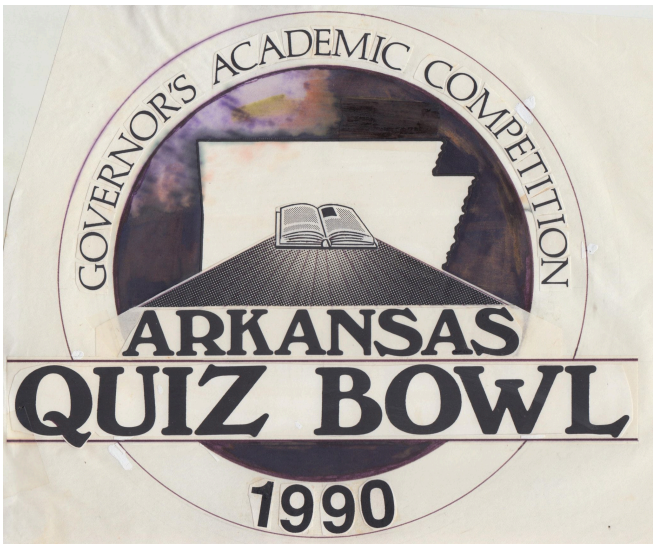
AGQBA History - 1985-2025

For forty years, Quiz Bowl has been an integral part of Arkansas's academic improvement. Born during a significant education reform effort by the state's executive and legislative branches in the mid-1980s, Quiz Bowl has sought to showcase the top academic students of Arkansas, just as the high school sports championships put a face on the top athletes and teams in the state.



Schools of all sizes and designs across the state of Arkansas build competitive academic teams that include students ranging from National Merit Finalists to regular students whose knowledge of various school subjects makes them ideal candidates for Quiz Bowl competition. Though pop culture questions do exist in Quiz Bowl, the majority of questions come directly from the courses mandated by the State Department of Education.

The idea of academic competition was not a new-fangled concept that emerged in the 1980s. Even in the classic radio era, games of skill and intelligence were popular. In the Quiz Show television era, shows like *Jeopardy!* morphed into academic contests between high school and college students nationwide. There is photographic evidence of academic contests on Arkansas television stations in the late 1960s, but no known film or video of matches is available.

During the second term of Governor Bill Clinton (1983-85), the Arkansas General Assembly initiated a significant effort to enhance academic achievement in Arkansas during a special session in the fall of 1983. Act 35 of the 1983 special session, sponsored by Sen. Clarence Bell of Parkin, created the State Recognition Program, which was run and funded by the State Department of Education. Quiz Bowl was one of five components of the new program that sought to recognize schools, teachers, and students for contributions to quality education in Arkansas.

Brenda Matthews was the first director of the State Recognition Program, overseeing Quiz Bowl during its first decade of existence. By the fall of 1984, the state was ready to start Quiz Bowl. In the spring of 1985, 114 high schools across the state (570 students based on team rosters submitted to the Department of Education) were divided into eight regions, and those regional winners would play in a tournament shown live from the Conway studios of the Arkansas Educational Television Network (now known as Arkansas TV). Pine Bluff would defeat Sylvan Hills to win the first Quiz Bowl state title in April 1985, with Gov. Clinton in attendance. This began the partnership Quiz Bowl/AGQBA and AETN, now Arkansas TV.

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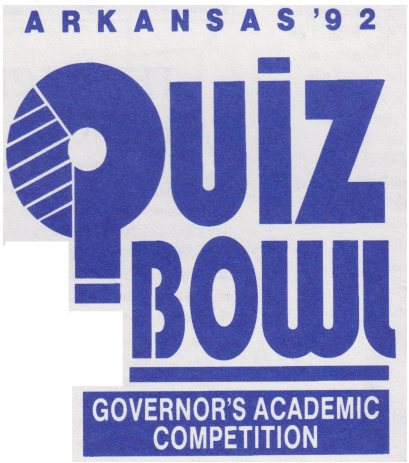
By 1988, when Fort Smith Northside won the first of its ten Overall titles under coach Larry Jones, the number of teams had grown to 229, doubling the number from 1985.

For the first few years, Quiz Bowl teams were not divided by classifications based on enrollment, as sports teams were. This eventually caused a number of smaller schools to drop out, due to the hardships of competing against much larger schools with much larger talent pools. In 1990, Quiz Bowl was divided into four classifications. AETN broadcast the four classification finals, along with an overall tournament consisting of each classification champion and the runner-up.



In 1991, 243 schools, comprising 1,212 students, participated in Quiz Bowl. The program had 32 regional tournaments, four classification state tournaments, and the Overall tournament. Also in 1991, Arkansas Power & Light (now Entergy) began sponsoring Quiz Bowl, providing more financial support for the program.

One of the principal promoters of Quiz Bowl in the early years was the Education Cooperatives, which were established by the state legislature in the mid-1980s and are located throughout the state of Arkansas. Even today, educational co-ops are used for coaches' meetings in the fall and hosting various invitational tournaments throughout the year. Many gifted and talented coordinators at the co-ops help schools with quiz bowl. While AGQBA conducts regional and state tournaments for high schools and junior highs, the cooperatives promote Quiz Bowl for students as young as third grade.

Gifted and talented coordinators at the educational co-ops played a crucial role in the formation of AGQBA in the mid-1990s, as ADE funding for Quiz Bowl was set to end. Two of the coordinators, Carolyn Shry and Martha Cathey, began to organize a new organization with the help of dozens of dedicated Quiz Bowl coaches from across the state. By the spring of 1996, the Arkansas Governor's Quiz Bowl Association (AGQBA) was established, an advisory board was created, and AGQBA was approved by the Arkansas Activities Association (AAA) as a separate activity entity, effective in the 1996-97 school year.

Bill Davis of Bald Knob was selected as the first president of the AGQBA Executive Board of Directors in the spring of 1996. The board also chose Carolyn Shry to serve as AGQBA's first executive director, overseeing the day-to-day operations of the organization. The AGQBA board meets monthly to develop policies and procedures for coaches, establish rules for play, and coordinate the postseason. Board members are generally Quiz Bowl coaches, but school administrators have also served on the board. Two current board members – Rick Clow of Greenwood and Steve Patterson of Arkadelphia – have been a part of the board since its inception, and both have served two separate terms as board president.

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By 1999, Quiz Bowl was in dire need of state funding to continue. Shry, Cathey, members of the AGQBA Board, and others began to lobby the legislature for funding. Sen. Jodie Mahony of El Dorado sponsored legislation to appropriate annual funding for AGQBA (Act 374 of 1999). The majority of the $100,000 grant is allocated to scholarships, to the executive director's salary, and to AETN for broadcasting the state championship matches.

In 2000, thanks to the funding from the legislature, AGQBA established a junior high division, enabling middle schools (grades 6-8) and junior highs (grades 7-9) to participate in regional and state competitions. Because AAA rules prohibit a junior high state champion, AGQBA divided each classification into two divisions to have two winners per classification, thus no single "state" champion.

In 2005, the Overall championships were discontinued, and AETN began live broadcasting of the five classification championship matches, showcasing the talents of Arkansas schools, both large and small, as well as public, private, and charter schools. During the 2004-05 school year, AGQBA celebrated 20 years of Quiz Bowl with a celebratory banquet at the Clinton Presidential Library the night before the championship games were played. The guest speaker that night was Lt. Gov. Win Paul Rockefeller.

Since 2007, AGQBA has expanded to seven classifications to determine high school champions, ranging from 1A to 7A. In junior high, there are also seven classifications, but they are split into two divisions per classification. By the 2006 school year, 240 out of 305 high schools in Arkansas had a Quiz Bowl team.

AGQBA also celebrated 25 years of Quiz Bowl in 2010.

In 2015, to help fund scholarships for worthy Quiz Bowl students, AGQBA created the Friends of Quiz Bowl, a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization. Friends of Quiz Bowl runs the largest single-day, one-site Quiz Bowl tournament in Arkansas. The tournament features more than ninety teams competing at the high school, junior high, and middle school levels. Friends also sponsors the Coach of the Year awards for the top high school and junior high coaches, which are nominated by the coaches and voted on by the Friends of Quiz Bowl Board.

In 2024, Friends of Quiz Bowl established the Arkansas Quiz Bowl Hall of Fame, with Carolyn Shry as the inaugural inductee. The 2025 inductees included coaches such as Fort Smith Northside's Larry Jones, who won two national championships, as well as ten overall and

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nine classification state titles; players such as Leonard Cooper, who not only was an MVP at eStem but also won the *Jeopardy!* Junior championship while attending Brown University, and contributors like President Bill Clinton, who was a champion of the State Recognition Program in 1983.

Although not mentioned by name, credit is due to the thousands of teachers, school administrators, bus drivers, parents, and volunteers who spend countless hours helping Quiz Bowl coaches and the AGQBA prepare and administer the preseason tournaments, regional, and state competitions throughout the state. Moderators ensure that tournament games run smoothly and, along with judges, verify that the questions (and answers provided) are accurate. As good as the AGQBA board, executive director, and coaches across the state are, Quiz Bowl would not be successful without the help of these volunteers who give up a school or workday, or a Saturday, to make the tournaments successful.

Since 1985, Quiz Bowl state champions have received more than $850,000 in scholarship money due to the team's success. Throw in scholarships awarded by the Friends of Quiz Bowl, and students have received more than $900,000 for participating in Quiz Bowl in Arkansas.

AGQBA has also hosted quiz bowl camps in the fall for junior high and senior high students. The junior high camps are one-day events held at various locations across the state, making them more accessible for teams, individual players, and their parents to attend. High School camp is an overnight retreat that begins on Friday night and continues through the day on Saturday. These camps help to improve the skills of each player who attends.

Every May, AGQBA also hosts an All-Star Camp, to which all-state and all-region players from both high school and junior high are invited. Players are divided into teams and compete both as a team and individually, earning honors in both categories.

Quiz Bowl has proven to be a smashing success since its humble beginnings forty years ago. With the help of the legislature, school administrators, Arkansas TV, coaches, players, parents, and volunteers, there is no telling how successful AGQBA will be in the next forty years.

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