



November 22, 2022

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Dear Dr. Sutherlin:

Pursuant to Section 10.00 of the Rules Governing the Standards for Accreditation, I am writing to appeal the decision to recommend that Graduate Arkansas Charter High School (“Graduate Arkansas”) be placed in Accredited-Cited status under Standard 1-C.1.1 of the Standards for Accreditation, as articulated in correspondence dated November 7, 2022, from Deborah Coffman. For several important reasons, Graduate Arkansas does not believe that it should be placed in Accredited-Cited status.

**The ninety-five percent (95%) testing requirement is inequitable due to Graduate Arkansas’ demographics**

As you know, the average age of Graduate Arkansas' 9th/10th graders exceed statewide average ages of the traditional 9th/10th grade cohort. In fact, the typical Graduate Arkansas student is overage and under-credit, which is in keeping with Graduate Arkansas’ mission to be a credit/dropout recovery public charter school. To put this information in context, virtually all of Graduate Arkansas’ student body is comprised of students whose profile correlate neatly with those of students who traditional public schools are regularly unable to test, despite best efforts. Placing Graduate Arkansas in Accredited-Cited status seemingly discourages Graduate Arkansas’ mission to serve the students that have failed to thrive in tradition public school settings.

**The assessment samples students who may be exempt from testing**

While there are times during the school year when the incidence of drop-out among students is higher, academic, social, and economic pressures are unpredictable and make dropping out a recurring problem throughout the school year. Consequently, Graduate Arkansas has positioned itself to be part of the solution by continuously enrolling and promoting students. This model contributes positively to the statewide graduation rate and to the pool of eligible employees and tax payers. However, the testing standards

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against which Graduate Arkansas is being assessed fails to fully appreciate important characteristics of the model. Specifically, it appears that students who have earned credits for promotion before the testing window, which should exempt them from testing, are being captured in testing sample as 10th graders.

**The testing requirement does not allow student to be tested in the manner in which they have elected to be educated**

More than fifty percent (50%) of Graduate Arkansas' 9th/10th grade students elected "virtual" as their chosen educational format. Students choose this option for various reasons, including alignment with other priorities such as outside employment. Despite the fact that students may validly make such an election, the assessment does not allow testing in a virtual format. Therefore, while these students' entire 2021-22 education is provided in a virtual format, they may only be assessed in a different format

**Graduate Arkansas has made extraordinary efforts to meet the 95% testing requirement**

I note that this is not the first year that Graduate Arkansas has been in communication with the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education regarding Graduate Arkansas' efforts to comply with the 95% testing threshold. Graduate Arkansas has always welcomed and sought to proactively implement any recommendations, plans, and support proposed by DESE.

Despite the hurdles discussed above, Graduate Arkansas showed growth in percentage tested compared to 2021 testing data. Graduate Arkansas was able to do so due to extraordinary efforts by its testing administrators, who tested every day of the 2021-22 testing window. Additionally, Graduate Arkansas offered off-campus testing sites across the state, including:

- Pine Bluff (the day after a widely reported shootout; traveled with a SRO)
- Fort Smith (multiple test dates offered)
- Rogers (multiple test dates offered)
- Melbourne
- Springdale
- Gravette
- Jonesboro
- Piggott

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Regardless, efforts to meet the 95% testing threshold have proven futile, largely for the reasons articulated above. Given these efforts and its collaborative approach, Graduate Arkansas is greatly concerned about how it will be assessed moving forward. We believe that efforts will continue to be unsuccessful if the Standards are not applied in a flexible manner that accounts for Graduate Arkansas' model. However, a proactive, collaborative approach will continue to be Graduate Arkansas' posture. Similarly, Graduate Arkansas is hopeful that support will continue to be the foundation of DESE's approach to Graduate Arkansas.

Respectfully,

*Katie Hatley*

Katie Hatley, Superintendent  
Graduate Arkansas, Inc.

Cc: Ms. Deborah Coffman

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