

10-1-2004

Interview with Dr. Ken James, Arkansas Department of Education

Sarah C. McKenzie
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Gary W. Ritter
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Citation

McKenzie, S. C., & Ritter, G. W. (2004). Interview with Dr. Ken James, Arkansas Department of Education. *Policy Briefs*. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/oepbrief/131>

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Q: How has the job started out and how are you enjoying being the director of ADE?

KJ: Well, it started out very busily, as everyone knows, with respect to the consolidations and bringing those to closure, and making sure we had all of that done to meet the deadline of July 1, so as we started out, it was extremely busy and we hit the ground running, but with respect to that, I am very pleased with what transpired and very proud of the State Board for stepping up to the plate and tackling these very tough issues, and making their decisions based upon the best interest of the kids. We've been very busy since I arrived with not only the consolidation but then rolling out rules and regulations for all the legislative pieces that were passed during this last special session. So, it's been non-stop since I arrived.

Q: How do you think the consolidation is going to work? Do you expect to see positive changes with some of the districts consolidating?

KJ: Well, we definitely expect to see some positive changes. Time will tell, with respect to how all of this rolls out, but we are going to be monitoring very closely, which is what we need to do to see what the long-term impact is going to be as a result of these consolidations. With respect to efficiency and economy of scale, we suspect that there is going to be an easy way to prove that and show that and demonstrate that, so as we continue to monitor this process, those are the things that we'll be looking for as we move together all across the state.

The other thing I would say about the consolidations is, like I say, they have gone very smoothly for the most part, and there are a lot of things that we have worked through in terms of process and procedure, and boundaries and elections and things of that nature. There is still

some tweaking that needs to go on in some of those areas, but I am very pleased, given the short time in which we had to operate and get this done by July 1, just very pleased with how it has all rolled out.

Q: How about some of the other reforms that occurred during the Special Session as a result of the Lake View lawsuit? Are you optimistic about these reforms, and are there any of them in particular that will have any really positive impacts for the kids in Arkansas?

KJ: Well, we're very confident and very hopeful that they will, because needless to say, that's going to be how we're judged with respect to rolling this whole thing out. At the end of the session, needless to say, Act 35 is going to be the driver in terms of accountability in the state as we continue to move forward. And you couple Act 35 with Act 1467, which is the omnibus act, and those are going to be the two triggers in terms of insuring that we continue to march down a path of accountability; additional testing; value-added, longitudinal tracking—those measures are all in Act 35—and so those two key pieces are really going to chart the course for the future of education as we continue to roll this out down the road.

Q: When you mention accountability, you can't help but think of No Child Left Behind. How do you think we are doing now in Arkansas at implementing No Child Left Behind's reforms?

KJ: I think we're doing very well in implementing them here at the State Department level. I think our most recent results with AYP, even though we had about 60+ new schools identified, we had well over half of our schools meeting AYP and meeting standards. I think that those are clear indicators for us that some positive things are beginning to happen. With No Child Left Behind, the key factors

to me are that we need to make sure—and the law requires—that we look deep enough into data...more so than we ever have in the past...and make sure that we are, in fact, doing are best not to leave any child behind. The term I like to use when we're looking at that data is “peeling the onion”...you know, as we have various layers of an onion, we need to make sure that as we're looking at all of our data that we're getting down to the subgroups, and we're looking to see how those particular subgroups are progressing. If they are not, then take the appropriate steps to adjust if they are not making the adequate progress they need to make.

I think that No Child Left Behind is a good law. I don't think any of us can argue about the accountability. I think that anything with 1178 pages, which the law has, needless to say, will require some tweaking. We've been able to tweak our accountability workbook and it put us on a more level playing field with the other surrounding states. We've changed our “N-number,” which is the big factor, from 25 up to 40. I think that has, again, placed us in a better position than where we were before in terms of making sure that we are being fair and equitable to all of our school districts across the state.

Q: So as we came in, how ready was our state as compared with others? Do you think No Child Left Behind was a big shock and difficult challenge for us to work with? Or were we in a good position to deal with the reforms that were required by No Child Left Behind?

KJ: Well I think that Smart Start and Smart Step, needless to say, set the stage years ago, in terms of putting Arkansas on the road to reform efforts. So we had the necessary groundwork in place with respect to No Child Left Behind, and I think that positioned our state nicely. I think as we continue to look at what we are doing in the testing arena and our accountability package, then needless to say, we'll continue to make adjustments as necessary to make it be fair and to make it equitable across the state as we continue to move forward. But I think Arkansas was positioned very nicely, given the fact that we had really started the effort with Smart Start and Smart Step in terms of some really focused professional development. I think that now, with

our results and the most recent report, we're showing that steady progress over time and that, in fact, demonstrates that we are doing some good things in that arena, so I think that's sets the proper stage for us as we're moving forward.

One of the key components of the law, of course, is that all of the teachers have to be highly qualified, and I'm wondering how we are positioned for that and how we are going to meet the challenge of that part of the law.

Well I think we, along with other states, will face the same challenges, especially in special education arenas, and also, in dealing with folks in the middle school and special education certification areas...things of that nature. Under No Child Left Behind, teachers have to be highly qualified by '05-'06 and as with all states, we have developed what is called our “house document”, which indicates how a teacher is kept qualified to get to the point in terms the number of points necessary to be determined highly qualified. Where we're going to have the rub in this state, and all other states, is going to be in those particular areas I've already mentioned to you: special education...potentially, the advanced certification...things of that nature.

The federal government has given us some latitude in that area: the other piece with highly qualified, the requirement is '05-'06, but there are no sanctions associated with the highly qualified component. So those are things that districts and schools across the country are going to continue to grapple with as we move forward, in terms of ensuring that we have highly qualified teachers in the classroom. So this is not something that we're all going to get to in a quick fix type of situation. It's going to take everyone working in a positive direction to get to where we need to be. It's also going to take us pointing out things that we might need to have adjusted with respect to this to the federal government, pointing out with data, as to why some of these things are going to be problematic.

Q: The documents that define “highly qualified”—are those external documents...internal documents?

KJ: Each state develops their own document—it's called a “house document”—and our document has

been developed and has gone out for public comment, and you know, we'll be finalizing that here in the very near future. But, in essence, it closely patterns what a lot of the other state documents look like in that, you qualify and get points based upon what your certification is, how many years you've been in the business, what kind of professional development training you've had, any specialty degrees and things of that nature that you might bring to the table. But again, we've had this out for public comment and we'll be bringing it to closure here pretty soon.

Q: You mentioned a couple of times the tweaking that's going to be required. What are some of the biggest challenges we (Arkansas) face in meeting No Child Left Behind requirements, and what are the challenges the feds face with trying to make NCLB a workable, useful, and effective law?

KJ: Well, I think what all states face, with respect to No Child Left Behind—one of the key factors—is making sure our publics and our constituents understand what No Child Left Behind is trying to do by working with the media to help them fully understand and to hopefully get out the message, that because a school might be on the improvement list, that does not mean, or immediately translate into, “that school is a school of failure.” So I think that from the standpoint of being proactive in making sure that we are doing our due diligence in communicating to our publics. We have a lot of work to do in that area, not only in Arkansas, but across the country.

Because as all of this initially unfolded, everyone was painted with that broad brush, to say that if you're on an improvement list that your school is not any good and is terrible, and that's totally not the case, needless to say, because as you know, you can be on this list with just one subgroup being the identifier and that can trigger you being on school improvement. You may have 15 or 16 targets to hit in your school and you may be hitting 15 of them, but if you're not hitting all 16, if you fall into one of these categories, then you're on school improvement. We have to do a better job, I think, of educating our publics and helping them understand what school improvement is, and that it doesn't

necessarily translate that you have a school that's a failure.

On the federal level, I think the key triggers are going to be, as we continue to roll this out, and in fact, if we have more schools across the country coming on and listed for school improvement, is whether states have adequate resources to be able to provide the technical assistance that we'd be required to do to get off school improvement (lists) and more in a positive direction? So I think that's a key factor that we'd have to keep an eye on as we continue to roll through these phases of No Child Left Behind out, as we get toward that magic year, 2014.

Q: People talk about the (school improvement) list in two different ways: critics of No Child Left Behind say we don't want to over-identify (schools in need of improvement) and with all these trip wires, we're likely to over-identify them. Then schools are labeled as doing poorly, even if they might be doing great in 14 out of 15 subgroups. An alternative way of looking at it: supporters of NCLB say that it's okay if you're labeling schools because you're just shining a light on it and shining a light means we get extra assistance, we figure out what's wrong, and if there's only one subgroup, we deal with that. I'm wondering which one of these seems to resonate with you? Is it just shining a light and that's okay, or we're going to be unfairly labeling folks?

KJ: Well, probably a combination of both, and that's not to skirt the question. I think that it's important that we point out problem areas in schools and aggressively focus our efforts to work on those (schools), but as with education, as we've known through the research, and things of that nature, labels can be quite problematic, whether you're labeling a child as being “not ready to do this” or you've placed them in an early reading group when they were young and set the expectations low...we have to be careful with labeling in this business. And I think, you know, oftentimes when we have labels that are tagged onto school districts, and things of that nature, that we spend a lot of time in those districts overcoming that label, and really spending a lot of energy in terms of making people understand that we're really not failing, that we've

got a lot of good things going on, and oftentimes when that label is attached, it's a hard stigma to get taken away. So I think therein lies some of the problem with the labeling. I think that if we can work better and more constructively with the media to help them better understand what being on improvement means, then I think we can work through some of those kinds of things.

But I think as this thing got initially underway, and I think the federal government will even say this, when it first came out, the word “failure” was an inappropriate term, but that was immediately what was seized upon by media around the country, and that's been the connotation thus far, so we've got to do a better job of making sure and stressing to media folks, as well as to our patrons, that being on this list does not mean, necessarily, that you're about to be doomed for closure and things of that nature. It just means that we have some targeted areas that we need to focus on and work on and we've got the resources to be able to do that.

Q: What do you see as the strengths of our system?

KJ: Well, I think our strengths definitely focus on the fact that we've had some real significant professional development, and some real concentrated, targeted professional development over the last few years in the areas of literacy and math, and I think those are key points that we can tap into and demonstrate by the results of recent data that we are making some difference in the lives on young people and moving them to higher levels of learning.

I think that targeted focus—the fact that we've stayed the course with our benchmarks and things of that nature—which is something that was not the case in the past in Arkansas . I moved back to the state in 1993, and I can tell you that since I've been back in the state—since 1993—we've gone through various stages and changes and we'd try something for a year or two, and then we'd do something else, and then we'd do something else. I think that Smart Start and Smart Step have brought a clear focus to what we need to do in literacy development and math development, across the board, I think those are key things I would point to...and I think we have a keener sense now, across the state, of

accountability and focus on learning, and really what that means. And I think the discussions in the recent past, legislatively, and across Arkansas on education, needless to say, will bode well as we continue down the road to the future.

Q: Where do we need to improve?

KJ: In terms of weaknesses, you know, with respect to...as you look at our data, mathematics in Arkansas has always been an issue, and it continues to be one. If you go all the way back to the minimum performance data, years ago, or the minimum performance examination, math has always been a problem in this state. As you look at our fourth graders, we're making steady progress...as you get on up into eighth grade, we're making progress, but the scores aren't where they need to be in terms of having kids at higher levels of learning.

But as I've looked at the most recent data with end-of-course examinations in algebra and geometry—and I've pointed this out in various venues across the state since I've been here—if you look at the kids that take end-of-course examinations in algebra and geometry, the ones that take it in January score significantly lower than those kids who are taking it at the end of school. So I have charged our math unit, our math specialists, to get their arms around that piece and to bring us some recommendations and some possible key points that might be causing that. Because if you look at the last four years of data, the performance level is significantly lower for those kids taking that test in January versus what it is at the end of the year. So mathematics has got to be, I think, our focus as we continue to roll down the road because, historically, it has been our greatest problem.

I think that closing the achievement gap, not only in this state, but across the country, is something that we're going to have to get a better handle on because we have some real issues as you really peel that onion and look at that data—we have quite a discrepancy with respect to where we are with achievement levels in majority versus minority. So those are areas that we're going to have to really focus on: make sure that we've got good preschool programs, that we continue to develop and focus our professional development, and that we have

highly qualified teachers, especially in at-risk and high poverty schools. Those are the key research factors that have been pointed out over time, that if we're going to close the gap, then we really need to be sure that we're doing those three things significantly and be very focused in terms of our efforts. So that would be the weakness areas.

Q: What do you think will be the big education concerns in the upcoming legislative session, so we can figure out how to provide information to policy makers so that we can, hopefully, be of some use during the session?

KJ: What I see in the next legislative session: I think we're going to have some key dialogue about accountability, whether some parts of omnibus or Act 35 need tweaking. I'm sure that will come up in some venues. My caution is going to be that, you know, we've got a set of standards, it's been blessed by the court—they've indicated that what we're doing is what we need to be doing—so we're going to need to be very careful if we give any impression that we're backing off of any kind of standards. I think the other thing, needless to say, is going to be facilities. That's going to be the predominant conversation. I think at this point in time, in terms of what all that means...how we're going to pay for it, you know...so that's got to get a great deal of conversation as we go forward.

I'm hopeful that, given this last Special Session and the Regular Session before that...all of the education things that came out of those two sessions—they were enormous! And they have really taken an enormous amount of time for the Department to roll out rules and regulations and get those things in place. I'm hopeful that we have time now to really focus and work on those versus getting a whole slew of new things to begin to work on. That doesn't mean that we don't probably need some additional things...

But the other thing I will continue to say in the halls (of the capitol) is that we've really got to look at what we've done educationally and what we've passed in the last few years, because what we have now got to fit into the regular school day...we can't add any more unless we add time to the school day or unless we instructional days to the year. Right now, the schedule is jam-packed, and we've got to

be careful in passing new or additional legislation that's going to further exacerbate that problem. Right now, we have very little wiggle room in the school day, and it's getting very difficult to fit in everything we have to fit in...because we're still doing school the same way we did it a long time ago, not only in this state, but across the country. So I'm going to do my best to...we need to talk about the fact that we don't need to make the school day more difficult by adding more layers to it without increasing the time or the instructional year.

Q. Is there anything that we didn't ask that you would like to mention or that we should have asked about?

KJ: No, I think you've covered it very well in terms of the key issues and things of that nature. The only thing I would say in closing is that we are at a pivotal time in Arkansas. We've gotten a lot of national attention right now, primarily because of all of the recent legislation and accountability acts that have been passed, coupled with the infusion of new dollars that we have across the board. We've got more money going into education than we've ever had in past history. It's going to be on our shoulders—"our shoulders" being everyone in this state and everybody working together for educational reform—to make sure that we don't squander this opportunity that we have. We've never had the stars lined up like we have them right now.

We've also got a governor who is the United States Vice-chair of the National Governor's Association. So when you couple that with all of the amenities and pushes, and all the accountability measures that have been passed, I think that the stars are aligned up for us to some significant things educationally in this state, and also, to impact policy nationally. So add all those things together, and I think we've got an outstanding opportunity, but we're going to have to stay focused, bring everybody together in a collaborative mode to get to the endpoint, which is what we need to be doing for the betterment of the kids of this state. And if we can keep the conversation focused on the kids, we're going to be doing what's right and that's going to be good. I work pretty hard to be sure that we don't lose sight of why we are in the business...