

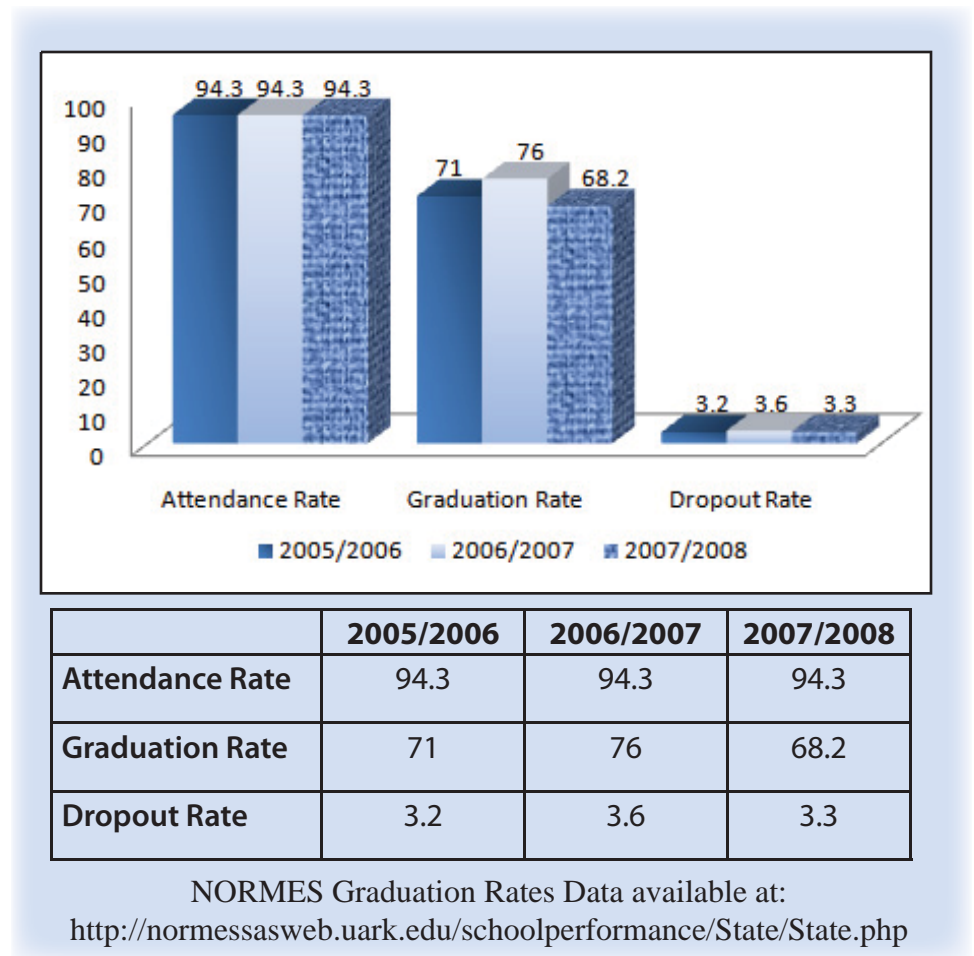
## For Consideration: Influencing Factors on Arkansas Graduation Rates

### FACTS ON DROPOUT PREVENTION

Graduation rates are an important indicator of school performance, according to a recent report from the Alliance for Excellent Education. Rates across the nation are calculated by a No Child Left Behind (NCLB) formula that renders the number of graduates from high school each year (see *Defining Dropout* fact sheet). Yet discrepancies between state-reported, federally-reported, and independently-reported statistics arise<sup>1\*</sup>. Thus an examination of state-reported figures, apart from federally or independently reported data, may offer a means of improving local graduation rates.

On a national level, research on Arkansas Graduation Rates is scarce. Most research focuses on major cities with a greater population. While dropout prevention activities have not been extensively researched in Arkansas as proven techniques for improving graduation rates, a close examination of Arkansas graduation rates point to the importance of becoming involved in dropout prevention activities.

Compared to the national average Arkansas's year-to-year progress has been steadily improving. However, a district level analysis of graduation rates reveals that the



improvement is not significant. In fact, some Arkansas school districts are experiencing declines in graduation.

One source of information on Arkansas graduation rates is the National Office for Research on Measurement and Evaluation Systems (NORMES), which provides a system for early detection. NORMES research shows

that overall rates in the state have decreased from 71% in the 2005/06 school year to 68.2% in the 2007/08 school year, with the largest decrease occurring from the 2006/07 to the 2007/08 school year. The graduation rate for the 2006/07 school year was 76%, 7.8% higher than the 2007/08 rate.

According to Diploma Counts 2009<sup>5</sup>, a report produced by the

# Graduation Rates

## Top 10 Highest Rating Schools for 2007 - 2008

High School	Grad Rate
1. Cave City	98.6%
2. Salem	98.5%
3. Pangburn	98.4%
4. Izard Co. Cons.	98.2%
5. Foreman	98%
6. Caddo Hills	97.9%
7. West Side	97.8%
8. Mount Ida	97.8%
9. Stephens	97.7%
10. Dierks	97.6%

## Top 10 Lowest Rating Schools for 2007 - 2008

High School	Grad Rate
1. Blytheville Charter	49.2%
2. Hughes	58%
3. Oak Grove	59.9%
4. Marvell	61%
5. Cross County	64%
6. Strong	64.9%
7. Turrell	65.5%
8. Kingston	67%
9. Earle	68.6%
10. Osceola	68.7%

Editorial Projects in Education Research Center (EPERC), the national graduation rate average was 69.2% in 2006, the most recently reported year available for comparison. Arkansas graduation rates have been, on average, higher than the national average. Yet, a 10-year trend analysis of these rates shows that the U.S. average has increased 2.8% from 1996 to 2006, while the Arkansas average has increased 2.5%.<sup>5</sup> These averages reveal that, although increasing, Arkansas graduation rates are climbing below the national average. The decreases occurring within the 10-year range led to this lower average.

While the Diploma Counts report includes state-by-state comparisons of graduation rates, another important consideration is district-by-district comparisons within the state. An examination between districts in the state reveals that local graduation rates are not improving at a significant rate. When subgroups such as students

in rural areas, poverty, or minority groups are considered, these numbers decrease even more. In fact, several school districts have graduation rates below state and national averages.

## Regional Considerations

Solving the problem of lower graduation rates may need a closer look in rural Arkansas. When NORMES data on Arkansas graduation rates are examined, the numbers reveal that school districts with the lowest graduation rates are in the more rural areas of the state. For example, the number one lowest ranking school district is Blytheville Charter School, with a graduation rate of 49.2% in 2007-2008.

Nationally, studies have long supported the fact that educational achievement is lagging in rural areas. Generally, research asserts that, “rurality directly influences educational outcomes,” which may in part be due to family struc-

ture and teacher expectations. For example, a 2001 study asserts that, “Students living in rural areas of the United States achieve at lower levels and drop out of school at higher rates than do their nonrural counterparts,” and goes on to cite that a “disproportionate share of the nation’s high school dropouts likewise live in rural places.”<sup>11</sup>

The same study explains that “Institutional resource disadvantages at family and school levels reflect rural labor market opportunity, and specifically rural areas’ dependence on low-wage, labor-intensive work (e.g., agriculture, mining, timbering) and low-wage service-sector jobs.”<sup>11</sup>

## Socioeconomic Considerations

The correlation between academic achievement and socioeconomic status (SES) is a complex one. Part of the complexity stems from variations of defining the concept. “Unlike poverty status, SES signifies an individual’s, a family’s, or a group’s ranking on a hierarchy according to its access to or control over some combination of valued commodities such as wealth, power, and social status,” affirms a 1998 study.<sup>10</sup> In a more recent study, Sirin (2005) states, “While there is disagreement about the conceptual meaning of SES, there seems to be an agreement... that incorporates parental income, parental education, and parental occupation as the three main indicators of SES.”<sup>12</sup>

In a 1982 analysis, White concluded, “...it appears that SES has become a convenient label to attach to a variety of different combina-

tions of variables. A significant amount of confusion could be avoided if a distinct, widely accepted definition of SES existed.”<sup>13</sup>

Did a more widely accepted definition of SES exist by the time Sirin replicated White’s meta-analysis in 2005? While he agreed that SES could be defined by the three main characteristics of parental income, parental education, and parental occupation, he recommends that a fourth indicator of SES be examined—home resources.

According to Sirin, “In recent years...researchers have emphasized the significance of various home resources as indicators of family SES... household possessions such as books, computers, and a study room, as well as the availability of educational services after school and in the summer.”<sup>12</sup>

### Minorities and SES

Although defining SES has been a challenge among researchers, there is evidence that SES, however it is defined, does affect a student’s likelihood of graduation from college. While this finding is typically consistent, the degree to which SES affects achievement is what varies. Worth noting are the varying types of SES, which offer alternative methods for assessing this effect. For instance, in the Sirin analysis, it was found that *family* SES has little effect on achievement for minority students. However, both *neighborhood* and *school* SES are strong predictors of achievement, particularly in African American communities.

Sirin alerts that this finding

should be of concern. He asserts that, “The finding that family background variables such as parental education, income and occupation are less predictive for minorities should be of concern not only for reasons of future research methodology, but also for its social policy implications...the weaker SES-achievement correlation among minorities in general and African Americans in particular is not solely because of their minority status but partly because most

attributes...conducive to higher achievement...attainment...in cultural practices such as visiting museums and/or taking extracurricular classes in subjects such as dance, art, or music.”<sup>11</sup> Given that these activities often require money and transportation, low SES may contribute to decreased cultural capital, which may in turn effect academic achievement.

## Socioemotional Considerations

According to a 1998 study,

families living in a low-income neighborhood have children who are at greater risk of failing academically and dropping out of school.<sup>10</sup> In fact, a 2008 study found that “...even after

Graduation Rate by Student Group <sup>5</sup> Race, and Ethnicity Averages		
	AR	National
American Indian/Alaska Native	50.3	50.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	+	78.9
Hispanic	60.0	55.0
Black (not Hispanic)	63.6	51.2
White (not Hispanic)	74.5	76.1

of these families, and few Whites, live in neighborhoods with higher educational risk factors.”<sup>11</sup>

### SES and Cultural Capital

The 2001 study on rurality and achievement echoes Sirin’s attribution of home resources as an indicator of SES. In the study, these resources are noted as “family educational investments”<sup>11</sup> that contribute to cultural capital. Since these investments will be “constrained where depressed income and family disruption are more commonplace,”<sup>11</sup> lack of cultural capital may decrease student performance.

Specially, researchers Roscigno & Crowley, offer that “First, parents can invest and transmit to their children cultural capital: that is, ‘highbrow’ European cultural

controlling for other factors, the quality of the neighbourhood early in life predicted adult educational attainment, and that, as expected, there were significant gender differences in the effect of neighbourhood quality on attainment.”<sup>6</sup>

### Social Support

We must work to provide a support network at school for students from low SES families. One study shows that a support network buffers students from the effects that often result from what they are lacking at home.<sup>9</sup>

### Nutrition and Achievement

In a 2010 report, Berliner asked the provocative question, “Are Teachers Responsible for Low Achievement by Poor Students?”<sup>3</sup> In the report, he examined the relationship between food insecurity

and achievement. "...there exists no 'safe' level of inadequate nutrition for children," reports Berliner. "Even nutritional deficiencies of a relatively short duration--a missed breakfast, an inadequate lunch--impair children's ability to... learn."<sup>3</sup> Food security rates are 3.4 times higher in households with incomes below the official poverty line, thus deepening correlation between SES and academic achievement.

### Teacher Expectations

Studies have shown that teacher expectations are a strong predictor to student success. In a 2003 study, researchers found that "children in student-centered classrooms were less likely to be disadvantaged by low expectations based on teachers' perceptions....," and showed "the importance of investigating both teachers' beliefs and values and the educational contexts in which they are enacted."<sup>7</sup>

Results from a 2007 study highlighted general findings that a phenomenon called "stereotype threat" also effects student performance with regard to expectations. Researchers, Leach and Williams, state that, "...a group's performance is significantly worse when group members are aware of the negative

Graduation Rate by Student Group <sup>5</sup> Gender, Race, and Ethnicity – Female Averages		
	AR	National
American Indian/Alaska Native	57.2	51.2
Asian/Pacific Islander	+	80.8
Hispanic	+	59.2
Black (not Hispanic)	69.5	57.5
White (not Hispanic)	76.2	78.4

Graduation Rate by Student Group <sup>5</sup> Gender, Race, and Ethnicity – Male Averages		
	AR	National
American Indian/Alaska Native	25.7	45.2
Asian/Pacific Islander	+	75.4
Hispanic	+	49.9
Black (not Hispanic)	54.8	44.0
White (not Hispanic)	69.9	73.0

expectancy of their performance."<sup>8</sup>

### Gender Considerations

According to a 2008 report by the American Association of University Women, "Research consistently shows that across all racial/ethnic groups, a higher percentage of women than men graduate."<sup>4</sup> That percentage increases more when the graduation rates of black males are examined.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, most young women and men graduate from high school, with a small gap favoring women. In 2006, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 88.5 percent of women ages 25 to 29 had graduated from high school, compared to 84.4 percent of males, with a larger gender gap among Hispanics.

Using Arkansas Diploma Count's statistics, a comparison between female and male graduation rates reveals a 31.5% difference, in favor of females.<sup>5</sup> The largest variance occurs between female and

Graduation Rate by Student Group <sup>5</sup> Gender Averages		
	AR	National
Male	50.3	50.0
Female	+	78.9

### Future Research Considerations

#### Arkansas Graduation Rates

Children in high SES families may be more likely to live in a home with access to a computer, technology, and books—all of which are factors that influence a student's academic achievement in today's information-driven economy. As of yet, research on the effect of home computer access on academic achievement is minimal. Perhaps future research would yield answers to the question: How does home resources, as a construct of SES, effect graduation rate? Other research questions to consider might include:

- How many Arkansas children live in a home without a computer or books?
- How does that picture change when variables such as rurality are considered?
- How many Arkansas parents work with schools to foster school-community collaboration?

male graduation rates for American Indian/Alaska Native students in Arkansas. Among black students, females graduate at a 14.7% greater rate than black males. The smallest gender difference between male and female graduation rates is among whites.<sup>5</sup>