



Research Report

School Improvement Planning Under Act 930 of 2017

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Prepared for

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INTRODUCTION

The adequacy study statute (§10-3-2102) calls for a review of the Arkansas Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (ACSIP) process as part of the legislature's biennial adequacy study. Ironically, that statute is one of the only areas in Arkansas code where ACSIP is still mentioned, though the Arkansas Department of Education indicates that it will propose "clean-up" language during the 2019 legislative session to eliminate that reference as well. The current lack of ACSIP mentions in statute is due to Act 930 of 2017, which replaced the former Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment and Accountability Program (ACTAAP) with the Arkansas Educational Support and Accountability Program. In doing so, it also rid the state of ACSIP. Language in Act 930, however, does describe a new process for Arkansas's public schools to follow as they create their still-required annual plans for school improvement.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the 1990s, new national research pointed out that certain school policies and practices could have a positive impact on student achievement, ushering in a focus on planning for school improvement. Arkansas began introducing the idea of school improvement planning through legislation in the middle of that decade. The first law to do so, passed as Act 915 of 1995, required school improvement plans from school districts identified in fiscal or academic distress. By 1997, legislation was passed (Act 1108) that directed all schools to develop a data-driven school improvement plan that would lead to improved student achievement. In 1999, Act 999 called for district improvement plans that would coordinate the actions of the improvement plans of its schools.

In 2002, the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) required states to submit to the federal government a state-level improvement plan in order to receive federal funds. The Arkansas Department of Education partnered with Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) to develop a web-based system that districts could use to meet state and federal school improvement requirements as well as serve as districts' applications for federal funds. Act 807 of 2007 established that each public school and school district would develop and file a comprehensive school improvement plan with ADE that detailed, among other things, how it would use its state categorical funds. In addition, the department was to monitor compliance of those school districts considered to be in school improvement under NCLB. Indicative of the import that legislators placed on the improvement plans is the fact that other legislation that year called for alignment of other school initiatives (i.e., alternative pay plans, teacher reward programs) with schools' ACSIPs.

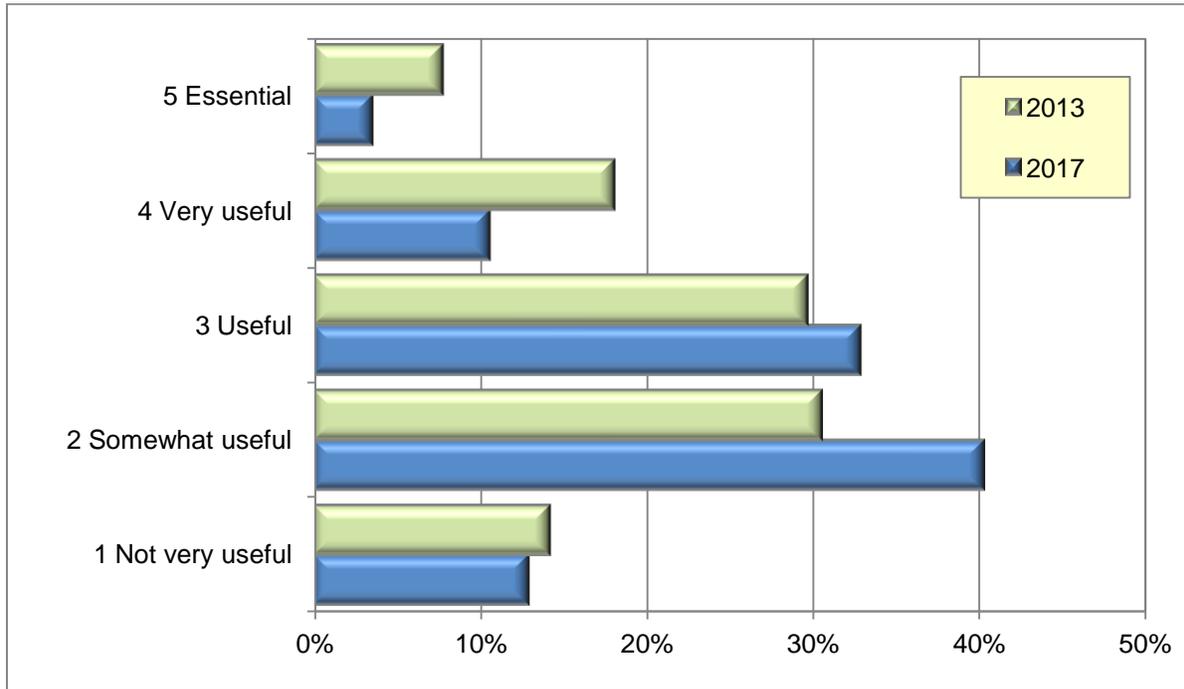
As the federal system moved from NCLB mandates to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility System, Arkansas responded with its ESEA Flexibility Requests, which were approved in 2012 and again in 2015. Act 841 of 2015 was the first to decouple some of the categorical funding requirements from the school planning process. By that time, too, school personnel frequently complained that the ACSIP process had become one of compliance rather than of inspired planning. In addition, because the school's budget had to be created in ACSIP as well as in the Arkansas Public School Computer Network (APSCN), making even small changes was tedious and time-consuming because they had to be reflected in both places and then often gain approval by ADE. Other frequent complaints at that time, according to surveys of school personnel by the Bureau of Legislative Research (BLR), was that the ACSIP process was driven by funding requirements rather than by the interventions needed to improve student achievement.

ADE replaced the online ACSIP platform with a new tool called Indistar in the fall of 2015, after pilot testing it with 37 schools during the prior school year. Indistar was created at the University of Virginia specifically for school improvement planning with general references to budgetary figures, while the detailed budget was created and resided in APSCN. Indistar allows schools to select indicators of objectives and maintain meeting agendas and minutes, coaching applications and outcome evaluations on a single platform. All schools and districts were required to use Indistar for school improvement

planning purposes until January 2018, when the state’s Every Student Succeeds Act plan was approved by the federal government.

Opinions of whether using Indistar was an improvement for the planning process over using the ACSIP/SEDL software, seem to be mixed, according to a comparison of responses to the BLR’s 2013 and 2017 surveys of administrators that asked each year, “How useful is the ACSIP in helping your district plan?” With 256 superintendents and charter school directors responding in 2017 and 233 superintendents in 2013, the results are presented in the following chart:

Usefulness of ACSIP in Planning for Improvement



School principals, who are often more directly involved in the school planning process, were similarly inclined this year, according to feedback to BLR’s site visits to schools during fall 2015. When asked about ACSIP and Indistar, a few explained that they felt the ACSIP process was used by their district to drive instruction, while others said they saw it more as a compliance piece as they used other tools to examine data and plan for interventions. Likewise, several found Indistar to be more user friendly than the former ACSIP online platform, but others said it was either more difficult or they could use more training.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING PROCESS TODAY

Act 930 of 2017 spells out a process for school improvement planning that provides schools and school districts more autonomy and flexibility than they have experienced in the last 15 years. This mirrors the federal effort to provide those same qualities to schools, districts and states under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as opposed to former requirements under No Child Left Behind and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Flexibility systems. ADE’s newly written draft of rules for the new accountability and school planning systems are currently in the public comment phase of approval.

Act 930 requires schools to develop school improvement plans by May 1 of each year, with the plans being posted on the district’s website with other state-required information by the following Aug. 1, according to section 8.03.2 of ADE’s draft Rules Governing the Arkansas Educational Support and Accountability Act (AESAA).

As described in the statute and fleshed out by school improvement personnel at the Arkansas Department of Education, planning for school improvement will begin in the school building. School personnel are to incorporate a “Cycle of Inquiry” or “plan-do-check” approach, which entails the following steps:

- Performing a needs assessment that is informed by analysis of student performance data (state test scores, interim assessments and other indicators identified by the school)
- Identify resources needed to address the determined needs by using a framework of six systems (the first five of which are listed in Act 930; ADE added the sixth later):
 - Academics (curriculum)
 - Facilities
 - Fiscal operations
 - Human capital management
 - Student support services
 - Communications & family outreach
- Set interim and long-term goals by which to monitor progress and make necessary adjustments along the way
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy or strategies annually
- Start the cycle again by assessing progress and identifying current needs



An example provided by ADE staff of how this might look is what could happen if a school decided that it needed a phonics program to improve reading scores. School personnel would first work with district leaders to determine if they had a phonics curriculum or if they needed to buy one. If the latter was true, they must determine if they had the money for the purchase. They would also determine if appropriate classroom space to incorporate a phonics program was available, if they had the right teachers and if any professional development would be needed (and if they could afford that). In addition, they would have to identify what special supports would be required for students before or during the implementation of a phonics program, and, finally, how they would best communicate facts about the program and engage students’ families in the process.

As opposed to previous years when all schools were to use a single online tool to develop and report their plans (most recently Indistar), the new approach offers more flexibility. For instance, schools may continue using Indistar to develop improvement plans, but they also may use a vendor’s plan or one that they are preparing for another state initiative such as the Arkansas Leadership Academy or as a participant in the School of Innovation initiative. It will be up to the districts to decide if all schools in the district must use the same planning tool or if there can be variation among them.

Under Act 930, schools are to complete their first school improvement plans by May 1 of each year beginning in 2018. However, school and school district personnel are just this semester receiving training and guidance from ADE about the new requirements because the state’s Every Student Succeeds Act plan only gained federal approval on Jan. 16, 2018. Therefore, the department expects this first year of planning to be a work in progress.¹

¹ That the plans might not be up to the hoped for standards the first time around was evident in a set of 31 transitional support plans that school districts previously classified in academic distress, priority, or focus status submitted to the Arkansas State Board of Education on Jan. 11, 2018. The plans often lacked measurable, specific goals, prompting Commissioner Johnny Key to say, “It’s a mind shift that all of us are undergoing. ... These first iterations look like, wow, that’s pretty vague. Yeah, it is. But the next iterations, you’re going to start seeing a little more concrete responses, concrete actions but it’s part of that growth process of moving to a new philosophy of systems approach of school improvement.”

Under the Act 930 framework, district personnel are considered the first line of assistance for their schools. Schools may also work with ADE or other “partners” to help develop their plans as well. (ADE leaders note that when the department is contacted directly by a school for assistance, they will always engage district personnel in the process.)

After the May 1 deadline, schools and school districts will negotiate on the plans’ specifics. How much of this is needed depends on how much school and district personnel have communicated about the identified needs in the plans throughout the year, according to ADE. The plans are to be posted on the school district’s website by Aug. 1.

According to the draft rules, districts that are determined to be receiving Level 2 – Collaborative support, Level 3 – Coordinated support, Level 4 – Directed support or Level 5 – Intensive support have until Sept. 1 of each year to finalize a school district *support* plan. (Act 930 eliminates the requirement for all districts to have district improvement plans.) However, the rules say that districts receiving support at Levels 4 or 5 *will work* with ADE in the development of their support plans.

Districts that are receiving Level 2 – Collaborative support only have to submit their plans to ADE upon request by the Commissioner “in order for the Department to provide additional support to the district.” All districts receiving higher levels of support must do so. Act 930 requires these school districts to post their support plans within 10 days of submission to ADE; however, the rules that are in the process of being approved say that they are to be posted no later than 20 days after submission to ADE. (Rules Governing the Arkansas Educational Support and Accountability Act (AESAA) §8.05.4) It is also the school district’s responsibility to monitor the implementation of each school’s plan and then to evaluate each for its effectiveness in achieving the school’s goals.

Under Act 930, ADE’s role throughout this process is more supportive than regulative, though the agency will continue to monitor school- and district-level data to see if there are instances in which they should engage with a district to assist in the district’s support of its schools. This differs from past practices in several ways. One is that much of the monitoring will be in the form of “desk-monitoring” since most of the data is maintained in the Arkansas Public School Computer Network. Mandatory, regularly scheduled visits for onsite monitoring and assistance, therefore, will no longer occur. The other is that while ADE involvement will focus at the district level, it will seldom be mandatory for districts to accept the department’s involvement. Before, certain academic benchmarks could trigger action by ADE either at the school or district level. ADE does say that “risk-based monitoring will be utilized which may include onsite monitoring.”

The levels of support that ADE provides to districts, which are listed in Act 930, vary widely. According to ADE staff, for instance, Level 1 – General support, garners such hands-off support that it consists mainly of information provided on ADE’s website, while Level 5, which is considered “intensive,” can trigger a number of actions by ADE or the State Board of Education from systems reviews to removal of school and district leadership. These levels of support differ from the labels once afforded to schools, as they are not assigned for a certain period of time and are not tied to specific actions on either the part of ADE or of the receiving district. The only exceptions are those school districts determined to need Level 5 –Intensive support.

ADE says it will determine the level of support needed through its relationships with districts, and therefore this level will most often be determined in collaboration with the districts. ADE says the levels of support will be established for all school districts by – and probably before – July 1, 2019, which is the date that other components of the law must be in place. Right now, ADE only knows the level of support status for two school districts – Little Rock and Dollarway. They were placed in Level 5 – intensive support by the State Board of Education in 2017.

It is important to note that these levels of support are provided for school districts, not schools themselves. The state will report the performance of students and student subgroups at the school level using a new tool called the ESSA School Index. This is a single grade of A-F based on multiple

measures: weighted achievement, growth on tests and growth for English language acquisition, high school graduation rates and another group of indicators called school quality and student success. Schools scoring in the bottom 5% either because of low scores of their whole student body or of their student subgroup(s) trigger a federal designation, but they do not trigger a label under state law.

However, the presence of low-performing schools within a district serves as a red flag for ADE to ensure that districts are providing the appropriate supports for those schools and will play into the level of support that ADE provides to that district.

ADE is combining its school improvement unit, which this year had 22 employees, with its standards monitoring unit, which most recently employed seven standards of accreditation monitors, to form a new unit with 18 employees. (The name of the new unit is still being determined.) These staff members will fill the role of first point of contact, answering school districts' questions and monitoring data to see when ADE assistance could be beneficial, or, in those infrequent instances, required. These staffers also determine if additional help is needed and where that help might be obtained. Options for sources of assistance include ADE staff from other units in the agency, education cooperatives, and partners such as the Leadership Academy or vendors. ADE school improvement personnel say that staff members on the new team will work to make sure the districts are connected to the appropriate resources to assist their schools.

FEDERAL PROGRAMS

In the past, because of federal and state directives, ACSIP and then Indistar have functioned as school districts' applications used for federal funds (Titles I, II, III and IV) in addition to being the school improvement tool. Legislation in 2015 allowed some decoupling of these purposes, and Act 930 divorced the two altogether. Even so, while Indistar is not the mandated tool for developing and submitting school improvement plans, it will remain the tool that all school districts must use to apply for federal funds. ADE personnel believe this change – plus appropriate scheduling of applications due dates after the planning process – will help schools plan for interventions and then apply for federal funds to help pay for them, thus reversing the complained about trend that funding requirements rather than needs drove the improvement planning process.

RESOURCES

Meeting with Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) school improvement staff (Deborah Coffman, Elbert Harvey, Mike Hernandez and Tiah Frazier) on March 8, 2017.

Email dated April 11, 2018, from Deborah Coffman, ADE Assistant Commissioner for Public School Accountability.

Act 930 of 2017

Act 841 of 2015

Act 807 of 2007

Act 35 of 2005

Act 999 of 1999

Act 1108 of 1997

Act 915 of 1995

ADE Commissioner's Memo 17-007

"Student gap no narrower, legislators told," Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Sept. 16, 2015.

ADE 2014-15 ACSIP Handbook

"Changes to ACSIP: Providing School Improvement Resources Where the Need is Greatest," Bureau of Legislative Research, Sept. 15, 2015.

BLR Memorandum to the ACSIP Subcommittee, April 2014.

(Draft) Arkansas Department of Education Rules Governing the Arkansas Educational Support and Accountability Act (AESAA) 2018.

Video of Arkansas State Board of Education meeting, Jan. 11, 2018, retrieved at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJd3TIZFJkU&feature=youtube>.