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Quality Counts 2012

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Summary Points

- Arkansas earned an overall ranking of 5th in the in the recently released *Education Week Quality Counts* report
- The measures used to determine the state's rankings place a significant amount of weight on education inputs (and little to student achievement)
- Arkansas ranks very high (A) in Standards, Assessment, and Accountability and in our Transitions and Alignment--which both look at standards
- Arkansas gets B's and C's for Teaching Profession, Chances for Success and School Finance
- Arkansas receives a D for K-12 Student Achievement--at or below the score of all neighboring states except for Louisiana and Mississippi

Quality Counts 2012

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 16th annual report - Quality Counts 2012 - was released in January. Overall, Arkansas ranked 5th among the 50 states and was one of only nine states in the U.S. that received a B. This policy brief examines Arkansas' rank in each category of the report as well as the quality of the report itself.

Background

Recently, policymakers have touted Arkansas' strong showing on the Quality Counts report as evidence of the close attention that Arkansas policymakers have paid to education in recent years.

Policymakers, however, should be cautious in paying too much attention to the overall score provided in the *Quality Counts* evaluation. While the individual components in the rating are interesting, the combined rating system is problematic and the overall result may not be very meaningful. For example, *Quality Counts* gives states a higher rating if their student population is deemed easier to educate and it gives states higher ratings for simply spending more on education. The opposite behaviors should be rewarded. *States should not be penalized for educating poor children nor should a state be penalized for efficient use of funds.* This ranking system enables both errors to occur. Indeed, perversely, Arkansas' grade is dropped because of the relatively poor population of the students in the state!

(Stuart Buck and Gary Ritter published this critique in a Letter to the Editor at Education Week on February 3, 2009.)

this brief

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Because the scoring methodology is dubious, 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.

Categories

Quality Counts looks at six areas in determining a state's overall rank:

- **Chance for Success**
- **K-12 Achievement**
- **Standards, Assessments, & Accountability**
- **The Teaching Profession**
- **School Finance**
- **Transitions and Alignment**

Arkansas received the highest possible grade--an A--in the Standards,



Assessments & Accountability category, again receiving perfect scores in the subcategories for Standards and School Accountability. Similarly, Arkansas' grade for Transitions and Alignment - or how well a state's educational system is coordinated from elementary school to college - was also an A. An overview of Arkansas' grades-as compared to its border states is presented below in Table 1. This brief examines the six categories in three separate broad groupings: Education Policies, Education Inputs, and Education Outputs. We describe how each section was scored, as well as Arkansas' grade in each.

Education Policies

The first category, Education Policies, scores states in three areas: Standards and Assessments, and Accountability, the Teaching Profession, and Transitions and Alignment. The following is a breakdown of Arkansas' scores in each of these three sections.

Standards, Assessments, and Accountability
Arkansas Grade: A (tied for 6th)

As one of the longest-standing elements of the *Quality Counts* state-of-the-states

framework, the Standards, Assessments, and Accountability score reflects a state's policies in each of the three listed areas. Arkansas received an A in this category; indicating that a high number of measured policies have been implemented in our state.

The first two categories (Standards, Assessments, and Accountability and the Teaching Profession) consist of non-numerical measures showing whether a state has implemented a particular policy or program. Scores in this category are generated using a "policy implementation tally," that is, the policies implemented by a state in each category are tallied as a simple "yes" (the measure exists in the state) or "no" (the measure does not exist in the state) to compute the grade for that state.

Standards: Arkansas received a perfect score in this category for receiving a positive ("yes") mark in all six different subcategories; four of which note whether or not the state has academic-content standards for each grade and/or course in elementary, middle, and high school. The

On the Record

"We've come a long way as a state in our pursuit of academic excellence, and we'll continue making improvements that help our students and state's future"

-Governor Mike Beebe

"We're very pleased about the latest signs of advancement in education...To be ranked 5th in nation indicates that good things are happening in Arkansas schools. Educators and policy makers across the country are taking notice. These are OUR kids. We take very seriously our responsibility to serve each and every child in Arkansas."

-Commissioner Tom Kimbrell

Table 1: Summary Grade for Arkansas and Border States, 2012

| EDUCATION POLICIES | AR | US | LA | MS | MO | OK | TN | TX |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Standards, Assessments, and Accountability (2012) | A | B | A | A | C+ | A | A- | A- |
| Teaching Profession (2012) | B+ | C | B- | D | D+ | C- | B- | C+ |
| Transitions and Alignment (2012) | A | C+ | B- | C | C- | B+ | A | A |
| EDUCATION INPUTS | AR | US | LA | MS | MO | OK | TN | TX |
| Chance for Success (2012) | C- | C+ | C- | D+ | C+ | C- | C- | C |
| School Finance (2012) | C | C | C | D+ | C- | D+ | D+ | D+ |
| EDUCATION OUTPUTS | AR | US | LA | MS | MO | OK | TN | TX |
| K-12 Achievement (2012) | D | C- | F | F | D | D | D | C- |
| OVERALL | AR | US | LA | MS | MO | OK | TN | TX |
| | B- | C | C+ | C- | C- | C+ | C+ | C+ |

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remaining two subcategories tally supplementary resources for all core academic subjects (English, math, and science) and for particular student populations (special education, English language learners).

Assessments: This section tallies twelve subcategories including the types of test items, whether the tests are aligned to state standards, whether state tests were vertically equated for the 2011-12 school year, and whether the state provides educators with a benchmark assessment. Arkansas received a "yes" mark in eight of the twelve subcategories.

School Accountability: In this category, Arkansas also received a perfect score because the state boasts the following: a school ratings system based on state-developed criteria, a statewide student identification system, rewards for high-performing or improving schools, assistance to low-performing schools, and sanctions for low-performing schools. It is important to note, however, Arkansas does not currently reward high-performing schools due to a lack of available funds; we do however have policies in place to do so.

This category represents a good measure of the educational inputs in education. Indeed, Arkansas' high grade is evidence that the Standards, Assessments, and Accountability in our state are on track with what *Quality Counts* deems important.

The Teaching Profession Arkansas Grade: B+ (tied for 2nd)

Like Standards, Assessment, and Accountability, scores under the subcategories in the Teaching Profession are generated using the tally system and

focus on a series of indicators that intend to capture three aspects of state teacher policy including: accountability for quality, incentives and allocation, building and supporting capacity.

Accountability for Quality: Positive markings in 16 different subcategories such as a state's policies to evaluate licensure requirements, clinical experience, evaluation of teacher performance, and effectiveness of teacher education programs are tallied to compute the Accountability for Quality grade. Arkansas received a positive mark in nine of the 16 policy measures.

Incentives and Allocation: Grades are calculated by tallying markings in 13 different subcategories such as a state's policies including an alternative-route program, license and pension portability, teacher-pay parity, reporting teacher salaries, and pay for performance. Of these 13 subcategories, Arkansas received a positive mark in nine areas, one being the offer of performance pay for raising student achievement, an area in which only 10 other states received a positive mark. It should be noted, although Arkansas does in fact have a law with this provision, very few schools actually offer incentive pay.

Building and Support Capacity: Grades in this area are generated by tallying positive markings in 15 different subcategories such as evaluating a state's support for beginning teachers, professional development, school leadership, class size incentives, student-teacher ratio, school facilities and school climate/working conditions. Arkansas earned credit in 13 of these 15 areas including receiving a score for having a low mean student-teacher ratio in primary-level schools—a 14.3—ranking

Arkansas as having the 15th lowest student-teacher ratio in this category.

Arkansas received an A in the Building and Supporting Capacity subcategory. Scores in Accountability for Quality and Incentives and Allocation were also high with Arkansas earning grades of B- and B+, respectively.

Transitions and Alignment
Arkansas Grade: A (tied for 1st)

The Transitions and Alignment measure is based on an assessment of whether the state has early-learning standards, a formal definition of school readiness, programs for students not ready for school, kindergarten standards aligned with elementary standards, a definition of college readiness, a requirement that all students take a college preparatory curriculum, high school course credits and assessments aligned with the college system, and more.

The Quality Counts report did not measure Transitions and Alignment in 2012; instead, the ranking relies on the 2011 information. Thus, just as last year, Arkansas ranks 1st nationwide (tied with Maryland). Of the 14 policies specified in the grading scheme, Arkansas had adopted 13. The

only category in which Arkansas had not developed policy was the alignment of high school assessment with the postsecondary system. For more information about Transitions and Alignment rankings, see our Policy Brief *Quality Counts 2011* available [here](#).

Although no new data are available in this category, we still find the Arkansas ranking to be a fair and useful measure of education inputs. Again, the high grade in this section seems to suggest that Arkansas system of education contains components considered important by the *Quality Counts* rating system.

Education Inputs

The Chance for Success and School Finance categories represent inputs to the educational process. These measures consist of numerical indicators and were 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.

Chance for Success
Arkansas Grade: C- (ranked 44th)

The Chance for Success measure represents a strange 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.

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.

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

Table 2: Arkansas Scores over Time, 2010-2012

| EDUCATION POLICIES | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|---|------|------|------|
| Standards, Assessments, and Accountability (2012) | A | A | A |
| Teaching Profession (2012) | B+ | B+ | B+ |
| Transitions and Alignment (2012) | B | A | A |
| EDUCATION INPUTS | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
| Chance for Success (2012) | C- | C- | C- |
| School Finance (2012) | C | C- | C |
| EDUCATION OUTPUTS | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
| K-12 Achievement (2012) | D | D | D |
| OVERALL | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
| | B- | B- | B- |

There has not been a significant amount of change in Arkansas' ranking since 2010. With the exception of Transitions and Alignment, the 2012 scores in each category are the same as the 2010 scores.

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, rich states like New Hampshire and Connecticut rank near the top of the Chance for Success 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. Thus, part of the reason that New Hampshire gets a higher overall grade than Arkansas is because New Hampshire has more affluent parents and a more privileged body of students. 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. 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 rich students. Such an outcome simply does not make sense. As a result we do not put much credence into this ranking as a measure of the quality of education in Arkansas.

School Finance
Arkansas Grade: C (Ranked 27th)

The School Finance rating is broken down into two sub-categories: equity and spending, with each sub-category evaluated on four financial measures.

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

Arkansas received a grade of C in the 2012 report. However, that grade is misleading as it is an average of two disparate measures. Specifically, Arkansas got a B+ for equity, as a result of treating all districts relatively equally in terms of school finance. But that B+ equity score was averaged together with an F for spending, which means that Arkansas spent less money per pupil than some other states.

While individual results under the four subcategories in spending result in a grade of F for the category, the state of Arkansas allocates 4.3% of its taxable resources on education and is tied for 10th in the nation on this measure. Moreover, the per-pupil expenditure amount (adjusted for regional cost differences) for Arkansas is \$908 less than the national average, ranking the state 30th in the nation on this measure. Thus, the Arkansas score is being depressed by low rankings on the final two measures, which focus on the percentage of students in districts spending below the national average.

In short, it is surprising that the School Finance grade for Arkansas is so low. Arkansas has a high grade for equitable financing of education and spends at just below the national average. As far as we can tell, Arkansas' overall School Finance grade

of C reflects little more than the fact that many Arkansas students live in districts that are poorer and have a lower cost of living than many other states. In our view, the B+ grade for equity is a far more meaningful indicator.

Education Outputs

Finally, only one measure focuses on the key area of educational outputs.

Student Achievement

Arkansas Grade: D (ranked 34th)

Arkansas' overall grade of D for the most recent available data puts it below the national average of C-, with a 34th place ranking. The Student Achievement measure includes comparisons between current status, change, and equity. The current status comparisons are based on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores administered to grade 4 and grade 8 students in math and reading, as well as high school graduation rates and advanced placement test scores.

A few of Arkansas' rankings on the 18 measures included in Student Achievement are worth comment. While Achievement Levels as measured by the NAEP remain low, the state performed very well in Achievement Gains. Math gains in the 4th grade ranked Arkansas 12th nationally, and 8th grade gains earned a 2nd place ranking for the state. Gains in reading were below the national average for both grades.

Arkansas' most recent graduation rate of 69.7% came in slightly lower than the national average of 71.7%, ranking it 35th nationwide. Also, Arkansas' performance on AP tests was below average. The AP pass

rate--the percentage of tested students scoring a 3 or higher--was 15.5% against a 21.9% national average.

Comparing Arkansas to Surrounding States

Compared to its bordering states, Arkansas has relatively high rankings (highlighted earlier in Table 1). Arkansas received or tied for the top grade in three of the six graded categories – Transitions and Alignment, Standards, Assessments and Accountability, and the Teaching Profession. Unfortunately, this comparison also shows how poorly Arkansas and the surrounding states perform with regard to Student Achievement. The only silver lining to this low grade on student achievement that the only neighboring state to outperform Arkansas was Texas.

Arkansas Grades over Time

Finally, just as students work to improve their grades, we also wanted to examine the extent to which Arkansas' *Quality Counts* grades have changed over time. As mentioned previously, five of the six categories evaluated have been updated to include the most recently available data (2012). Since 2010, the overall *Quality Counts* grade and four of the six components of it have remained unchanged. Arkansas has regressed in one category—School Finance—last year, but has rebounded this year. However, we have made our case above as to why we believe the scoring in this category is flawed. A detailed picture of Arkansas' *Quality Counts* grades can be found in Table 2 on page 4.

Conclusion

Media outlets and state press releases tend to focus on Arkansas' overall Quality Counts scores; however, we do not view the overall Quality Counts score as meaningful. It seems nonsensical that a state's overall grade

is based on the simple average of disparate measures.

In the 2012 report, Arkansas scored extremely well in Education Policies, average in Education Inputs (though we have noted our reservations with this ranking that penalizes our state's educators for working with poor students!), and poorly in Education Outputs.

Specifically, Arkansas ranks among the top 10 states in measures of Education Policies, receiving an A in Standards, Assessments, and Accountability (tying for 6th nationwide), a B+ in the Teaching Profession (ranking 2nd nationwide), and an A in Transitions and Alignment measure (tying for 1st nationwide). In measures of Education Inputs, Arkansas received a grade of C in the School Finance measure (ranking 27th nationwide). Arkansas' score in the Chances for Success measure was very low, ranking 44th nationwide. However, both of these input measures are relatively misleading and we do not put much stock in them.

Thus, Arkansas' scores in the components of the *Quality Counts* report are generally positive. Hopefully, Arkansas' high marks in the Quality Counts categories focused on Education Policies are truly indicative of sound policy. However, one concern we have is that although the sound policies are in place, very few are implemented in a meaningful way. It is our hope to see better results in the future scores for the category of primary importance - Student Achievement.

For more information on how these scores were calculated, visit the [Methodology section](#) of Quality Counts.

The full report can be found [here](#).