

# **Reasons and Rationale for the Arkansas State Board of Education to Reconsider 2020 Reconstitution Framework of the Little Rock School District and to Restore LRSD to Unitary Local Control**

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**1. The state accountability test (ACT Aspire) does not adequately align to Arkansas curriculum content standards, leading to consequential difficulty for struggling school districts, such as the LRSD, in meeting proficiency standards.**

A statewide accountability system that includes a comprehensive assessment in Arkansas is required under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Act 930 of Arkansas. The State Board of Education (SBE) adopted the ACT Aspire as the state's accountability assessment effective starting in the 2015-16 school year.

In late 2018, the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), which is now the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), began the process of aligning the performance level descriptors (PLDs) of the ACT Aspire assessment to the subject content standards in Arkansas in the areas of Reading, Writing, English, Math, and Science. The alignment study itself was conducted in late January, 2019 with ACS Ventures<sup>1</sup>. The final alignment report was released in July 2019.

The overall findings from the state indicate 21% of the 3rd grade reading and 18.7% of 3rd grade math performance level descriptors (PLDs) that are tested by the ACT Aspire are not aligned or are misaligned to Arkansas content standards. The alignment report also found that 23% of actual 3rd grade reading and 2% of actual 3rd grade math test items on the 2018 ACT Aspire were either misaligned or not aligned to Arkansas content standards.

The level of misalignment and non-alignment are unacceptably high, considering the weight of the ACT Aspire on the calculation of a school's ESSA index score, which is the basis for a school's letter grade. There should be a 100% alignment between the ACT Aspire PLDs and the subject content standards in Arkansas, which would indicate that every item tested on the ACT Aspire was found, and at the appropriate grade level in the curriculum content standards that teachers are required to teach.

Table 1, on the next page, outlines the percent of ACT Aspire PLDs not aligned or misaligned to the Arkansas content standards by grade and subject. Table 2, which follows, indicates the percent of actual 2018 ACT Aspire test items not aligned or misaligned to the Arkansas content standards by grade and subject.

Note that the level of non-alignment or misalignment should be zero (0).

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<sup>1</sup> ADE (DESE) Commissioner Memo LS-19-033 (November 5, 2018)

Table 1. Percent of ACT Aspire PLDs Misaligned or Not Aligned to Arkansas Content Standards

	Reading	English	Math	Science
3	20.6	0.0	18.7	6.0
4	25.4	12.8	7.1	3.0
5	17.1	21.4	0.0	4.0
6	10.4	0.0	0.0	2.0
7	3.8	0.0	0.6	6.0
8	3.8	0.0	1.3	2.0
EHS	1.5	0.0	8.1	0.0

Table 2. Percent of ACT Aspire Sample Items Misaligned or Not Aligned to Arkansas Content

	Reading	English	Writing	Math	Science
3	23.0	3.0	0.0	2.0	6.0
4	23.0	7.0	25.0	6.0	3.0
5	12.0	4.0	25.0	0.0	4.0
6	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.0
7	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.0
8	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.0
EHS	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	0.0

Misalignment and non-alignment include those ACT Aspire PLDs that (1) are not found in the Arkansas content standards, (2) are located at a higher grade level in the Arkansas content standards, or (3) were categorically grouped with an overarching “anchor standard.” The issue with aligning to a general category of standard, an anchor standard, is that without a standards crosswalk<sup>2</sup> provided to schools, it is unclear how educators would be able to articulate curriculum and instructional practices that are aligned to what is being tested since the anchor standards are so broad whereas the ACT Aspire test items are derived from specific PLDs.

Notably, the DESE/ACS Venture alignment study counted PLDs that were determined to fall under the broad anchor standard category in English Language

<sup>2</sup> A crosswalk is a document that serves as a cross-reference of two documents that have similar outcomes or purposes but use different language.

Arts and even standards that were at a higher grade level than the indicated assessment as being aligned. This is problematic because (1) of the lack of a crosswalk to align the ACT Aspire PLDs to specific, focused standards in the Arkansas content standards framework, and (2) the difficulty and inequity of expecting teachers to teach and students to learn standards above grade level.

What must be stressed, above all, is that there should be a perfect alignment between the performance level descriptors (PLDs) tested by the ACT Aspire and the Arkansas content standards on which curriculum and instructional practices are based. As Squires (2005) has noted, “To be fair to students, content and skills assessed on high-stakes tests need to be covered in the curriculum, requiring curriculum decisions to be aligned and balanced with these tests.”<sup>3</sup>

According to the “Holding Arkansas Schools Accountable” (HASA) report by the Arkansas Bureau of Legislative Research (September, 2019), the Arkansas Educational Support and Accountability Program (AESAP) has “veered away from the sole reliance on standardized test scores” (p. 1) in favor of other indicators not tied to high-stakes achievement test results. However, for secondary schools, 70% of the accountability index score is still determined by growth and performance on the ACT Aspire assessment. For elementary schools, this reliance on the standardized test score is higher, at 85%.

Therefore, any misalignment in what is being tested to what is being taught will significantly and negatively impact the overall ESSA index score and subsequent letter grade.

## **2. The ESSA School Index Score fails to capture true student performance and growth and negatively impacts low-income and Black students.**

To rely on the ESSA School Index Score as a measure of achievement inherently disadvantages low-income and Black students.

The ESSA School Index Score is based on a variety of indicators, with a primary focus on achievement and growth measured by the ACT Aspire assessment and, to a lesser extent, on “soft accountability” benchmarks, such as school attendance, graduation rates, and number of computer science and AP courses, among other things.

The HASA report notes the problematic use of these “soft accountability” measures in the calculation of the ESSA School Index Score and associated letter grade.<sup>4</sup> Essentially, the report cites limitations of composite indicators to illustrate the diverse needs of schools and the many different ways they fail to capture true student performance and growth.

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<sup>3</sup> p. 4 of David Squires, *Aligning and Balancing the Standards-Based Curriculum* (2005; Corwin)

<sup>4</sup> p. 11

However, even in light of the shortcomings noted above, this composite index score and the associated letter grade are currently required by Arkansas law. Noting that, a deeper collaboration with the school district should be sought to accommodate the specific needs of the LRSD and its diverse student population.

Critically, the HASA report highlights the negative correlation between the components of the ESSA School Index Score and Black and low-income students.<sup>5</sup>

The report states the growth score component of the ESSA School Index Score should help “regulate the influence students’ demographics have on a school’s letter grade.” However, there still exists a negative correlation, and the impact is even more stark when noting the prevalence of schools with large non-White student populations receiving a school letter grade of D or F.

Of all the D-rated schools in 2017-2018, 64.52% of the students were non-White. Of all the F-rated schools, 87.32% of the students were non-White. There were no A or B-rated schools in Arkansas with a majority low-income and Black population.

In particular, the four school districts in Level 5 of distress, Little Rock, Pine Bluff, Earle, and Dollarway, each had a large percentage of Black students in the 2017-2018 school year: LRSD (62.85%), Pine Bluff (96.38%), Earle (97.14%), and Dollarway (91.45%).

The other demographic noted to have a negative correlation with the measures of the ESSA School Index Score were low-income students, those who qualify for free or reduced school lunch. The four Level 5 school districts each had a majority of students who identified, in 2017-2018, as low-income: LRSD (67.44%), Pine Bluff (84.51%), Earle (95%), and Dollarway (93.48%).

The HASA report bears this out, highlighting the fact that “[s]chools with a larger percentage of non-Black students are six times as likely to receive A’s than schools with a larger than average percent of Black students” (p. 15). The same holds for low-income populations, but there is an eight times differential between low FRL population schools and high FRL populations schools to receive an A grade.

The HASA report adds that, like Oklahoma’s school grading system, Arkansas’s use of a composite index score does not necessarily reflect the actual learning gains within schools.

Through a regression analysis<sup>6</sup>, the researchers in the HASA report indicated that 13 of the 44 F-rated schools had “weighted achievement scores that were higher than predicted, which could indicate that something happening at school is adding value to the student’s learning” (p. 17).

With this in mind, it is curious why the ESSA School Index does not include measures of accountability related to student work samples, which Act 930

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<sup>5</sup> p. 13

<sup>6</sup> A regression analysis in this context highlights how to reveal more accurate relationships between demographics and a school’s weighted achievement score.

explicitly allows “without limitation.” Work samples could include performance-based measures, which are better suited to students with diverse needs.<sup>7</sup>

This is not just consequential to the level of support that the ADE would provide based on the ESSA School Index Score but also to the reward-based accountability system (Arkansas School Recognition Program) that provides monetary awards to “high-performing” schools.

In light of these findings, the State Board of Education should consider a more collaborative approach with the LRSD leadership to determine how to assess the performance of all students more equitably.

### **3. There is a legitimate concern that the SBE reconstitution framework will further segregate students by race at the expense of Black and Latinx students.**

The current demographic breakdown in the Little Rock School District student population is 18.96% White, 61.35% Black, 15.18% Latinx, 3.11% Asian, 1.12% Two or More Races, .25% American Indian, and .04% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.<sup>8</sup>

Based on a preliminary analysis based on the SBE reconstitution framework and draft plans to consolidate several schools in the LRSD<sup>9</sup>, there would be 29 schools in Category 1, two (2) schools in Category 2 (consolidation of Henderson, Romine, and Dodd and Cloverdale, Baseline, and Meadowcliff), and four (4) schools in Category 3 (Hall, Southwest (JA Fair & McClellan), Washington, and Watson).

According to the SBE reconstitution framework, Category 1 schools would be those with a 2019 ESSA letter grade of A-D, Category 2 schools would be those undergoing reconfigurations, and Category 3 would be schools with a 2019 ESSA letter grade of F.

If this framework were to go forward, the percentage of White students in Category 3 schools would be 4.2% (down from 18.96% representation in the entire district) and 6.01% in Category 2 schools (down from 18.96% representation in the entire district). The percentage of Black students in Category 3 schools would be 75.22% (up from 61.35% representation in the entire district). Latinx student representation in Category 2 schools would be 28.72% (up from 15.18% representation in the entire district).

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.fairtest.org/sites/default/files/FairTest-Model-Assessment-Report-2016.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> These percentages are based on LRSD student demographics for the 2018-19 school year.

<sup>9</sup> [LRSD Community Blueprint](#) (December 11, 2018)

Based on SBE Framework & Proposed School Consolidations

	White	Black	Latinx	Asian	Two or More Races	American Indian	Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander
<b>CURRENT (2018-19)</b>	<b>18.96%</b>	<b>61.35%</b>	<b>15.18%</b>	<b>3.11%</b>	<b>1.12%</b>	<b>0.25%</b>	<b>0.04%</b>
<b>Category 1 (A-D) Proposed</b>	<b>23.55%</b>	<b>58.35%</b>	<b>12.55%</b>	<b>3.98%</b>	<b>1.29%</b>	<b>0.25%</b>	<b>0.04%</b>
<b>Category 2 (Based on current plans for school consolidation) Proposed</b>	<b>6.01%</b>	<b>63.64%</b>	<b>28.72%</b>	<b>0.61%</b>	<b>0.74%</b>	<b>0.28%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>
<b>Category 3 (F) Proposed</b>	<b>4.20%</b>	<b>75.22%</b>	<b>12.55%</b>	<b>3.98%</b>	<b>1.29%</b>	<b>0.25%</b>	<b>0.03%</b>

The future of LRSD is inextricably tied to its past, and the potential impact on the Black and Latinx communities of Little Rock is of national significance. This is supported by the recent national coverage of the SBE framework and controversy by the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *US News & World Report*, and the Associated Press.

#### 4. Low-performing schools with vulnerable populations should have more short-term flexibility.

The HASA report highlights the need for contextual flexibility among schools, while noting “baseline expectations for long-term outcomes should be the same for all schools” (p. 3).

Accountability in Arkansas does not grant schools such flexibility. All are measured on the same time frame. If we were to take the report at face value, then schools with higher needs should have more short-term flexibility.

In other words, schools with higher needs should have a different achievement and growth standard for the 1-3 year time period and perhaps be aligned with other schools on a 5-year basis.

This increased accountability time frame aligns with the report’s observation that since the “baseline for where [students] begin may differ greatly... the supports and time they and their schools need could differ as well” (p. 3).

## **5. Availability of exit criteria for removal of Level 5 support lacked expediency.**

The HASA report includes a description of Level 5 support and a district's responsibility to meet "the exit criteria set by the state" or else face annexation, reconstitution, or consolidation.<sup>10</sup> However, no statute or rule specifies how or when those exit criteria are to be established. The ADE/DESE and the State Board are thus responsible for articulating and making available the exit criteria in a timely way.

It is unclear why academic exit criteria for the district were not released early in the takeover since the basis of the takeover was academic distress. It is noted that since the state takeover of the LRSD, there has been a transition in the state's accountability system and testing program (AESAP, 2017), yet exit criteria were still not released even until two years after that.

The point is that while districts should be given five (5) years to meet exit criteria, that was not the case for the LRSD. The exit criteria for its removal from state control were publicly released in February, 2019, four (4) years after state takeover, two (2) months before students were to take the ACT Aspire, the state accountability exam, and less than a year before the state board would make a decision regarding its possible exit. In this scenario, the LRSD was given no roadmap, no exit criteria, until the fifth year of state control.

## **6. The State Board of Education allegedly met outside of public review, contributing to criticisms of a lack of transparency in discussions surrounding the future of LRSD.**

Former State Representative Clarke Tucker recently chided the SBE for discussing the issue of LRSD reconstitution in closed meetings: "In discussing the proposal at last month's meeting, SBE Chair Diane Zook admitted both that SBE members had held private conversations about the future of the district and also that SBE members had individually met with Commissioner Johnny Key and his staff to discuss the proposed framework. These latter meetings constitute a textbook violation of the open-meeting requirement of Arkansas's Freedom of Information Act. These admissions feed the legitimate perception that the state is not acting transparently and that the voice of the public at large does not matter because a few people behind the scenes are calling all the shots."<sup>11</sup> The meeting that Tucker refers to is the SBE Meeting on September 20, 2019. The video of that meeting can be found on the [ADE YouTube Channel](#).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> p. 9

<sup>11</sup> "A unified path exists for Little Rock schools," *Talk Business & Politics*, October 6, 2019

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=3495&v=U7Va6peJ7cE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3495&v=U7Va6peJ7cE) (timestamp 58:08)



The framework at issue here was released the day before the special meeting of the SBE and was not shared at any of the previous public meetings, which were held in late August, 2019. This was notably mentioned by Dr. Fitz Hill of the SBE at the September 20 SBE meeting.

This lack of public review is problematic also in terms of the two surveys<sup>13</sup> released by the ADE in August, 2019. Despite assurances from the SBE that the author of the surveys and the complete results of both surveys would be released to the public, neither piece of information has been released to date.

## **7. There exists an overwhelming public demand for unitary and local control of the LRSD by the public.**

According to the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, “emails sent to the state agency show strong opposition to the framework plan and to ending recognition of the union as the contract bargaining agent. A Freedom of Information Act request for email correspondence between the public and members of the Board of Education dating between Sept. 20 and Sept. 30 produced more than 400 messages. A review of many of those messages from the public to board members showed that virtually all of the the message writers were opposed to putting F-graded schools under ‘different leadership in partnership with the Little Rock district,’ which many said would be a racially and/or economically segregative move.”<sup>14</sup>

This seems counter to the unattributed list of comments and suggestions curated by Diane Zook, chair of the SBE, who said “that she has been encouraged by people who pull her aside at the bank or grocery store or in a parking lot to voice support of the framework plan.”

Notably, a sitting member of the SBE, Stacy McAdoo, 2019 Arkansas Teacher of the Year, voiced strong opposition to the reconstitution framework, calling it “wrong” and “unjust.”<sup>15</sup>

## **8. Having a locally elected school board and receiving support from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education/State Board of Education are not mutually exclusive.**

State Representative Andrew Collins punctuated this possibility in late September, 2019, saying, “The state board should modify the framework to return the entire district to a fully empowered local board while continuing supplemental intensive support to the F schools, probably via a memorandum of understanding as Jay Barth has proposed. No ‘different leadership’ for some schools. Modifying the

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/KQVSCSM> & <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BDH7MX9>

<sup>14</sup> “Schools’ grading has LR urgency,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, October 6, 2019

<sup>15</sup> “LRSD proposal is wrong, unjust,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, October 6, 2019

framework in this way would not hinder state leaders' professed goals of putting students first and continuing programs that they believe are helping F schools."<sup>16</sup>

Former representative Clarke Tucker added that "giving the community a voice in the running of their own schools, the state does not abandon its work in Little Rock. For the state to maintain its commitment to Little Rock does not require the state to divest the community from having a voice in the education of their own children."<sup>17</sup>

Also, the Little Rock City Board and Mayor Frank Scott, Jr. announced in a press conference on October 7, 2019 full support of a return to a locally elected school board for LRSD while receiving necessary support from the state and city.<sup>18</sup>

Further, a collaborative partnership between the DESE and a locally elected school board for LRSD would allow time and more investment in several initiatives that have proven worthwhile. Examples include the intense focus on early literacy and the science of reading as well as the Teacher Excellence Support System (TESS). Additional focus could also be given to the development of alternative assessments meant to recognize the unique needs of students, especially those in high need, and a deeper commitment to using mobile technology in purposeful ways in teaching and learning.

Accomplishing these goals would not only benefit LRSD immediately but also allow LRSD to be a beacon to other schools in the state.

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<sup>16</sup> Social media post reprinted in *Arkansas Times*, September 30, 2019

<sup>17</sup> "A unified path exists for Little Rock schools," *Talk Business & Politics*, October 6, 2019

<sup>18</sup> "Little Rock school proposal outlined," *Arkansas Times*, October 7, 2019