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The School Performance Index in Arkansas

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For a copy of the report, visit http://www.uark.edu/ua/oep/der_spi_index.htm

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Executive Summary

Policymakers, practitioners, journalists, and the general public regularly use the results of state accountability tests to assess the quality of schools. Schools with high scores must be “good schools,” people assume, while schools with low scores must be “bad schools.” Unfortunately this use of test results is actually a misuse. Test score results are only partially a reflection of the quality of school instruction; they are also partially a reflection of the advantages and disadvantages that students bring to school. A school with high test scores might actually be of sub-par quality propped up by very advantaged students. Conversely, a school with low test scores might actually be of high quality masked by the severity of its students’ disadvantages. Unless one isolates the influence of student characteristics and other resources made available to schools, it is impossible to determine school quality simply from test results.

The School Performance Index (SPI) is an attempt to disentangle school quality from the advantages and disadvantages given to a school. Using a regression model controlling for a host of student characteristics, community characteristics, and resources, we are able to predict how well each school should be performing on standardized tests given those inputs. The extent to which schools perform better or worse than we would expect given the context in which they operate is our best estimate of the quality of the school itself. Based on our analyses, we note six key findings:

- After controlling for student characteristics and resources, Arkansas students perform slightly higher than the national average;
- School performance on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills is not substantially affected by the spending of the district;
- School performance on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills is not substantially affected by the size of the school or district;
- School performance on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills is partially affected by the household income, educational attainment of residents, percentage of Hispanic students, and percentage of married families in the district;
- School performance on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills is substantially affected by the percentage of black students and the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced price school lunch in the school; and
- Some schools and school districts in Arkansas perform substantially better than we would expect given their student characteristics and resources, while others perform substantially worse than expected.

The School Performance Index is certainly not perfect. For example, it may not fully control for all advantages and disadvantages given to each school, thereby confusing school quality with unmeasured student characteristics. Nevertheless, we believe that it is a significant advance in assessing school quality. As the policymakers in the Arkansas Department of Education consider ways of reporting the level of school performance as required in Act 35, we hope they will consider the approach outlined in this report.

About the Authors

Jay P. Greene, Ph.D., is the Endowed Chair and Head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas. He has conducted evaluations of school choice and accountability programs in Florida, Charlotte, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and San Antonio. He has also recently published research on high school graduation rates, social promotion, and special education. His articles have appeared in policy journals, such as *The Public Interest*, *City Journal*, and *Education Next*, in academic journals, such as the *Teachers College Record*, the *Georgetown Public Policy Review*, and the *British Journal of Political Science*, as well as in major newspapers, such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. His education research has been cited in U.S. Supreme Court opinions and has appeared in scholarly and popular publications. Dr. Greene obtained his doctorate in political science from Harvard University in 1995.

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The School Performance Index in Arkansas

Introduction

How well are Arkansas' schools performing? While accountability testing has significantly improved our ability to answer this question, our common use of those test results confuses the issue. Policymakers, practitioners, journalists, and the general public normally focus on the percentage of students meeting state standards or a national percentile ranking to assess school quality. Schools with high scores must be "good schools," people assume, while schools with low scores must be "bad schools."

Unfortunately this use of test results is actually a misuse. Test score results are only partially a reflection of the quality of school instruction; they are also partially a reflection of the advantages and disadvantages that students bring to school. A school with high test scores might actually be of sub-par quality propped up by very advantaged students. Conversely, a school with low test scores might actually be of high quality masked by the severity of its students' disadvantages. Unless one isolates the influence of student characteristics and other resources made available to schools, it is impossible to determine school quality simply from raw test results.

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The School Performance Index is certainly not perfect. For example, it may not fully control for all advantages and disadvantages given to each school, thereby confusing school quality with unmeasured student characteristics. Nevertheless, we believe that it is a significant advance in assessing school quality. As the policymakers in the Arkansas Department of Education consider ways of reporting the level of school performance as required in Act 35, we hope they will consider the approach outlined in this report.

Following the paper, Appendix A provides the School Performance Index score for each school district in Arkansas and Appendix B provides the SPI results for each school in the state. These results as well as all of the data used to compute the SPI can be found online at http://www.uark.edu/ua/oep/der_spi_index.htm

Why the School Performance Index is an Improvement

The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires that states administer annual standardized tests to students in grades 3-8 to measure statewide student achievement in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science. In addition, Arkansas' Act 35 (6-15-

404) imposes another layer of school accountability. Specifically, it requires measurement of student achievement by national, norm-referenced tests. The results of these assessments are to be reported annually in two ways: the level of school performance and the year-to-year progress in student skills.

Under the requirements of NCLB and Act 35, students in Arkansas in 2004-05 in grades 3-8 took the state, criterion-referenced Arkansas Comprehensive Testing and Accountability Program (ACTAAP) exam, and the students in grades 3-9 took the national, norm-referenced Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). A sample of fourth- and eighth-grade students in Arkansas also took the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) mathematics and reading tests; students enrolled in Algebra, Geometry, and grade 11 English courses also took an end-of-course exam.

Neither the federal accountability system under NCLB nor Arkansas' current implementation of the state accountability system under Act 35 accurately captures the quality of school performance. School performance is the extent to which schools contribute to student learning given the advantages and disadvantages that students bring to the educational process. Under NCLB schools are deemed to be performing well as long as they have a certain percentage of their students meeting state standards or as long as they increase that percentage over time. Unfortunately, a high percentage of students meeting state standards may tell us more about the characteristics of the students in a school than the performance of that school itself. And, although growth measures are better indicators than are point-in-time measures, the rate of improvement in the percentage of students meeting state standards may also be distorted by the lack of controls for important demographic characteristics.

The way in which Act 35 is currently being implemented suffers from similar defects. As of this year, the state simply reports the percentage of students in each school with varying levels of proficiency. No effort is made to adjust for the characteristics of students in those schools to isolate the difference that the school is making. By next year, the law calls for the state to track the year-to-year improvement in student skills, which better isolates the value-added by schools. But even that analysis could more precisely isolate the quality of schools by controlling for student characteristics, as is done in this report.

Constructing the School Performance Index

The SPI uses school and district factors to predict a score for each school on the norm-referenced ITBS test and the grade 11 end-of-course literacy exam. The school and district factors incorporated in the index are:

- percentage of black students in the school;
- percentage of Hispanic students in the school;
- percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch in the school;
- number of students enrolled in the school;
- number of students enrolled in the district;

- median household income of families with children of school age in the district;
- percentage of district residents over the age of 25 with at least a high school diploma;
- percentage of district residents over the age of 25 with at least a bachelors degree;
- percentage of district families with school-age children that are married; and
- net current expenditures per pupil in the district.

These factors were used to predict how well we would expect each school in Arkansas to score on the ITBS and the 11th grade end-of-course literacy test. The ITBS was only administered in grades 3-9, so in school systems where grade 9 is separated from the other high school grades, the local high school would not have an ITBS score. It was therefore important to include the grade 11 end-of-course exam in this analysis so that we could evaluate the performance of all schools in the state.

Once we computed the predicted values for each school on the ITBS math, ITBS reading and end-of-course literacy exam, we compared these predicted scores to the scores that schools actually produced on these tests. That is, we compared how well we would expect each school to score given its inputs relative to how well each school actually scored. The actual score was divided by the predicted score and multiplied by 100 to compute the SPI rating for each school on each available measure. Once the scores for each school were known, the scores for each school were then weighted by the number of test takers and aggregated by district to produce the School Performance Index for each district.

If a school performed exactly as we would expect given the advantages and disadvantages of the students in that school, it would have received an SPI of 100. If a school performed better than we would expect it would receive a score higher than 100, and if it performed worse than expected it would receive a score lower than 100.

We also adjusted the SPI so that we could compare the performance of schools in Arkansas to the performance of schools nationwide. We calibrated the SPI so that 100 would represent the expected score for schools nationwide given the advantages and disadvantages of their students. To the extent that Arkansas schools perform better or worse than schools nationwide, their scores would be above or below 100. So, the average score for schools in Arkansas is not necessarily 100, since the average Arkansas school may be performing better or worse than schools nationally.

To calibrate the SPI on a national average, Arkansas' NAEP mathematics and reading results were compared to the expected scores on these exams. The expected scores on the NAEP mathematics and reading exams were computed by controlling for the same demographic variables used in the SPI calculation; however, instead of using school level data to predict the outcomes, state level data were used.

We computed the expected NAEP scores for Arkansas using the same regression model that was used to produce expected scores for schools and districts in the state. This allowed us to compare the state's actual performance on the NAEP exams to the

predicted scores to assess whether Arkansas performed better or worse than expected given the advantages and disadvantages of its students. By dividing the actual score by the predicted score and multiplying by 100 we were able to compute the extent to which Arkansas performed better or worse than students nationwide, adjusted for demographic factors. If Arkansas students performed the same as students nationally, controlling for differences in their advantages and disadvantages, Arkansas would receive a score of 100. If Arkansas students performed better than their peers nationwide the score would be above 100 and if they scored worse the score would be below 100.

Arkansas' adjusted NAEP score for the average of 4th and 8th grade reading was 100.33 and for math was 100.30, which indicates that Arkansas' students score slightly above the national average after demographic differences are statistically controlled. The average SPI reading score in Arkansas was adjusted so that the average in the state would be 100.33 to reflect that Arkansas students perform better than the national average after controlling for demographic differences. The average SPI math score in Arkansas was similarly adjusted so that the average in the state would be 100.30. We calibrated the grade 11 end-of-course literacy exam scores to national performance levels using only the 8th grade reading NAEP. Adjusting for demographic differences, Arkansas' reading score on that test was 99.85, meaning that Arkansas students did slightly worse than the national average in 8th grade reading.¹

Scores below 100.00 should be interpreted as a school or district performing below the national average for a school or district with similar advantages and disadvantages, while scores above 100.00 should be interpreted as a school or district performing above the national average for a similar school. Each point above or below 100.00 corresponds to one percent above or below the national average. For example, a school with an SPI math rating of 105.00 would have scored 5% above the national average (given its students' demographics), while a school with an SPI math rating of 95.00 would have scored 5% below the national average (given its students' demographics). Table 1 provides a summary of the SPI ratings for schools in Arkansas, and Table 2 provides a summary of the SPI ratings for districts in the state.

Results

Table 1 shows that 1,064 Arkansas schools administered the ITBS test and 313 schools administered the grade 11 end-of-course exam. The SPI total includes 1,116 schools because it is the average of whichever of the three tests – ITBS math, ITBS reading, and end-of-course exam – is available at the school. According to our data, 52 schools took the end-of-course exam but did not have an ITBS score, which is why the SPI total has 1,116 schools instead of 1,064. In order to ensure that a single test did not “trump” the other tests, we computed the average weighted by the number of students taking each test. Finally, regarding the SPI, the lowest and highest scores and standard deviations are provided for each test.

¹ We used the 8th grade NAEP because it is the best available proxy for comparing the Arkansas end-of-course exam to a national measure since state-level NAEP results do not exist for grades higher than eight.

Table 1: Descriptive Summary of the SPI Ratings for Schools in Arkansas

Rating	Number of Schools	Lowest Score	Highest Score	Weighted Mean	Standard Deviation
SPI Math	1,064	56.0	177.4	101.9	14.6
SPI Reading	1,064	40.8	214.9	102.2	14.7
SPI End-of- Course	313	83.2	110.0	100.0	3.5
SPI Total	1,116	64.2	195.2	101.9	13.2

Table 2 shows that 255 districts had ITBS math, ITBS reading, and end-of-course exam scores. The weighted mean was used once again to provide the most accurate information since different numbers of students took the ITBS math, ITBS reading and end-of-course exam. The lowest and highest scores and standard deviations are also provided.

Table 2: Descriptive Summary of the SPI Ratings for Districts in Arkansas

Rating	Number of Districts	Lowest Score	Highest Score	Weighted Mean	Standard Deviation
SPI Math	255	79.4	145.7	101.8	8.4
SPI Reading	255	80.6	157.4	102.1	8.6
SPI End-of-Course	255	93.6	107.0	100.0	2.7
SPI Total	255	82.8	147.5	101.9	7.8

After calculating the SPI, we wanted to examine how certain districts across the state performed. Table 3 provides a description of the spending, demographic characteristics, ITBS math performance, SPI total score, and the SPI rank for each selected district. Fifteen districts, including some of the state's largest, were selected and ordered by their rank among the 255 districts in the state. The results in Table 3 through 7 help illustrate some of our key findings. Complete results for each school and each school district in the state can be found in Appendices A and B.²

² In Appendix A, we attempted to exclude reporting results for any "alternative" schools. We did so because alternative schools often have students assigned to them whose educational disadvantages are more severe and cannot accurately be captured by our regression model; the result was a biased SPI model. While we could not always identify which schools were alternative schools, we made our best effort with the information we had available. In Appendix B we aggregated the results for all charter schools and report the combined charter results as if they were another school district. This gives us a total of 254 regular school districts and one charter "district."

Table 3: 15 Selected Districts

District Name	Operational Spending Per Pupil (03-04)	Percent of Black Students (04-05)	Percent of Students Eligible for Subsidized Lunches (04-05)	Median Income from 2000 Census (99-00)	ITBS Math National Percentile Ranking (04-05)	SPI Total Score (04-05)	Rank out of 255 (High=1)
Bentonville	\$5,982	2%	25%	\$50,409	72.8	106.9	54
Springdale	\$5,927	1%	48%	\$45,190	64.9	105.1	73
Rogers	\$6,105	1%	47%	\$32,839	65.9	104.9	76
Conway	\$5,967	22%	34%	\$50,375	67.9	104.6	85
Pine Bluff	\$6,715	95%	71%	\$37,679	35.7	104.3	96
Fayetteville	\$7,983	9%	33%	\$45,091	69.7	104.5	87
El Dorado	\$6,056	55%	57%	\$30,900	52.4	104.3	95
Bryant	\$5,503	3%	25%	\$50,357	67.4	102.7	115
Jonesboro	\$6,448	33%	54%	\$34,601	59.6	102.0	129
Cabot	\$6,145	1%	27%	\$51,722	66.3	100.4	155
Pulaski Co. Special	\$7,659	41%	49%	\$34,375	52.1	98.2	179
Little Rock	\$8,848	69%	59%	\$36,718	42.4	96.6	198
Texarkana	\$6,766	48%	66%	\$34,564	46.3	94.5	219
Fort Smith	\$6,863	15%	56%	\$36,957	51.6	92.7	231

In our analysis, we find that spending more per pupil does not lead to higher performance, adjusting for all other factors. While it may seem counter-intuitive that spending more does not produce better results, this lack of an independent relationship between school spending and student achievement is consistent with most research findings on this question. For example, the Little Rock School District is the second highest spending district in the state but its SPI is 96.6, below both the state and national averages. By comparison, the Magnolia School District spends more than \$2,000 less than Little Rock and yet has an SPI of 101.4, higher than the state and national averages. The superior performance in Magnolia cannot be explained by differences in the demographic characteristics of Magnolia and Little Rock students because those factors are controlled statistically. In fact, Magnolia and Little Rock do not differ very much in their demographic profiles.

We also find that school performance on the ITBS is not affected by school size. This finding also seems counter-intuitive in light of the consolidation efforts in Arkansas; however, we find that students in larger schools do not perform better on the SPI. For example, Springdale High School is the largest school in the state with an enrollment of 2,707 students but its SPI is 96.4, below both the state and national averages. By comparison, Wickes High School has an enrollment of 195 students but its SPI is 105.6, above both the state and national averages. Similar to the previous discussion, the higher performance at Wickes High School cannot be explained by differences in the demographic characteristics of Wickes and Springdale students because those factors are statistically controlled in the model.

This finding also holds true for district size. For example, the Little Rock School District, with nearly 25,000 students, has the largest enrollment of any district in the state but its SPI is 96.6, lower than both the state and national averages. In comparison, Stephens School District, which has a similar demographic profile to Little Rock, has an enrollment of 537 and an SPI of 114.6, higher than both the state and national averages.

Finally, we find that some districts that are often considered “low performers” received an SPI higher than the state and national averages, while some districts regarded as “high performers” received an SPI lower than the state and national averages. For example, the Helena/West Helena School District has received much negative attention because of its low test scores and administrative scandals. However, once the severe disadvantages of students in that area are taken into account, Helena/West Helena received an SPI of 124.1, which ranks 4th of the 255 districts in Arkansas. Conversely, Fort Smith School District, which is sometimes heralded as a high performing district because of high test scores, received an SPI of 92.7, which ranks 231st of the 255 districts in Arkansas.

While we should not be satisfied with the low test scores produced in Helena, we should recognize that the district is doing an admirable job of trying to rise above the challenges it faces. Of course, Helena (and all other districts) can and should do more to bring student achievement higher, but our analysis suggests that the district has been unfairly characterized as of low quality. There are also some districts in the state with highly disadvantaged students, such as Fort Smith and Little Rock, that under-perform even after those student disadvantages are taken into account. Only by attempting to control for those student advantages and disadvantages are we able to focus more clearly on the performance of schools. If the SPI results sometime surprise us, it is largely because we have not properly assessed school performance in the past.

Conclusion

By no means should the SPI be considered a perfect measure of school quality. To the extent that it cannot fully control for all student advantages and disadvantages, its estimate of school performance will be distorted. We have some reason to fear that this has occurred to some extent. We only have information on student characteristics and achievement aggregated by school, which less perfectly captures the relationship between student demographics and test scores than would an analysis with individual level data. We only have demographic information that is collected and reported publicly by the state department of education or readily available from the US Census, but we know that there are more student characteristics that would be useful to include in our model. We do not have information about the prior year’s student achievement since this was the first year that the ITBS was administered. If we were able to control for previous student achievement we could more accurately capture the full set of student advantages and disadvantages that should be separated from the performance of schools.

Despite all of these defects and limitations, the SPI is a significant step forward in assessing the performance of schools in Arkansas. Even imperfect controls for student characteristics will more accurately allow us to identify school performance than no

controls at all -- and our existing system of reporting raw scores for each school uses no controls at all. In addition, in future years, we can work to improve the accuracy of the SPI by obtaining individual level data, more complete demographic information, and information on prior student achievement. If the policymakers in the Arkansas Department of Education were to adopt something akin to the SPI as part of its implementation of Act 35, they could more easily make those improvements than could we as independent researchers. We would then have a rating of school performance that was both better than what the state currently reports and better than the SPI. We hope this report will move us in that direction.

Table 4: Twenty Highest Performing Schools in Arkansas on the SPI Total

School Name	District Name	SPI Total	Rank out of 1,116 (High = 1)
Martin Elementary School	Alzheimer Unified School Dist.	195.2	1
West Side Elementary School	Helena/ West Helena School Dist.	171.5	2
Indiana Street Elem. School	Pine Bluff School District	169.4	3
Woodruff Elementary School	Helena/ West Helena School Dist.	160.3	4
Madison Elementary School	Forrest City School District	153.3	5
Turrell Elementary School	Turrell School District	152.7	6
Park Magnet School	Hot Springs School District	152.4	7
Stephens Elementary School	Stephens School District	148.4	8
Kipp: Delta College Prep*	Helena/ West Helena School Dist.	143.7	9
Carthage Elementary School	Malvern School District	143.1	10
Meadow Park Elementary School	N. Little Rock School District	142.3	11
Holly Grove Elementary School	Clarendon School District	141.7	12
Earle Elementary School	Earle School District	141.0	13
Maddux Elementary School	West Memphis School District	140.6	14
Jackson Elementary School	West Memphis School District	138.6	15
Langston Magnet School	Hot Springs School District	138.1	16
Whitten Elementary School	Lee County School District	134.4	17
Portland Elementary School	Hamburg School District	132.6	18
Williams Magnet Elem. School	Little Rock School District	132.2	19
Mineral Springs Elem. School	Mineral Springs School Dist.	131.1	20

* denotes charter school

Table 5: Twenty Lowest Performing Schools in Arkansas on the SPI Total

School Name	District Name	SPI Total	Rank out of 1,116 (High = 1)
Summit School	Hot Springs School District	64.2	1,116
Harry C. Morrison Elem. School	Fort Smith School District	65.2	1,115
Rose City Middle School	N. Little Rock School District	65.4	1,114
Cloverdale Middle School	Little Rock School District	65.7	1,113
Watson Elementary School	Little Rock School District	65.9	1,112
Parkin High School	Parkin School District	66.4	1,111
Cotton Plant High School	Augusta School District	68.1	1,110
England Middle School	England School District	68.3	1,109
Southwest Middle School	Little Rock School District	70.8	1,108
Tilles Elementary School	Fort Smith School District	72.0	1,107
Arise Charter*	Monticello School District	72.3	1,106
Trusty Elementary School	Fort Smith School District	73.0	1,105
Mcrae High School	Beebe School District	73.1	1,104
England High School	England School District	74.1	1,103
Waldo High School	Waldo School District	74.4	1,102
Union High School	El Dorado School District	74.5	1,101
Spradling Elementary School	Fort Smith School District	74.7	1,100
Jacksonville Middle School	Pulaski Co. Spec. School Dist.	75.0	1,099
Biggers-Reyno High School	Corning School District	75.3	1,098
J.A. Fair High School	Little Rock School District	75.6	1,097

* denotes charter school

Table 6: Twenty Highest Performing Districts in Arkansas on the SPI Total

District Name	SPI Total	Rank out of 255 (High = 1)
Altheimer Unified School Dist.	147.47	1
Turrell School District	138.49	2
Earle School District	125.26	3
Helena/ West Helena School Dist.	124.11	4
Devalls Bluff School District	120.75	5
Hot Springs School District	117.53	6
Omaha School District	116.07	7
Melbourne School District	115.90	8
Mineral Springs School Dist.	115.54	9
Scranton School District	115.26	10
Armored School District	115.21	11
Stephens School District	114.59	12
Norfolk School District	114.29	13
Barton-Lexa School District	114.01	14
Nettleton School District	113.85	15
Mccrory School District	112.65	16
Bradley School District	111.86	17
Searcy School District	111.68	18
West Memphis School District	111.67	19
Dumas School District	111.16	20

Table 7: Twenty Lowest Performing Districts in Arkansas on the SPI Total

District Name	SPI Total	Rank out of 255 (High = 1)
Waldo School District	82.82	255
England School District	84.76	254
Fordyce School District	85.29	253
Decatur School District	85.48	252
Trumann School District	86.18	251
Bauxite School District	87.61	250
Manila School District	88.60	249
Hope School District	88.88	248
Cross County School District	89.01	247
Blevins School District	89.10	246
Mansfield School District	89.49	245
East Poinsett Co. School Dist.	89.95	244
Augusta School District	90.36	243
Dewitt School District	90.49	242
Nevada School District	90.64	241
Two Rivers School District	90.84	240
Mulberry School District	90.90	239
Hoxie School District	91.44	238
Magnet Cove School Dist.	91.69	237
Westside School District	91.73	236