

Postsecondary Remediation and Rogers' Academic Guarantee

Over a decade ago, Rogers School District implemented a policy called the Academic Guarantee, promising to reimburse eligible graduates who have to enroll in remedial courses in college. In this brief, we examine Arkansas's college remediation policy, Rogers' policy, and how this might affect other Arkansas school districts.

Background: Closing the Gap 2020

In October of 2015, the Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE) released *Closing the Gap 2020*, a plan to increase educational achievement and attainment in Arkansas over the next five years. This plan is a portion of the longer-term goal of raising the percentage of Arkansans earning a credential or degree from the current percentage of 43% to 60% during the 2019-2020 school year. The ADHE listed four goals to increase educational achievement and attainment:

- 1) Raise completion and graduation rates by 10% per year
- 2) Increase enrollment of 25-54 year olds by 75% by 2018
- 3) Raise attainment rates of underserved groups by 10% and
- 4) Improve college affordability through effective resource allocation.

One strategy the ADHE proposes to raise completion and graduation rates (goal 1) is to “[r]educe the percentage of students needing remediation to prepare them for college-level coursework.”¹ Remedial coursework is typically a high school level course for students deemed unprepared academically for college-level coursework. Remedial courses do not count as credit towards graduation but students still pay for the course and is often identified as a barrier to college completion.

Compared to the rest of the country, Arkansas students are more likely to require college remediation. In 2011-12, the most recent year of available national data, 49% of Arkansas's students required remediation, 16 points higher than the national average of 33%.² Arkansas's remediation rate has decreased slightly over the last few years, as 41% of students in college in Arkansas enrolled in at least one remedial course in the fall of 2014. Remediation is more common at Arkansas's 2-year colleges, where 67% of students were remediated compared to 29% at 4-year institutions.³

Remediation is expensive. Conservative estimates of the cost of remediation nationwide in the 1990s were over \$1 billion, but rising costs of tuition over the last 20 years have increased these estimates to \$1.5 billion.⁵ The ADHE is aware of not only the cost to the state of having a higher percentage of our students enrolling in remediation in college, but also the impact it has on students. The ADHE writes, [“For too many Arkansas students, achieving their goal of completing a certificate or degree program is delayed,](#)

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[or thwarted, by required enrollment in remedial courses. Although these courses also add to the cost and time required to complete are essential to preparing students for success in college-level courses, they also add to the cost and time required to complete.”](#)⁶

Remediation in Arkansas

Since 1988, Arkansas has required competency-based testing for students enrolling in college for the first time. This policy requires students seeking an Associate's degree or higher to take placement tests in math, English, and reading, recommending students who score below the state established minimum threshold to enroll in remedial coursework. While students can choose from several tests, most select the ACT. Students taking the ACT earn scores between 0 and 36. The national average ACT score in 2015 was a 21 and the average for Arkansas was a 20.

Students scoring below 19 on the math, English, and/or reading sections of the ACT are recommended for remedial coursework (called “developmental coursework” by practitioners), which does not count as credit towards graduation. Postsecondary institutions in Arkansas can determine their own minimum cutoff score, but it cannot be below the state minimum of 19. Setting cutoffs above the minimum cutoff is often reserved for specific majors at individual postsecondary institutions.

Of the 22,000-plus first time students enrolling in Arkansas colleges and universities in the fall of 2014, 41% were assigned to at least one remedial course. What does this remediation rate mean for Arkansas college students? According to *Closing the Gap 2020*, “**Students requiring remediation pay more in tuition and are less likely to complete a credential...typically only 25-30% successfully enroll in and pass the college-level course required upon completion of remediation.**”⁷

Reducing Arkansas’s postsecondary remediation rate has moved to the forefront of the ADHE’s goals to improve the attainment rates in the state. However, remediation is not something that can be fully addressed at the college level. Instead, it will take a devoted effort at the K-12 and college level to ensure students choosing to pursue postsecondary education are adequately prepared. While there are a variety of efforts Arkansas schools could pursue to reduce the college remediation rates, Rogers School District has a policy in place designed to hold themselves accountable for ensuring their students are prepared.

Rogers SD Academic Guarantee

Since 2004, Rogers has implemented a policy called the “Academic Guarantee”. In this policy, Rogers School District makes a promise to its high school graduates that they will be prepared for college-level coursework. In essence, Rogers is offering a guarantee to its graduates they will be ready for what comes next. The policy states, “For any Rogers graduate who meets all of the...conditions and is then required to take remedial courses upon admission to a public college or university in Arkansas, the Rogers School District agrees to reimburse the student for the full cost for such remedial courses. (If a student enters a public institution outside of Arkansas, or a private institution, the school district will pay remedial tuition comparable to in-state tuition at a public institution in Arkansas.)”

While a novel idea in Arkansas, similar policies have been put into place elsewhere in the country. Minnesota allowed colleges to send a bill to high schools if their graduates were remediated. Also, Hanover County School District in Virginia offered a warranty guaranteeing graduates were ready for college courses or “possessed necessary skills” for employment by including a certification on their graduates’ diplomas.⁹

Cost of an Academic Guarantee, Hypothetically

While the Rogers policy is an interesting one and definitely commendable in that they are essentially providing a monetary guarantee to prepare their students, [no Rogers graduate has taken advantage of this policy](#). However, information is available to calculate what the district would have paid for students in the class of 2014 looking to cash in on their guarantee. There were 1,048 students who graduated from Rogers School District in 2014. Of these, 457 enrolled at a public in-state institution and 178 (39%) enrolled in at least one remedial course.³ With this in mind, this brief uses average costs of tuition at 2- and 4-year

Rogers Academic Guarantee Requirements⁸

To qualify for tuition reimbursement, students must:

- 1) Complete all [Core](#) requirements set by the ADHE
- 2) Have a GPA of 2.50 or greater in Core courses at graduation
- 3) Take the ACT prior to April of 11th grade
- 4) Complete an ACT prep program at the end of junior year if the most recent ACT score in math or English was below 19
- 5) Successfully complete a recommended course of study during senior year if previous ACT scores were below 19
- 6) Take the ACT at least once in the spring semester of senior year if previous scores were not above 19
- 7) Successfully complete an ACT prep program at the conclusion of senior year if scores were below 19
- 8) Have an average attendance of at least 95% for grades 9-12
- 9) Enroll as a full-time student in Rogers Public schools for 5 prior to graduation
- 10) Enroll in college no later than the spring semester following high school graduation

institutions in Arkansas to provide a range of the cost of reimbursing students enrolled in remedial courses.

Unable to track where each individual student attended, we include a range of the cost where the minimum represents every student attending a 2-year institution and the maximum is every student attending a 4-year institution. During the 2014-15 school year, the average cost of a single course at 4-year university based on three credit hours is \$561, with the average per course cost ranging from \$417 at UA-Fort Smith to \$682 at the University of Arkansas for the 2014. For 2-year institutions, we use in-district costs, as most students enrolling in these institutions are from nearby. In this case, the cost per course ranges from \$204 at UACC-Hope to \$368 at Northwest Arkansas Community College.

Table 1 presents the cost of such a remediation policy for Rogers School District, some other Arkansas school districts, including the largest districts in each of the five regions of the state and those with the highest post-secondary remediation rates, and the state as a whole. For Rogers School District class of 2014, if all graduates enrolling in remedial courses qualified for and requested reimbursement, Rogers would have paid between \$42,389 and \$88,645.

Table 1: Cost to Sample of Arkansas School Districts to Implement an Academic Guarantee Policy for the Class of 2014 and beyond

District	College Enrollees ¹	% Remediated	Cost for all 4-year ²	Cost for all 2-year ²	Projected 5-year cost of reimbursement ³
State of Arkansas	22,102	35%	\$4,361,492	\$2,085,637	\$11,413,959 – \$23,019,096
Rogers	457	35%	\$88,645	\$42,389	\$266,756 – \$537,875
Bentonville	474	27%	\$71,215	\$34,055	\$206,428 – \$418,361
Danville	24	42%	\$5,691	\$2,722	\$19,006 – \$38,296
El Dorado	176	58%	\$57,128	\$27,318	\$138,748 – \$281,233
Fayetteville	296	25%	\$40,987	\$19,600	\$137,737 – \$277,741
Fort Smith	411	29%	\$67,050	\$32,063	\$231,215 – \$466,490
Hamburg	58	46%	\$15,022	\$7,183	\$51,188 – \$103,177
Helena/W. Helena	49	78%	\$21,372	\$10,220	\$58,160 – \$117,359
Jonesboro	151	35%	\$29,374	\$14,047	\$109,091 – \$219,843
Little Rock	679	55%	\$209,360	\$100,114	\$663,671 – \$1,338,702
Monticello	62	35%	\$12,200	\$5,834	\$42,895 – \$86,503
Nettleton	118	40%	\$26,130	\$12,495	\$82,625 – \$166,612
Pulaski Co.	440	48%	\$119,141	\$56,972	\$409,187 – \$824,764
Springdale	480	36%	\$96,355	\$46,067	\$312,966 – \$631,012
Stuttgart	70	51%	\$19,935	\$9,533	\$58,799 – \$118,444
Texarkana	87	51%	\$24,679	\$11,801	\$74,224 – \$149,812
West Memphis	135	66%	\$49,875	\$23,850	\$155,306 – \$313,157

¹ Enrollees are the number of students enrolling at an Arkansas 2-year or 4-year institution in the fall of 2014

² Average cost per course consisting of 3 credit hours at a 4-year public institution is \$561 and \$268 at a 2-year institution for the 2014-15 academic year

³ Calculated using the average percent increase in tuition & fees (4% for 4-year and 5% for 2-year), average percentage of students enrolling in post-secondary education from each district, and average percentage of students being remediated in the first year after high school graduation. This is used to predict the potential cost of reimbursement based on current enrollment of students in grades 8 through 12 in each district for the 2015-16 school year, assuming no movement in or out of the district for any of these students. Here, the lower value is all students attending a 2-year college, while the larger value is all students attending a 4-year university

Projected costs for remediation graduates for the next five years are also presented in Table 1. Projections are developed as if college enrollment and remediation rates held steady and if we saw similar increases in tuition and fees at Arkansas's postsecondary institutions. It is important to remember the projected costs are hypothetical and use the averages for increases in tuition and fees, as well district graduation and remediation rates.

As shown in Table 1, there is quite a bit of variation in districts' percentage of students who are remediated at the college level. Certain districts are less likely to graduate students who are prepared for college coursework, or at least to perform well on the ACT as this is the most common metric determining placement in remedial coursework. As Table 1 shows, the cost of reimbursing students appears much larger for some districts and would continue to grow over the future graduating classes. With such high costs and such high variation in costs across districts, this policy seems like a difficult one to implement across the state.

Conclusion

Even though no Rogers graduate has requested reimbursement to date, the district should be commended for establishing this policy. Offering a guarantee of academic preparation increases accountability for the district as a whole and sends a signal to the taxpayers that the district believes in the quality of the education they are providing. It is unclear why Rogers Public School graduates have not taken advantage of this program given that it is readily available on the [district website](#) and included in the student handbook. There is the chance that many students do not qualify, given the 10-point checklist of requirements.

A policy similar to Rogers' "Academic Guarantee" implemented across the state could lead to negative consequences. Districts could council students away from enrolling in postsecondary education if they would qualify for college remediation or push students to only look at less expensive postsecondary institutions.

With Arkansas's new policy of paying for all juniors to take the ACT, schools could also encourage students to attempt the test more times to meet the minimum cutoff and avoid remediation. This would get more students out of remediation, but could put students into courses for which they are not adequately prepared. Simply scoring above the remediation cutoff does not necessarily mean students are prepared for college-level courses. Rather, research from the ACT suggests that students are likely to see their scores increase when they take the test multiple times, suggesting improved test-taking skills instead of better academic preparation.¹⁰

Moving forward, there may be some other disconnects caused by the language used. Often times, practitioners use the term "developmental coursework" in place of "remedial coursework" (see the [National Association for Developmental Education](#)).

Stats on Remediation in Arkansas

- Remediation rates in the fall of 2014 were the lowest in the last five fall terms
- A higher percentage of male students than female students were remediated at 4-year universities (29% vs. 28%)
- A lower percentage of male students than female students were remediated at 2-year colleges (66% vs. 68%)
- A higher percentage of Black and Hispanic students (72% and 47%) were remediated at any postsecondary institution than White or Asian students (33% and 33%)
- Part-time students are more likely to need remediation than full-time students (77% vs. 38%) at any postsecondary institutions
- Most students are remediated in only one subject (48%), but nearly one-third require remediation in two subjects (30%) and just over one-fourth are remediated in three subjects (27%)
- Act 970 of 2009 required reporting of remediation rates for students who had a high school GPA of 3.0 or higher and the number of attempts to pass a remedial course
 - 22% of graduates with 3.0 or better were remediated in all postsecondary institutions (14% in math, 11% in English, and 8% in reading)
 - Most students (85%) only needed one attempt to pass a remedial course during the 2014-15 academic year
- At 4-year universities, 29% of students were remediated during the 2014-15 school year
- At 2-year colleges, 67% of students were remediated during the 2014-15 school year

For more information on college remediation and other postsecondary policies in the state of Arkansas, visit the [ADHE website](#).

The difference in language may be creating confusion, as policy language uses "remedial", but practitioners use the term "developmental". Some consistency in practice and policy would be helpful.

One of the biggest issues with remedial coursework and the state's placement policy is that it is determined through a single dimension. Instead of taking multiple measures of student ability and potential into account, Arkansas's ACT

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postsecondary remediation policy determines student placement and future success through ACT performance alone (see note 6).

While tests scores can be indicative of success in college-level coursework, they do not provide a complete picture of student abilities. Research conducted by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) on a large, urban community college network shows that using multiple measures to determine course placement could reduce incorrectly placing students in remedial courses by roughly 15 percent.¹¹ When a study of community college remediation found that four out of five colleges were using only ACT's Compass test to determine placement into math remediation, ACT chose to phase out the test in support of a multi-dimensional approach to placement¹² According to the CCRC, this multi-dimensional approach would include standardized tests along with high school GPA and courses taken to provide a more complete picture of students' ability and potential.

Too many of Arkansas's college enrollees are not adequately prepared for college and are required to complete remedial coursework. Rogers' policy of offering reimbursement to its graduates is admirable, but prohibitively expensive to implement statewide. K-12 and postsecondary systems need to join forces to reduce remediation and increase college completion. Using multiple measures to determine if students are ready for college coursework should be implemented, instead of the single measure used now. Arkansas should revisit its placement policy. We can do more to support college completion than use a single measure to determine remedial placement.

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