

Arkansas Commission on Closing the Achievement Gap
Annual Report
November 1, 2012

Mission

Originally created by Act 1777 in 2003, the GAP Commission's primary purpose is to work with educators from across the state who work first-hand in addressing the academic disparity that we continue to see among various disadvantaged groups. As such, we are committed to working along-side school districts to ensure that all students are given the support they need to succeed in school, and we are also committed to provide any assistance we can on the state level to make real progress in closing the academic achievement gap here in Arkansas.

Specifically, the Commission is mandated by legislation (HB 2164) to focus on these 5 key issues:

- *Developing a plan designed to enable all public school students to meet the state's student academic achievement standards while working towards the goal of narrowing the achievement gaps in public schools, for both economically disadvantaged students, as well as students from major racial and ethnic groups.*
- *To monitor the Department of Education's efforts to comply with federal guidelines on improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged, specifically including, but not limited to, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.*
- *To monitor the department's identification of population groups to be motivated in closing the academic achievement gap efforts.*
- *To receive national school lunch data and reports biennially from the Department of Education.*
- *To interface with local school district achievement gap task forces to provide data on the achievement gap, as well as intervention strategies.*

Legislation

The Arkansas Commission on Closing the Achievement Gap has been re-constituted, and is now composed in accordance with two powerful pieces of legislation enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Arkansas: Act 949 (HB 2163) and Act 1314 (HB 2164) of 2009 as approved on April 6, 2009 and April 9, 2009 respectively(*see Appendix*).

In accordance with Arkansas Code 6-15-1601 (b) concerning membership on the Commission, the body has been downsized to eleven (11) Commissioners: Five Commissioners appointed by the Governor, three (3) by the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, and three (3) by the Speaker of the House.

Currently, the Commission is awaiting approval of two nominations made to both the House and the Senate, along with two more recommendations from the Speaker of the House, and one more recommendation from the President Pro Tempore of the Senate

Commission Meetings: 2011-2012

Since submitting our last annual report on November 1, 2011, the Commission has met on 7 separate occasions, which is more often than we are mandated to do, including:

- 🍏 January 19, 2012
- 🍏 February 16, 2012
- 🍏 March 15, 2012
- 🍏 April 19, 2012
- 🍏 May 17, 2012
- 🍏 September 20, 2012
- 🍏 October 18, 2012.

Website Development

In accordance to our mission statement, we have collaborated with the Arkansas Department of Education's web master to create a website link to the Closing the Achievement Gap Commission, which was accessible for the first time last year.

<http://www.arkansased.org/divisions/policy/arkansas-commission-on-closing-the-achievement-gap>.

Pictures of each Commission member have been taken, with relevant contact info included for each member. Additionally, the website link includes the following:

- Current Membership List
- Relevant Legislation
- Annual Reports
- Meeting Agendas,
- Meeting Minutes
- Presentations/Relevant Data.

Committee Work

The Commission currently has a total of five Standing Subcommittees aimed at developing a state plan to close the achievement gap for Arkansas students across the state. These subcommittees include the following:

- 🍏 Scholastic Audit/ACSIP
- 🍏 Parental Involvement
- 🍏 Common Core
- 🍏 Analysis of Distribution of Educational Resources
- 🍏 Interfacing with Local Gap Task Forces

Scholastic Audit/ACSIP: Chairman, Dr. Vera Brown

The Sub-committee on Scholastic audit/ACSIP chose to focus on the Commission support of the Arkansas Department of Education's proposed ESEA Flexibility Waiver. We believed that the evidence presented to our Commission on March 15, 2012 by Mr. John Hoy, Assistant Commissioner for the Division of Academic Accountability, could possibly help to close the achievement gap in Arkansas.

Earlier this year, ADE had worked on a waiver application, and although the application was somewhat controversial in terms of student accountability, the Commission lent its support through a letter written on its behalf, as a direct result of Mr. Hoy's explanation of the impact this change could have on Arkansas schools.

For example, currently, schools are responsible for the achievement of all students, including students who are identified in subpopulations of 40 or more students. These subpopulations include minority students, those who access free/reduced lunch, as well as those utilizing special services. In the current adequate Yearly Progress (AYP,) one subgroup can cause an entire school to be placed on school improvement, even though the general population performed well on state tests. Additionally, a school could receive multiple penalties on a single student if a student is a minority, impoverished, and working under an Individualized Education Plan (IEP.)

Additionally, schools with subgroup populations of less than 40 students do not have to report those subgroups. Therefore, those unidentified students may not be receiving the attention and help needed. The new goal that the U.S. Department of Education has set is a goal of college and career readiness. The ADE is proposing to create two groups: the general population and one *combined* subgroup of a minimum of 40 students. One concern is that this approach will mask the needs of the students in that subgroup. It is the belief of the ADE that this approach will actually help identify more schools with qualifying subpopulations, and therefore bring attention to the needs of those students.

Mr. Hoy presented this information to the Arkansas Closing the Gap Commission to get the members thoughts and input. The consensus of the Commission was to lend support to ADE in this new strategy to identify previously ignored subgroups because the number was under 40 at many schools across the state.

Parental Involvement: Chairman, Mr. Jon Fulkerson

The Sub-committee on Parental Involvement as it relates to the academic achievement gap in Arkansas has focused upon the collection of data and general information regarding what is and is not considered parental involvement. As a result, an expert in the field of public school parental involvement, Teryn Spears, Parent Involvement Coordinator for the Blytheville Public Schools presented a session at the *Bridging the Gap Symposium* held in May, 2012 titled "Bridging the Stakeholder Gap."

The findings of the sub-committee that are most concerning is that due to their own educational level, many parents feel inferior and inadequate to participate in their child's education. Therefore, the concept of parental involvement and not simply parental attendance must be the focus for the learners of today. Partnerships must be created involving parents, teachers and the community to educate the whole child.

These findings and continued exploration of new data with regard to parental involvement and partnerships will be the focus of the sub-committee on parental involvement in the upcoming year of work with the commission.

Common Core: Chairman, Dr. Jesse Hargrove

Can the movement to the Common Core Standards in K-12 help close the achievement gap in students' learning in Arkansas Public schools? The charge of this sub-committee was to take a look into the classroom policy domain to gain insightful vision regarding helpful practices that will lead to increased learning and achievement for Arkansas students.

The Arkansas Commission on Closing the Achievement Gap Sub-Committee is focused on identifying policies that will lead to the improvement of student learning as well as strategies to close the achievement gap. The Common Core Standards are area- specific to achieving this task. There are both pros and cons in the literature. For example, there is repeated criticism with the Common Core for its lack of public input and involvement of large numbers of partners in the development of its practices and standards. Yet, it has lots of supporters as it moves forward in 26 states. There are supporters who contend that students are developing fluency in Math while learning contextual clues?

Without Common Core standards, students do not need contextual practice. They can simply memorize multiplication tables, addition, subtraction, and division. They can do these skills by clapping aloud or silently by odd or even numbers. They can also put theory to practice by jumping rope in a class. Others ask, is this type of learning helping the majority of students to develop contextual fluency or math practice? Yet, others contend that Common Core is the best help for the majority of students to develop reading and mathematical fluency. The standards, they say, allow for conceptual understanding so that fluency might be acquired by the learner. Then, and only then, will fluency be practiced in the context of applying math or reading content. The over-arching goal is to get students to develop a conceptual understanding of the content so that fluency in content areas is acquired. All students need to receive grade-level instruction. Some need grade-level plus additional support (language (ELL), special education. In Arkansas, Common Core standards in math and reading were implemented in Fall 2011 for K-2. Our Sub-Committee on Common Core Standards will need your input and guidance.

Analysis of the Distribution of Educational Resources: Interim Chairman, Dr. Luis Restrepo

Our goal as a Commission in evaluating the distribution of educational resources was to evaluate the equity, and any subsequent disparity, in regards to the link between educational resources and the academic achievement gap in local school districts across the state. Additionally, we were interested in evaluating best practices that other schools can implement as a model of how to close the achievement gaps among today's students. As such, this Sub-committee found current research that examined various factors affecting the distribution of resources and the schools' subsequent performance in evaluating those "exemplary" schools:

2011 Exemplary Schools

Arkansas is required to identify a reasonable number of high performance and high progress schools for designation as Exemplary (Reward) Schools on an annual basis beginning with 2011. Four categories of

performance were identified by stakeholders as notable performance for Exemplary School designation. These were schools demonstrating high performance, schools with large populations of at risk students with high performance, schools with high progress; and schools with large populations of at risk students with high progress.

The Targeted Achievement Gap Group (TAGG) was used as a measure of the size of the population of at risk students within a school. Schools were considered to have high TAGG populations when two-thirds (66.7%) of the students tested are members of the TAGG, i.e., economically disadvantaged, ELs and/or SWD. To determine Exemplary Schools for high performance, high progress, high-TAGG performance and high-TAGG progress three years of Arkansas Benchmark and End of Course Exam results were used to calculate a three-year average percentage of students Proficient/Advanced for math and literacy combined for 2009 through 2011. Combining the grade levels and the years for each school provides a more stable percentage for comparability and accountability purposes. High Performing and High TAGG High Performing schools were ranked within K – 5, 6 – 8, and 9 – 12 grade ranges. Over 78 schools were considered for Exemplary Designation based on ranking at or above the 95th state percentile within their grade ranges. Schools were required to be removed from consideration if their achievement gap between TAGG and Non-TAGG students was larger than the gap size of the 25 percent of schools with the smallest achievement gap sizes, or if schools' graduation rates were below the state median graduation rate of 83.78 percent. Progress was calculated based on the difference between schools' three year percentage of students Proficient/Advanced for math and literacy for 2008 to 2010 scores and the three year percentage of students Proficient/Advanced for math and literacy for 2009 to 2011 scores.

The difference scores represent the gain or loss in proficiency for a school between the two time periods. High Progress and High TAGG High Progress schools were ranked based on their difference scores within the three grade ranges. Over 52 schools were considered for Exemplary Designation based on ranking at or above the 95th state percentile for gains within their grade ranges. Schools were required to be removed from consideration if their achievement gap between TAGG and Non-TAGG students was larger than the gap size of the 25 percent of schools with the smallest achievement gap sizes, or if schools' graduation rates were below the state median graduation rate of 83.78 percent.

In terms of equitable school resources, two key indicators of progress in closing the academic achievement gap for minority students is the enrollment and success in Advanced Placement courses and their performance in the ACT exam. In addition, early grade level reading assessment makes evident areas where an achievement gap needs to be addressed.

According to the College Board *8th Annual AP Report to the Nation*, released February 8, 2012, in Arkansas only 13.5 percent of high school students took AP classes and received a 3 in the national exam, compared to 18.1 percent national average. The report also reflects a significant increase in the past decade. Only 4.4 percent of Arkansas students scored 3 or higher in the national exam in 2001, compared to 13.5 in 2011, a 9.1 percent increase, above the national average of 7.3 percent. However, nationally African Americans were the most underrepresented group in AP classes and Latinos did not enroll at the same rate as White students. As a result, the report concludes that “Four out of five black/African American graduates were either left out of an AP subject for which they had potential or attended a school that did not offer the subject.” The report recommends to identify minority and low income students with the potential to succeed in AP classes.

The *ACT Report* for the 2012 graduating class for Arkansas indicates that there is still a significant achievement gap for African American, Latino, and Native American students. The state ACT composite average was 21.5. White students ACT composite average was 22 points. African Americans (17.5), Latinos (19.2) and Native Americans (19.5).

The *Arkansas Campaign for Grade Level Reading Report* by the Arkansas Advocates for Families and Children, released in September 2013, stresses the importance of reading levels necessary for learning: “True reading comprehension is not just the ability to recognize words and articulate them, but also the ability to understand the underlying concepts expressed by those words.” The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows clear disparities in 4th graders reading at or above the proficiency level as shown in figure 1. Clearly, African American and Latino/Hispanic students are reading at levels significantly below White students. Arkansas ranks 36th in the nation in 3rd grade reading proficiency levels.

Interfacing with Local Gap Task Forces: Chairman, Dr. Dawn Tirado Simpson

First Educational Outreach – Bridging the Gap: May 10-11, 2012

On May 10-11, 2012, we hosted our first educational symposium, entitled *Bridging the Gap: An Educational Symposium with the Arkansas Commission on Closing the Academic Achievement Gap*, in Blytheville, Arkansas. Our mission for this educational outreach was to invite all those educators from this part of the state who work first-hand in addressing the academic achievement gaps in their local schools. As a Commission, we emphasized that we were ready to work alongside school districts to ensure that all students are given the support they need to succeed in school. Additionally, we as a Commission are committed to provide any assistance we can on the state level to make real progress in closing the academic achievement gap in Arkansas.

Our plans are to make *Bridging the Gap* the first of many symposiums we can offer across the state. Since we are already mandated by current legislation to interface with the local achievement gap task forces in each of the four congressional districts, we plan on continuing to host these symposiums on an annual basis, with plans for our next symposium to be held in Pine Bluff, Congressional District 4, this summer.

Purpose of the Meeting

- Establish rapport and partnership with those around the state who are interested in closing the gap.
- Increase the visibility of the Commission and emphasize our advocacy and dedication to work alongside school districts across the state.
- Collect information from different constituencies around the state as to what the achievement gap looks like in their region and what attempts have been made to close it.
- Compile the information from meetings around the state and develop an overall report or White Paper authored by this commission.

Structure of the Symposium/Educational Outreach

- Although we plan to host one of these meeting in each of the Arkansas’ four congressional districts, we started in the first congressional district, with the host city being Blytheville, and Commissioner Jon Fulkerson volunteering to be our site coordinator.
- After meeting with the school district’s superintendent, it was decided that the symposium would be scheduled for May 10-11, 2012. Plans included not only a reception the evening before, but also a bus tour of the school district and community prior to the opening session, along with keynote speakers, and breakout sessions.
- Parents and community leaders were invited both to the reception and the lunch that followed the training. Lunch also included a panel discussion with students and local school district personnel, including the Superintendent.

- Professional development credit was offered for all those that qualified, including the 2 hour required Parental Involvement component for teacher licensure.

Supporting Documentation

Feel free to refer to the Appendix for the following documentation regarding our symposium:

- *Bridging the Gap* flyer, designed by students of the Blytheville School District
- *Bridging the Gap* agenda for the symposium
- *Bridging the Gap* invitation that was sent to superintendents statewide
- *Bridging the Gap* e-vite that was sent to administrators, teachers, and key educational personnel
- *Bridging the Gap* sample thank you letters

Summary & Recommendations

Summary

As a result of the research conducted as a Commission throughout the year, and through the various presentations that we have been privy to, we have seen both the educational and economic impact the achievement gap can have across our state. For example, when examining the current drop-out rate in Arkansas public schools, research conducted by the Arkansas Campaign for Grade Level Reading, found some interesting findings – according to the report, an estimated 11,900 Arkansas students dropped out of the class of 2010. If that number were cut in half, to 5,950, the state would see the following results:

- \$60 million in increased home sales
- \$51 million in increased gross state product
- \$42 million in increased earnings
- \$33 million in increased spending
- \$9.8 million in increased investments
- \$5.9 million in increased auto sales
- \$3.5 million in increased tax revenue
- 300 new jobs

Just from this research alone, one can see why ensuring that all students have an equal chance to succeed in the classroom is of such vital importance to the future of our state. With regards to race and ethnicity, according to the 8th Annual AP Report to the Nation issued on February 8, 2012, four out of 5 (or 79%) of African-American graduates, and 70.4% of Hispanic/Latino students, were either left out of an AP subject for which they had potential, or attended a school that did not offer the subject.

Recommendations

One of the most important aspects of serving on The Arkansas Commission on Closing the Academic Achievement Gap, is that we are authorized to make recommendations to our governing officials and key educational leaders – as such, we as a Commission would make 3 recommendations that if followed, could impact the effectiveness of our future work as a Commission as we work alongside school districts on this vital issue:

- 1) School districts and their Superintendents should take heed that local gap task forces charged with examining the academic discrepancies among their school subpopulations should already be in place. Codified on April 24, 2012, we saw first-hand how few school districts are implementing this requirement. At present, there is “no teeth” behind failing to abide by this recommendation – and perhaps, there should be. Doing so would certainly be a more pro-active approach to solving this dilemma.
- 2) With the new configuration of the ADE website, our website link as a Commission is much harder to find – as we travel across the state and promote our mission, we are asked for information that is made available on the website, but now one must type in the name of our Commission to even find where our information is located. It would be the recommendation of this Commission that better accessibility to our Commission be considered.
- 3) Without an operating budget, we are limited to what we can do. We strongly believe that Arkansas has made great strides in examining this issue and that we could continue to be on the forefront of academic progressiveness. As such, we as a Commission could become the model for other states to follow, demonstrating first-hand how a state commission can serve as an educational resource and advocacy groups to help districts across our state take a pro-active, rather than re-active, stand on this important issue.

Commission Composition

The Arkansas Commission on Closing the Achievement Gap consists of the following members:

2012 Academic Achievement Gap Commissioners



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**Report of the Arkansas Commission On Closing the Achievement Gap
November 1, 2012**

13

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