen the plan by ensuring the new alternate assessments are built upon the state alternate achievement standards.

Arkansas will use the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA21) to measure English language acquisition in grades K-12. However, Arkansas does not have a definition or threshold for determining the languages, beyond English, that are present to a significant extent, nor does the state administer summative assessments in languages other than English.

Indicators: Are the state’s chosen accountability indicators aligned to ensure targets and goals are met and likely to lead to improved educational outcomes for students? Why or why not?

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Arkansas will hold schools accountable for achievement, growth, graduation rate in high schools, English learner progress in English language proficiency, and a series of School Quality/Student Success indicators. At the high school level, Arkansas is planning to incorporate both the four- and five-year graduation rates. Including the five-year rate will give schools extra incentive to help all students complete; however, the state gives more weight to completions within four years.

Arkansas has a number of School Quality/Student Success indicators for each grade span, and the state envisions the data providing part of the basis for each school's "cycle of inquiry" (see below for more). For elementary and middle schools, those indicators include chronic absenteeism, science achievement, science growth, and reading at grade level. Each of those indicators also applies at the high school level, in addition to ACT/Work Keys, specific ACT subject benchmarks, GPA, community service learning credits, on-time credit accumulation, computer science credits earned, and Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate/concurrent enrollment credits. For each of these indicators, Arkansas has created cut points where students generate points for meeting certain thresholds. For example, students who miss less than 10 percent of the school year generate one point, missing between 5 and 10 percent of the year generates half a point, and missing more than 10 percent of the school year generates zero points. Under the computer science measure, high school students generate a point for completing any computer science class in grades 9-12.

Arkansas deserves credit for assembling a comprehensive list of indicators and, by calculating them at the student level, creating an innovative way to encourage schools to offer a wide range of opportunities to all students. However, given the relatively low weighting of each measure within the overall ESSA school index, and the sheer number of measures included, this many measures could cause confusion as to the priorities within this indicator. The state should monitor its data to ensure all of its indicators are comparable and driving to outcomes it desires. For example, high school GPA may not be a useful accountability indicator if it simply leads schools to inflate grades or enroll students in easier courses. By giving schools one point for every student with a GPA of 2.8 or above, schools will have an extra incentive to monitor that threshold and ensure students do not fall below it.

Similarly, rather than offering schools credit for course completions, like completing an Advanced Placement course, which is at least partially controlled by the schools themselves, the state is exploring including attainment on externally validated measurements like the Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate assessments.

Academic Progress: Has the state created sufficient incentives for schools to care about both student proficiency and student growth over time? Why or why not?

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Arkansas is planning to give strong weight to academic achievement and growth, with achievement weighted at 35 percent of a school's rating and growth weighted at 50 percent for elementary and middle schools and 35 percent for high schools. However, as the state transitions from older accountability systems focused primarily on proficiency to a new one with such a larger growth emphasis, the state should take special precautions to communicate the change and the new expectations to parents and educators.

Arkansas uses an index to calculate performance. For instance, performance at the lowest level is worth 0 points; the second level is worth 0.5; the third level, which corresponds to grade-level performance, is worth 1 point; and a fourth level is also worth 1 point. However, in the event a school has more students performing at level four than level one, it receives another .25 points for every additional student at level four as compared to level one. While this index could still mask underperformance somewhat, it places a strong emphasis on level three, the grade-level benchmark, and it includes an extra protection to ensure that students performing at level four can't easily compensate for lower-performing students. Moreover, rather than having one cut point at the proficiency benchmark, it includes more incentives for schools to help students advance at all performance levels.

Arkansas plans to use a value-added growth model that uses a student's past performance to "predict" future performance. However, the way the state is translating the results into an accountability indicator compresses the scores into a relatively narrow band. For example, it appears that schools with growth at the 25th percentile would receive 78 percent of the possible points, whereas schools at the 75th percentile would receive 82 percent of the available points. This may not sufficiently differentiate performance to identify schools in need of support.

Arkansas' approach to English language proficiency is similar. It would give schools credit for students who meet or exceed their growth targets, and it would give more credit to schools where students made faster growth. However, it suffers from the same problem as the state's general growth model, in that its final outcomes are compressed together such that schools at the 25th and 75th percentiles, which are quite different in performance, would receive relatively similar scores for accountability purposes.

All Students: Does the state system mask the performance of some subgroups of students, or does it have adequate checks in place to ensure all students (including all subgroups of students) receive a high-quality education? Why or why not?



Arkansas is dropping its minimum subgroup size from 25 to 15, which will help bring attention to more subgroups of students. For example, the state presents data showing this change will boost the percentage of schools meeting the minimum threshold for Hispanic students from 34 to 49 percent, for African-American students from 46 to 55 percent, and for students with disabilities from 54 to 82 percent. Arkansas also deserves credit for including a strong incentive for schools to ensure high participation rates, in that it will use 95 percent as its denominator even in the event a school has fewer students participating. The plan would be even stronger if it included meaningful consequences for schools that miss the 95 percent participation threshold, overall or for particular subgroups.

Arkansas is proposing to combine English language proficiency into its growth measure, rather than as a standalone measure, in a weight proportional to the percentage of English learners in the school. While this procedure will include more students who otherwise wouldn't meet the minimum subgroup size, including it in the growth measure could also mask the performance of English learners.

Arkansas' school rating system is based on school-wide averages and does not include specific weights for subgroups of students. Although it has provided assurances that it would identify schools with low-performing subgroups through back-end checks, it did not include data on how many schools its rules would identify or what those schools would look like.

In addition to its traditional subgroups of major racial and ethnic student subgroups and educationally at-risk student groups, Arkansas will also disaggregate data for students participating in gifted and talented programs and students who were *former* English learners. Adding these groups will help diversify what it means to be a school that serves all students. In particular, tracking former English learners will help the state monitor their progress and ensure those students are translating their gains in English proficiency into gains in math and English language arts. Although Arkansas plans to include former English learners in the English learner subgroup for accountability purposes—which will have the effect of boosting the group's score—Arkansas is at least taking proactive steps to monitor its data.

Identifying Schools: Is the state's plan to identify schools for comprehensive and targeted support likely to identify the schools and student groups most in need?

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Beginning in the 2018-19 school year and every three years thereafter, Arkansas plans to separate schools by grade span, and then identify the lowest 5 percent of Title I schools on its "ESSA School Index" within each grade span for comprehensive support. In addition, it will add to this list any high school with a four-year graduation rate below 66.67 percent. Also, the state will identify non-Title I schools for comprehensive support beginning in 2021-22. Because different grade levels have different scoring bands, identifying schools by grade span will mean that the state will identify schools proportionately at all grade levels (rather than, say, over-identifying high schools).

Arkansas is also planning to use its ESSA School Index to identify schools for targeted support and improvement. It says it will identify schools with "consistently underperforming" subgroups based on performance gaps, but it has not yet defined what particular magnitude of gap would qualify a school for this list. Arkansas is working on revising its rules based on new data, but its submitted plan said it would not identify schools with low-performing subgroups until 2020-21, and federal law requires it happen sooner than that. Arkansas also says it will identify schools with any subgroup scoring at or below the bottom 5 percent of schools on its ESSA School Index for "additional targeted support," but it did not provide data on how many schools would be identified under this rule.

Finally, Arkansas provides a helpful mock-up of what a school report card will look like, including an overall A-F rating. That mock-up depicts a clear, straightforward rating, plus well-displayed information around each of the main indicators in the system as well as subgroup performance on those indicators. However, the rest of the plan does not mention the A-F rating system, and it's not clear how those grades would be calculated or incorporated into the way Arkansas will be identifying schools for improvement.

Supporting Schools: Are the state's planned interventions in comprehensive and targeted support schools evidence-based and sufficiently rigorous to match the challenges those schools face? Why or why not?



The Arkansas plan is heavy on *diagnosing* problems in comprehensive and targeted support schools, but it does not include much information about planned interventions that have been effective with low-performing schools. While the state lists a comprehensive needs assessment and improvement approach, it is not clear as to which specific turnaround strategies will be promoted by the state based on previous investments.

This is in line with the state's theory of action, which will shift focus from directly intervening in schools to empowering and enabling school districts. Arkansas clearly states that *districts* must take responsibility for directly supporting and improving schools in need of support. As such, the state has created a three-part "local inquiry and improvement cycle." The state lists some key focus areas that districts might choose—such as instructional and learning strategies, personal competency development, classroom and school routines that support and enhance deeper learning, and administrative structures impacting students' time, place, path, and pace of learning—but the state sees itself in a support role in accomplishing these things. Similarly, for schools that fail to make progress over time, the state "may" become more directive over things like funding decisions, the specific interventions used, school choice options, or personnel decisions. However, Arkansas does not specify when these things would kick in or how it would decide when the state needed to take on a more directive role.

Arkansas plans to distribute the 7 percent of Title I funds dedicated to school improvement activities on a formula basis. It will award those funds to *districts*, and it will prioritize districts with schools identified for both comprehensive and targeted support. The state will also review those applications in accordance with its three-part "inquiry and improvement cycle." If a school or multiple schools within a district fail to make progress, the state will conduct a "resource allocation analysis" to re-evaluate how the district spent its funds. The state may then specify evidence-based interventions, reallocation of resources, or reassignment of personnel. State statute permits the Arkansas Department of Education to direct district uses of funds or to classify a district in need of intensive support, but it's not clear what would trigger that determination or what the intervention might entail.

Additionally, the state would strengthen its plan if it indicated if and how it intends to provide direct student services using the optional 3 percent set-aside, which provides an additional opportunity for the state to align school improvement activities with its statewide goals.

Exiting Improvement Status: Are the state's criteria for schools to exit comprehensive and targeted support status sufficient to demonstrate sustained improvements? Why or why not?



Arkansas' exit criteria for schools identified for improvement rely heavily on the phrase "upward trend." It's a strong practice to require schools to demonstrate an upward trend to exit improvement status, even if they no longer fall within the identified schools list, but Arkansas does not define what level of progress it would consider sufficient. Moreover, the plan indicates that, if schools in need of comprehensive and targeted support demonstrate an "upward trend" but remain in the lowest percent, they will be considered "Progressing Toward Sustainability." Schools classified as "Progressing" will not be identified for more rigorous intervention even if they fail to meet exit criteria within three years. By allowing struggling schools to avoid rigorous intervention with minimal progress, Arkansas signals a lack of urgency around improving educational conditions for students in the lowest-performing schools.

Continuous Improvement: Has the state outlined a clear plan to learn from its implementation efforts and modify its actions accordingly, including through continued consultation and engagement of key stakeholders? If not, what steps could the state take to do so?



The plan includes a thoughtful continuous improvement model that is woven throughout. From the Theory of Action, balanced scorecard, growth emphasis, and comprehensive/targeted improvement strategies, the state shows a commitment to continuous improvement throughout the ESSA plan. School-level improvement plans will track leading indicators for actions to monitor, assess, reflect, and adjust planned actions in a continuous inquiry cycle for improvement.

Arkansas also identifies several places where it engaged stakeholders in making decisions in its plan, including how it set its minimum subgroup size and how it included English language proficiency into the system. However, it is unclear if the state will continue to consult and engage with them during ongoing implementation efforts. For example, the state intends to add indicators to its School Quality list, but it's not clear how it plans to include stakeholder engagement in that process.