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Quality Counts 2015

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Summary Points

- ◆ Arkansas receives a **D+** for K-12 Student Achievement, same as 2014 but an increase from prior performance.
- ◆ Arkansas receives a **C** in School Finance, consistent with prior performance.
- ◆ Arkansas receives a **C-** in Chance for Success, consistent with prior performance. Chance for Success is a category that measures opportunities in the state from preschool to career.
- ◆ Arkansas' performance has not decreased from prior years; rather the Quality Counts calculations for performance have changed.
- ◆ Overall grades and rankings for 2015 are not comparable to those from prior Quality Counts reports, as fewer measures were included.
- ◆ Overall grades and rankings were not assigned in the 2014 Quality Counts report.

Quality Counts 2015

In an attempt to gauge the educational progress of the nation and each state, Education Week has published state report cards since 1997 in its annual Quality Counts series. The 19th annual report - Quality Counts 2015 - was released in January. Overall, Arkansas received an grade of C- and was ranked 36th among the 50 states. This policy brief examines Arkansas' rank in each category of the report as well as the quality of the report itself.

Background

Grades and rankings are widespread, easy to understand and sometimes misleading. An "A" in one high school class may be less representative of high academic achievement than a "C" in another. The question we must ask is—what does a C- from *Quality Counts* mean for Arkansas?

Last year, *Education Week* took a hiatus from assigning such summative grades to states "in order to step back and reassess the education policy landscape". The grades return this year, but, according to *Education Week*, with a "leaner form that focuses on outcomes". The combined rating system remains problematic, however, and the overall result may still not be very meaningful.

This brief focuses on the individual categories of the *Quality Counts* measures that are compiled and ranked by the editorial staff of *Education Week*. Indeed, while the overall rating is not very useful, the ratings in several of these individual categories can provide valuable information to policymakers.

This brief examines and evaluates the three categories used in the 2015 report:

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Chance for Success, School Finance and K-12 Achievement. We describe how each section was scored, as well as Arkansas' grade in each. An overview of Arkansas' grades over the past six years and grades compared to border states is also presented.

Chance for Success: The Richer, the Better

Quality Counts assigns states a higher grade if their population displays low risk demographic characteristics. **The less wealthy or educated a state's population is, the lower the grade.** If schools graded students this way disadvantaged students would always receive low scores, regardless of their achievement.

School Finance: The More You Spend, the Better

Quality Counts gives higher grades to states that spend more on education. Adequately funding education is important, but finance grade is unconnected to student achievement. This effectively **penalizes states who use their funding more efficiently.**

And... Student Performance?

Student learning is the **key area of educational outcomes**, and the *Quality Counts* methodology diminishes the importance of this indicator by averaging with the other two categories.

Are We Improving? Arkansas' Grades over Time

The 2015 *Quality Counts* overall rating includes only three of the original six categories, so it is not directly comparable to earlier years. Grades within the remaining categories, however, are comparable over time, and demonstrate that Arkansas' performance in these areas has not decreased. Chance for Success has remained a C-, and School Finance has received a C for the past several years. K-12 achievement has, in fact, **increased** since 2010. The direct result of changes in *Quality Counts*' calculation, Arkansas' overall letter grade and ranking dropped in 2015 despite the fact that Arkansas' achievement increased.

Table 1: Arkansas Quality Counts Scores over Time, 2010-2015

CATEGORY	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
<i>Standards, Assessments, and Accountability</i>	A	A	A	A	A	No longer included
<i>Teaching Profession</i>	B+	B+	B+	B+	B+	No longer included
<i>Transitions and Alignment</i>	B	A	A	A	A	No longer included
Chance for Success	C-	C-	C-	C-	C-	C-
School Finance	C	C-	C	C	C	C
K-12 Achievement	D	D	D	D	D+	D+
OVERALL	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
	B-	B-	B-	B-	Not provided	C-

Note: Shaded cells indicate categories that are no longer used by *Quality Counts*.

Keeping Up With The Neighbors: Arkansas and Border States

Compared to its bordering states, Arkansas has relatively high rankings (highlighted earlier in Table 1). Among its neighbors, Arkansas tied for the top grade in School Finance. Unfortunately, this comparison also shows how low Arkansas and the surrounding states perform in the Chance for Success and Student Achievement categories. The only silver lining to this low grade on student achievement is that Texas is the only neighboring state to outperform Arkansas.

Table 2: Grades by Quality Counts Category for Arkansas and Border States, 2015.

CATEGORY	AR	US	LA	MS	MO	OK	TN	TX
Chance for Success (2015)	C-	C+	C-	D+	C+	C-	C	C
School Finance (2015)	C	C	C	D+	C-	D+	D+	D
K-12 Achievement (2014)	D+	C-	D-	F	D	D	D+	C-

Chance for Success

Arkansas Grade: C- (ranked 42nd)

Of the 13 total categories that comprise the Chance for Success Index, eight are demographic measures. These measures, such as poverty statistics on the student body, do influence the "Chances for Success" of the students as they represent outside forces from the community that affect the lives of students. *However, these community demographic measures do not belong anywhere in a ranking of the state's quality of schooling.*

Unsurprisingly, because their residents experience fewer challenges associated with poverty, wealthier states like New Hampshire and Connecticut rank near the top of this measure; at the same time, poorer states--like Arkansas, Mississippi, and West Virginia--rank near the bottom.

What makes the Chance for Success measure perverse, however, is the way that it is used in the *Quality Counts* results: a higher Chance for Success grade is simply averaged in with all the other measures, producing a higher overall grade for the state's education system.

Indeed, under the *Quality Counts* system, a state that had high-achieving impoverished students would be ranked similarly to a state that had low-achieving wealthier students. Such an outcome simply does not make sense. As a result, we do not put much credence in this ranking as a measure of the quality of education in Arkansas.

The Chance for Success measure consists of numerical indicators and was scored using a "best-in-class" approach. This scoring method awards 100 points to the leading state and ranks the other states according to the points earned in proportion to gaps between themselves and the leader. For more information on the scoring in this category, see the Appendix at the end of this document.

As highlighted in Table 3, **The Richer, The Better**, Arkansas is penalized for the demographics of its population. Arkansas and Nebraska score similarly on both the finance and student achievement measures, and only

scored differently on Chance for Success. Arkansas ranked 46th in Chance for Success with a score of 71, while Nebraska ranked 11th with a score of 84. Nebraska receives a higher overall grade and ranks 14 positions higher simply because Nebraska parents are more affluent and their students are easier to educate. If anything, the opposite should be the case: states whose students are poorer and less advantaged should receive a bonus for whatever achievement results they manage to accomplish, rather than being penalized even further in the overall rankings.

Table 3: Arkansas and Nebraska Quality Counts Overall and Category Scores , 2015.

The Richer, The Better		
	AR	NE
Chance for Success Score and Rank	71 (46th)	84 (11th)
Finance Score and Rank	73 (28 th)	75 (22 nd)
K-12 Achievement Score and Rank	67 (37 th)	67 (35 th)
Overall Grade and Rank	C- 36th	C 22nd

School Finance

Arkansas Grade: C (ranked 28th)

Arkansas held steady in the School Finance category, once again receiving a **C** in the 2015 *Quality Counts* report.

Arkansas allocates 3.8% of its taxable resources to education, earning a ranking of 14th in the nation. Arkansas also scores well in terms of equity, receiving a rank of 18th for funding equity across districts.

Arkansas spends \$511 less per pupil annually than the national average (adjusted for regional cost differences), and this efficiency negatively impacts Arkansas' rating in school finance. Several measures focus on a comparison of state to national spending, and as long as Arkan-

sas is below average spending nationally the rankings will be low.

In short, the School Finance grade for Arkansas places us in the middle: slightly above average in the equity category and slightly below average in the spending category. For more information regarding how this category, and the sub-categories under this measure are scored, see the Appendix at the end of this document.

Table 4, **The More You Spend, the Better**, demonstrates how Arkansas is penalized by *Quality Counts* for efficiently utilizing its financial resources. Compared to Arkansas, West Virginia has lower student performance, similar state demographics, but spends **over \$2,000 more than Arkansas per student annually**. The regionally adjusted per pupil expenditures are so high, in fact, that West Virginia is ranked 2nd in the nation.

When it comes to student achievement, however, West Virginia is near the bottom of the rankings at 47th. Although spending 18% less per student, Arkansas' academic performance is ranked 10 positions higher.

With similar demographics and less spending, Arkansas is able to get better results in higher student achievement. West Virginia, however, is awarded a higher grade and ranking, because according to *Quality Counts*, "the more you spend, the better".

Table 4: Arkansas and West Virginia Quality Counts Overall and Category Scores, 2015.

The More You Spend, the Better		
	AR	WV
Chance for Success Score and Rank	71 (46 th)	70 (47 th)
Finance Score and Rank	73 (28th)	89 (2nd)
K-12 Achievement Score and Rank	67 (37 th)	61 (47 ^h)
Overall Grade and Rank	C- 36th	C 27th

K-12 Achievement

Arkansas Grade: D+ (ranked 37th)

Educational success is the focus of only one *Quality Counts* measure, K-12 Achievement, and Arkansas held steady, receiving a **D+** in the 2015 report. The most recent available data puts the state below the national average of **C-**, with a 37th place ranking.

Current student achievement is measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Students in 4th and 8th grade complete NAEP in reading and math every two years. The data used for the 2015 *Quality Counts* report were collected in 2013.

Student poverty and parent education level are key predictors of student academic success, and Arkansas students are more at risk for low performance than most other states. *Quality Counts* ranked Arkansas students' 'Chance for Success' 47th in the nation, but Arkansas students are beating those odds. Eighth graders ranked 40th and 42nd in reading and math respectively, and fourth graders ranked 36th in reading and 37th in math.

Although performance is below the national average, Arkansas students made greater gains since 2003 than students across the country. Arkansas ranked 5th nationally for gains in eighth grade math, as students increased over 160% of the national average. Fourth grade students improved 150% of national average in math, earning Arkansas a rank of 11th nationally. Students in Arkansas also evidenced better than average gains in reading, with fourth grade gains ranking 16th nationally and eighth grade gains ranking 23rd.

Arkansas also is awarded high rankings for smaller achievement gaps for students in poverty, although the gaps between have increased somewhat since 2003. Of particular concern is the widening of the math performance gap between eighth graders in poverty and those who are not economically disadvantaged.

The achievement of students taking Advanced Placement exams is another bright spot for Arkansas. The percentage of high scores on these exams merits a rank

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of 25th in the county, and Arkansas scores even higher for improvement in AP scores. The percent of students achieving a high score on AP assessments has increased over 15 points since 2000, awarding Arkansas another top 20 ranking.

For more information on scoring of this measure, see the Appendix at the end of this document.

Conclusion

Arkansas' overall letter grade and ranking is not helpful to policymakers, educators or students. These values for the 2015 report are not even comparable to prior years and two of the three measures retained for this year's report can penalize states for measures for which they should be rewarded.

The key takeaway from Quality Counts 2015 is that Arkansas students are making gains. If policymakers and education leaders can focus on meaningful data, like growth and efficiency in the face of disadvantage, then students in Arkansas can continue to beat the odds.

Appendix

The front-end of this document contained brief descriptions of the *Quality Counts* categories, as well as Arkansas' grade and rank in each of those categories. The purpose of this Appendix is to provide more detail on the components of each category graded above. For more information on the 2015 Quality Counts report, [click here](#).

Quality Counts looks at three areas in determining a state's overall rank: Chance for Success, School Finance, and K-12 Student Achievement.

Chance for Success

The Chance for Success measure represents a combination of educational outcomes and community socioeconomic measures. Specifically, the Chance for Success measure ranks states in subcategories covering two education outcomes and demographic measures. [Click here](#) for a PDF of this section of the 2015 *Quality Counts* report.

Education Outcomes: This measure includes state data such as 4th grade literacy scores on the NAEP, 8th grade math scores on the NAEP, and high school graduation rate. These outcome measures are essentially "double-counted" as they are also included in the category of student achievement.

Demographic Measures: Includes state data such as percent of children above 200% of the poverty line, percent of children who have a college-educated parent, percent of children with at least one parent who is employed, percent of children whose parents speak English, percent of children enrolled in preschool or kindergarten, and more.

School Finance

Updated in 2013, the **equity** sub-category is calculated using:

- The wealth neutrality score (which looks at the relationship between district funding and local property taxes)
- The "McLoone Index" (which looks at how much each school district spends compared to the median)
- The coefficient of variation (which looks at the extent to which a state's school districts spend an equal amount)
- Restricted range (which looks at the difference in spending between the 5th percentile and the 95th percentile)
Adjusted per-pupil expenditures (adjusted for variations in regional costs)

The **spending** sub-category includes:

- Percent of students in districts with per-pupil expenditures at or above the US average (expenditures adjusted for regional cost differences and student needs)
- A spending index focusing on the percent of students served by districts spending at or above the national average as well as the degree to which lower-spending districts fall short of that national benchmark
- Percent of total taxable resources spent on education

[Click here](#) for a PDF of this section of the 2015 *Quality Counts* report.

Student Achievement

Student Achievement represents 18 categories including student achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). It is important to note that the data represent the more recent NAEP, taken in 2013 and originally reported in the 2014 Quality Counts report.

[Click here](#) for a PDF of this section of the 2015 *Quality Counts* report.