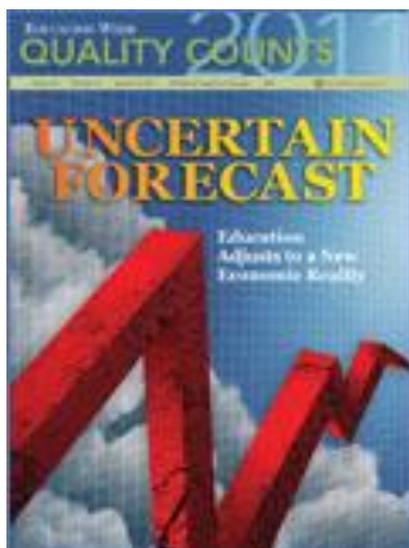


## **QUALITY COUNTS 2011**

*On January 11, Education Week released its 15<sup>th</sup> annual Quality Counts report. Since 1997, Education Week has been releasing yearly report cards for each state and the nation as a whole. These report cards attempt to measure educational progress and success in several areas as well as assign an overall letter grade to each state. Some of the grades assigned in the report cards measure the strength of states' policies, while others measure educational inputs (school funding, job markets) or outputs (K-12 achievement).*



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### **SUMMARY POINTS:**

Like any ranking, whether in sports, entertainment, or education, the measures used in Quality Counts are certainly subject to criticism. Nevertheless, they represent an important and useful attempt at comprehensively measuring the quality of education in all 50 states (plus DC). Perhaps most useful are the comparisons between states allowed by the common measures in the report.

In summary, a few points should be taken away from this analysis of Quality Counts:

- The strength of education policies in Arkansas is relatively high, and has gotten stronger in recent years due to the broad development of policies to measure student learning, gather effective data, hold schools accountable, define and align readiness at different levels of education, and improve the teacher workforce.
- While measures of school finance have declined over the last three years, the numbers behind these trends are simplistic and subject to bias.
- Likewise, some measures in Chances for Success are questionable. They claim to represent the trajectory of a person's education and workforce outcomes, but they track groups of people who were in school in the 1960s, for example, alongside current students and recent graduates. Also, the inclusion of non-educational measures in a measure of educational quality makes little sense.
- A few details in the grading system stand out. Arkansas has made real, great progress since 2003 on the math portion of the NAEP. This progress has significantly outpaced national gains. Dragging the state down, on the other hand, is the growth it has seen in the achievement gap between low- and high-income students, a gap which has grown while shrinking for the nation as a whole
- Arkansas' overall ranking in Quality Counts has been high for several years and has increased further in the most recent report, to 6th place nationally. The state's ranking for K-12 achievement is consistently and significantly higher than its rankings for educational inputs. While not directly factored into the Quality Counts analysis, this is nonetheless indicative of educational effectiveness in Arkansas.

This year's report grades states in six areas: K-12 Achievement, Chances for Success, School Finance, the Teaching Profession, Transitions and Alignment, and Standards, Assessments, and Accountability. As in previous years, most but not all of the grades for these areas are updated from last year. For 2011, only grades for two areas were not assessed this year: the Teaching Profession and Standards, Assessment, and Accountability. The other four areas are newly updated.

Overall, Arkansas earned a B-minus (81.4), well above the national average of C (76.3). This grade placed Arkansas sixth out of fifty states and the District of Columbia, behind only Maryland, New York, Massachusetts, Virginia, and Florida. Arkansas' good grade this year is due mostly to high marks on education policy measures. The state earned an A, the highest possible mark, in standards, assessment, and accountability (94.4, 7<sup>th</sup> overall), as well as in transitions and alignment (96.4, 1<sup>st</sup> overall). Additionally, the state was assigned a grade of B-plus (88.0, 2<sup>nd</sup> overall) for This policy brief will examine particular policies and conditions in Arkansas which are determining its grades, as well as providing a deeper examination of the measures used by *Education Week* to assign

the quality of the teaching profession. Though two of these measures carried over from last year, Arkansas' across-the-board strong showing on education policy is evidence of the attention and priority given to education by state policymakers in recent years, and is to be commended.

On the report card's other three areas, Arkansas scored slightly below average or worse. Arkansas scored a D in K-12 achievement (64.8, 36<sup>th</sup> place), a C-minus in chances for success (71.8, 45<sup>th</sup> place), and a C in school finance (73.1, 27<sup>th</sup> place). The inclusion of K-12 Achievement must be central to any measurement of education quality in a state and should be the ultimate result of good policies. However, the two measures of educational inputs, Chances for Success and School Finance, Have laws which confuse present economic conditions and past educational outcomes with the current quality of education. The composition and weighting of these two categories should be taken with caution.

grades. The brief also takes issue with some of the methods used to assign grades, arguing that they are either poorly designed or improperly weighted.

Table 1: Summary Grades for Arkansas and Border States, 2011

EDUCATION POLICIES	AR	US	LA	MS	MO	OK	TN	TX
Standards, Assessments, and Accountability (2010)	A	B	A	B+	B-	A	A-	A
Teaching Profession (2010)	B+	C	B	D	C	B-	C+	C
Transitions and Alignment (2009)	A	C+	B-	C	C-	B+	A	A
EDUCATION INPUTS	AR	US	LA	MS	MO	OK	TN	TX
Chances for Success (2010)	C-	C+	C-	C-	C+	C	C-	C
School Finance (2010)	C	C	C-	D	C-	D+	D	D+
EDUCATION OUTPUTS	AR	US	LA	MS	MO	OK	TN	TX
K-12 Achievement (2008)	D	D+	F	F	D+	D	D	C-
OVERALL	AR	US	LA	MS	MO	OK	TN	TX
	B-	C	C+	C-	C	C+	C+	C+

## EDUCATION POLICIES

While Arkansas' performance in education policy for *Quality Counts 2011* is admirable, two of the three areas grouped as education policy are carried over from the previous year. Grades for the teaching profession and for standards, assessments, and accountability carry over from the 2010 report, while only the area of transitions and alignment is newly examined.



## STANDARDS, ASSESSMENTS, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

ARKANSAS GRADE: 94.4: **A**  
(RANKED 7<sup>TH</sup> NATIONWIDE)

Arkansas' grade of A, which placed it 7<sup>th</sup> nationally, was determined by tallying whether states had developed or implemented a list of 23 category-related policies. Out of the 23 possible policies, Arkansas earned positive marks for 19. These marks were distributed among three subcategories: Academic Standards, Assessments, and School Accountability.

Arkansas received top marks in Academic Standards for having grade- and course-specific standards at all levels of education in four major subjects: English, math, science, and history. The state was also rewarded for providing standards-related materials for particular student populations.

In the Assessments subcategory, Arkansas earned positive marks on 8 of 12 policy measures. The measures here broadly consider the sophistication of states' assessments, e.g. whether they have short-answer and extended response questions in addition to multiple-choice bubble items, as well as the alignment of assessments with academic standards and, lastly, whether test scores are vertically equated across grades. While Arkansas had policies in place on most measures, the state was marked down for not including student portfolio work on assessments, as well as not yet aligning its social studies/history assessment with academic standards. Half or fewer of the states had adopted policies on the four measures for which Arkansas was marked down.

Finally, in School Accountability, Arkansas was given five out of five positive marks, a perfect grade. The five measures in this subcategory consider both the backbone for school accountability, that is, student test scores and school-level marks, as well as incentives to reward successful schools and improve underperforming ones. For underperforming schools, states were assigned scores based on both state assistance for them and sanctions against them. While these two policies may seem to be counteractive, some states have one but not the other, so *Quality Counts* includes them both.



## THE TEACHING PROFESSION

ARKANSAS GRADE: 88.0: **B+**  
(RANKED 2<sup>ND</sup> NATIONWIDE)

Arkansas received a grade of B-plus for its policies pertaining to the teaching profession, ranking it second in the nation. This grade carried over from 2010. Like Transitions and Alignment, scores for Teaching Profession were generated by tallying whether states had specific policies in place in several categories. Arkansas earned a B-plus for having policies in 34 of 44 subcategories.

The report assigned grades based on three main categories: Accountability for Quality, Incentives and Allocation, and Building and Supporting Capacity. A range of policies were assessed within each category.

In Accountability for Quality, Arkansas received 10 of 16 possible marks, giving the state a B-minus in the subcategory. The state was broadly rewarded for strong licensure requirements, teacher evaluations, and state data collection. Notably, the state received poor marks for not tying evaluation of teachers and training programs to students' academic performance.

Arkansas received a B-plus with 11 of 13 positive marks in Incentives and Allocation, being rewarded for policies that encourage teachers to further develop their skills as well as lowering barriers to entry from other states or other professions. The state received negative marks for teacher salaries not being competitive with comparable occupations, and for not requiring districts to report school-level salaries.

For the subcategory of Building and Supporting Capacity, Arkansas earned an A with 13 of a possible 15 marks, a superb showing. The state earned mostly positive marks in professional development, quality of school leadership, help for beginning teachers, and efforts to minimize class size. The only categories in which Arkansas lacked good policy were having a reduced workload for beginning teachers, for which only three states had a policy, and not posting teacher survey data on school culture and working conditions, with only four states having such a policy.

These measures, carried over from Quality Counts 2010, still apply for 2011 but should be updated in next year's report.



## TRANSITIONS AND ALIGNMENT

ARKANSAS GRADE: 96.4: **A**  
(RANKED 1<sup>ST</sup> NATIONWIDE)

Arkansas led the nation in Transitions and Alignment, receiving the highest grade possible (A). States were graded based on whether they had implemented a list of 14 policies. Transitions and Alignment was broken down into three policy areas: early childhood education, postsecondary education, and economy and workforce. The policies in each category broadly included the definition and assessment of readiness, the provision of remediation for those not ready, and the applicability of K-12 credentials to postsecondary and workforce settings. 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.

### POLICIES AND GRADING SYSTEM IN PERSPECTIVE

While the development and implementation of statewide policies is certainly necessary for a regular and effective system of education, not all policies are well-designed, nor are they equally important. By only counting policies and not examining their enforcement or their quality, the grading scheme used for education policy in the 2011 Quality Counts is a blunt instrument. Perhaps this is necessary: a thorough examination of policy quality and implementation for each state would be a truly monumental task. Nevertheless, a better understanding of policy quality and fidelity is necessary to make a full judgment of the strength of states' education policies, and this should be kept in mind when comparing states' policy environments in depth.

### EDUCATION INPUTS

The Chances for Success and School Finance categories represent inputs to the educational process. Rather than using a tally system, as with education policies, the measures for these categories 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 the top-scoring state in the country.<sup>1</sup>



## CHANCES FOR SUCCESS

ARKANSAS GRADE: 71.8: **C-**  
(RANKED 45<sup>TH</sup> NATIONWIDE)

The Chances for Success category is intended to measure residents' educational and economic "trajectory" from birth to adulthood. However, the combination of measures of the educational participation and achievement of children with the economic well-being of adults is confusing, not to mention potentially misleading. Of the 13 measures included in this category, only six pertain to current participation and achievement in education, while the other seven concern demographic or economic factors which are exterior to the condition of education in the state at present. Moreover, these economic factors represent the trajectory mostly of people educated in past decades, thus not necessarily the "chances for success" of current students.

Measures of current education include statewide 4<sup>th</sup> grade literacy scores on the NAEP, 8<sup>th</sup> grade math scores on the NAEP, and high school graduation rates, for which Arkansas placed between 33<sup>rd</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> nationally. Also included are enrollment rates for non-compulsory levels such as preschool and postsecondary education, with the state placing in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> for early childhood but 49<sup>th</sup> for postsecondary. While these measures could reasonably represent future chances for success, they would be more appropriate in the category for student achievement, which is treated in a separate category in *Quality Counts*.

Demographic measures in Chances for Success include state data such as the percent of children above 200% of the poverty line, parental employment, and parental education. Some of these measures are virtually double-counted by also including the state's overall annual income, rate of steady employment, and the percent of adults with postsecondary degrees. Arkansas, as has been the case for many years, consistently ranks below 40<sup>th</sup> on measures of income and education levels.

The inclusion of this category in Quality Counts 2011, separately from student achievement, renders the meaning of overall state grades less interpretable. What does it mean? If the overall grade is intended to tell the quality of education in the state at present, then broad economic

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the how scores were calculated, visit the Methodology section of the Quality Counts website at

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/01/14/17method.h29.html>

measures and measures of past educational attainment should be excluded. If this were done, poor states would be on a more equal footing with wealthy ones, and the independent contribution of states' education systems to their citizens' well-being could be more clearly estimated. The way in which Chances for Success is currently designed and included in the overall grades means that poor states are penalized for being poor, independently of the quality of education. Unsurprisingly, rich states like New Hampshire and Connecticut rank near the top of the Chances for Success measure; at the same time, poorer states like Arkansas, Mississippi, and West Virginia rank near the bottom.



**SCHOOL FINANCE**  
ARKANSAS GRADE: 73.1: **C**  
(RANKED 27<sup>TH</sup> NATIONWIDE)

The School Finance rating is broken down into two sub-categories, Equity and Spending, with each sub-category evaluated on four financial measures. Arkansas' overall grade in this category, a 73.1 C, is a combination of very high marks for Equity (B-plus) and low marks for Spending (F). Like Chances for Success, these measures are numerical, and states are graded by assigning the top state in each category a grade of 100, then scoring other states in proportion to the top state's figure.

The Equity category considered four measures of statewide variation in district spending, as well as how much local spending relies on property wealth, or lack thereof. Arkansas' performance in this category is admirable, earning an 88.5 B-plus. Arkansas ranks well above the national average in three of the four categories examined.

In Spending measures, Arkansas earned a 57.7 F. Three of the four measures in this category were below the national average. Interestingly, the two categories in which Arkansas scored lowest were calculated by comparing Arkansas per-pupil expenditures to national averages, whereas those categories in which Arkansas ranked higher had explicit adjustments for regional cost differences. Aside from concerns of bias against high-poverty states, this category makes no consideration of how efficiently or wisely money is spent, only how much is spent. While total amounts matter, the criteria used for assessing Spending are too simple and should be taken with caution.

## EDUCATION OUTPUTS

Finally, only one category in the 2011 *Quality Counts* focuses on the key area of educational outputs.



**STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**  
ARKANSAS GRADE: 64.8: **D**  
(RANKED 36<sup>TH</sup> NATIONWIDE)

Arkansas' overall grade of D for the most recent available data put it just below the national average of D-plus, with a 36<sup>th</sup> place ranking. This important category was broken down into several subcategories: Achievement Gains and Levels, Achieving Excellence, the Poverty Gap, High School Graduation, and Advanced Placement. Each of these is an important component of a state's overall achievement, so this category is well-designed.

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, ranking the state between 36<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> depending on grade and subject, the state performed very well in Achievement Gains. Math gains in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade ranked Arkansas 7<sup>th</sup> nationally, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade gains earned a 5<sup>th</sup> place ranking for the state. Gains in reading were slightly below the national average for both grades.

The Poverty Gap is the difference in NAEP scores between students eligible for the federal lunch program and those who are ineligible. Results in this category show that the size of the poverty gap in Arkansas is slightly lower than the national average in both math and reading. However, in the most recent period, the size of this gap actually grew, while for the nation as a whole it shrank.

Arkansas' most recent graduation rate of 69.3% came in very slightly higher than the national average of 68.8%, ranking it 33<sup>rd</sup>. However, the change in its graduation rate was worse than the national average, as it ticked down by 0.3% while the nation saw a 2.0% increase.

Lastly, Arkansas' performance on AP tests was below average. The AP passing rate, considered as the percentage of tested students scoring a 3 or higher, was 13.6% against a 20.4% national average.

## ARKANSAS' POSITION COMPARED TO SURROUNDING STATES

Compared to its bordering states, Arkansas earned relatively high marks in Quality Counts (highlighted earlier in Table 1). Arkansas' 2011 grade of B-minus placed it above all its surrounding states, which scored between C- and C+. Arkansas equaled or bettered its neighbors in all three measures of education policy: Standards, Assessments, and Accountability, the Teaching Profession, and Transitions and Alignment. In educational outputs, its grade of D was on a par with its neighbors, outperforming two (LA, MS), equaling two (OK, TN), and underperforming two (MO, TX). Lastly, bearing in mind that measures of educational inputs are somewhat dubious, Arkansas outperformed its neighbors in School Finance while underperforming them in Chances for Success.

## ARKANSAS GRADES OVER TIME

Frequently, debates over the quality of education in Arkansas revolve around figures and numbers that are difficult to characterize. If state test scores are the numbers of interest, educators disagree over whether observed gains are real or inflated, and whether observed scores represent real proficiency

or are meaningless. If NAEP scores or anything measured in dollars is considered, there will be disagreements about how much these figures are reflective of the state's poverty, or instead of the state's education system.

With these problems in mind, there are two ways to gain an objective footing: compare Arkansas with itself over time, and compare Arkansas with other states on comparable measures.

Quality Counts provides exactly this opportunity, in a comprehensive but imperfect way. Results are comparable over time since the report has been using its current grading and ranking system since its 2008. Results are comparable between states because, by design, only measures which can be taken of all states count toward state grades. These results are comprehensive because they cover many aspects of education: what goes in, what comes out, and what happens in between. They are imperfect because, as discussed before, some of these measures confuse non-educational measures with educational ones, or they apply criteria that are biased. Nevertheless, they provide a useful and objective estimate of the quality of education across the country.

*Table 2: Grades and Rankings for Arkansas, 2008-2011*

STANDARD	2008		2009		2010		2011	
	Grade	Rank	Grade	Rank	Grade	Rank	Grade	Rank
<b>EDUCATION POLICIES</b>								
Standards, Assessments, and Accountability (2010)	89.4 B+	18	89.4 B+	18	94.4 A	7	94.4 A	7
Teaching Profession (2010)	88.9 B+	2	88.9 B+	2	88.0 B+	2	88.0 B+	2
Transitions and Alignment (2009)	85.7 B	7	85.7 B	9	85.7 B+	6	96.4 A	1
<b>EDUCATION INPUTS</b>								
Chances for Success (2010)	71.7 C-	45	71.6 C-	45	70.8 C-	46	71.8 C-	45
School Finance (2010)	81.1 B-	16	75.9 C	24	74.2 C-	24	73.1 C-	27
<b>EDUCATION OUTPUTS</b>								
K-12 Achievement (2008)	66.3 D	34	66.3 D	34	66.3 D	34	64.8 D	36
<b>OVERALL</b>								
	80.5 B-	8	79.6 B-	11	79.9 B-	10	81.4 B-	6

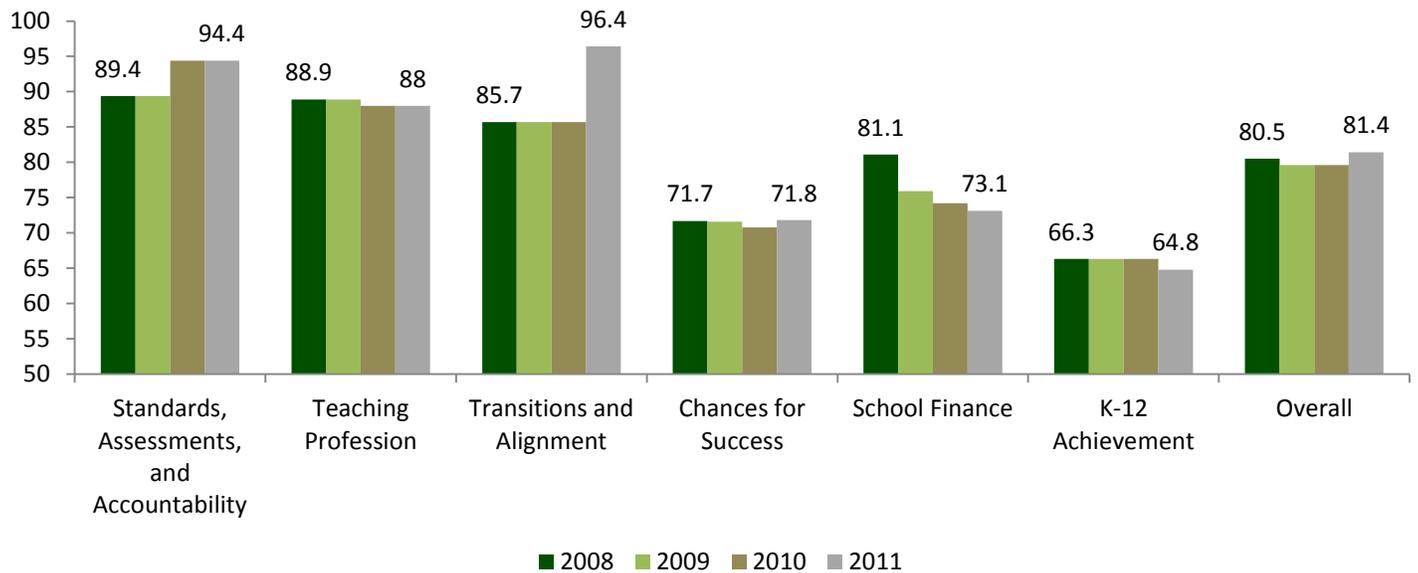
Table 2 provides grades and rankings given to Arkansas in the past four Quality Counts reports. The information in this table is represented also in Figures 1 and 2, which present state grades and rankings, respectively.

Arkansas' performance over the past four years reveals two major trends. First, education policy has markedly improved in the areas of Standards, Assessments, and Accountability, and Transitions and Alignment. This upward trend holds for both grades and rankings. The second major trend has been a substantial decline in Arkansas' performance on School Finance. Recalling that this measure includes subcategories for Equity and Spending, this decline is due almost entirely to a falling score for Spending, and due very little to changes in

financial equity. This trend should be taken with caution, bearing in mind the criticism made of Spending above.

In addition to trends, an examination of relative levels or rankings can help to interpret the quality of education in Arkansas. First and most obviously, Arkansas' persistently high overall ranking deserves mention. Through 2010, this ranking hovered around 10th, and with the most recent results out, the state now ranks 6th nationally. Second, Arkansas has persistently ranked higher on education outputs than on education inputs. This is at least suggestive that Arkansas' education system is doing well given the challenges the state faces. Bottom rankings on such measures as parental education and household income have not prevented students in Arkansas from achieving well above this level, and even graduating at a rate higher than the national average. This is evidence of educational effectiveness.

Figure 1. Grades for Arkansas, 2008-2011



For more information about this policy brief, please contact the Office for Education Policy at [oepe@uark.edu](mailto:oepe@uark.edu) or visit the OEP Blog at <http://officeforedpolicy.com>