

THE ARKANSAS DEPARTMENT OF  
**Education** 

4 State Capitol Mall, Room  
Little Rock, AR 72201-1071

**October 5, 2005**

**Dear Parent or Guardian:**

Today marks a new day for Arkansas's benchmark exams.

If you haven't already, you will soon be receiving your child's scores from the Arkansas benchmark exam he or she took last spring. These tests are important for several reasons. One, they help your child's teachers assess his or her progress and determine the best educational course for your child. Two, they are used by both the state and federal government to hold schools accountable for student performance.

Arkansas's math and literacy benchmark tests began with the state's fourth graders being tested in 1998. In following years, we added testing in the eighth grade and then in the sixth grade.

This past year, No Child Left Behind demanded that we add math and literacy tests in third, fifth and seventh grades. In addition, two years ago, it was time to review the state's English Language Arts frameworks, the guidelines for what is taught in each grade. A committee of Arkansas educators carried out this task. With the revised frameworks, the literacy benchmark tests had to be revised. In addition, new "cut scores" to divide the scores into the categories of below basic, basic, proficient and advanced had to be developed. Another committee of Arkansas educators completed these tasks this past summer, setting new cut scores for grades three through eight in each subject.

Because of these changes, we basically offered a brand new test to these six grades. Therefore, the results on this year's tests cannot and should not be compared to last year's scores.

Such changes are common with standardized tests. As more research is done and as changing times demand new knowledge, frameworks for learning are regularly updated. Tests are then redesigned to reflect the new frameworks.

When this happens, in educational lingo, it's called starting a new "trend line."

Grades three, five and seven obviously are starting new trend lines as this is the first year for those grades to be tested. These scores, for the most part, indicate a good beginning for these grades.

Scores for grades six and eight at the beginning of this new trend line are, for the most part, near to where they were at the end of the previous trend line.

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The most dramatic difference between scores at the end of the old trend line and at the beginning of the new one shows up in the fourth grade. Last year, 65 percent of fourth graders scored proficient or advanced in math; 68 percent did in literacy. The 2005 scores for fourth grade are strong, with more than 50 percent scoring proficient or advanced in both subjects.

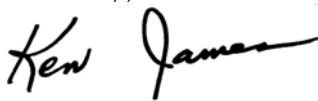
This seemingly different score, however, is in no way a reflection on our fourth grade students, teachers or school administrators. They have done a terrific job and worked very hard to bring the academic performance level of our fourth grade students to impressive levels. This change has been reflected in the upward trend of scores that has occurred since that first test was administered in 1998.

In fact, I believe that this is one of the main reasons for the change. Since the fourth grade test began in 1998, teachers have participated in intensive professional development activities, which have given them new tools for the classroom. As a result, they have watched their students perform at increased levels each year. So when educators got together to work on the new frameworks and then the new test design and cut scores for the benchmark exams, they brought with them higher expectations for student performance. These are reflected in the latest test results. I'm convinced that the performance of fourth grade students remains as strong as ever. And I am further convinced that growth will continue to occur.

The Arkansas Department of Education has said all along that we would ratchet up expectations as we improved performance levels. We've done that this year, and as we've witnessed with our other standardized test scores – the norm-referenced Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores, for example – those efforts are paying off.

At this time, let me thank you for your involvement in your child's education. The support and encouragement your child receives at home makes a tremendous difference in his or her performance in the classroom. The old adage says, "it takes a village to raise a child." That's true for education, too. It takes all of us to help a child reach his or her learning potential.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken James". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Dr. T. Kenneth James  
Commissioner of Education