



Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind

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Jacob Oliva
Secretary

K. Nicole Walsh
Superintendent

ARDB Superintendent Report October 2026

Update

- Our Lions Track & Field Team traveled to Ohio to participate in the NCASB Track and Field Championships where our girls won 1st place and one senior won "Outstanding Track Athlete."
- Residential Advisor Sheri Buddenberg was recognized for her exceptional dedication to students and her ongoing commitment to supporting dorm life and student success.
- A campus lockdown drill was conducted to evaluate emergency response procedures and preparedness. The drill provided valuable opportunities to identify areas for improvement and strengthen emergency response protocols, enhancing campus safety and readiness.
- Blind and Deaf Department seniors have launched fundraising efforts to support their Senior Trip, with sales of cookies, candy corn, and beef jerky currently underway.
- Leopard volleyball and football season is ongoing, with students benefiting from both home and away game experiences that support athletic development, teamwork, and personal growth.
- ARDB students and staff are looking forward to several upcoming activities, including the annual Northwest Arkansas trip featuring visits to Crystal Bridges, the University of Arkansas, and Camp War Eagle. The school is also preparing for Homecoming festivities, the Homecoming Parade, and Red Ribbon Week. These shared experiences help bring students and staff together across both departments, supporting relationships and a stronger sense of community as ARDB continues to grow as one school.
- Training of Trainers- Instructional Administration attended the Meaningful Access Train the Trainer. We will be providing professional development regarding Universal Design for Learning and Meaningful Access in the coming months.

- Dorm Study Meetings- The Joint Leadership Committee for the new instructional building has launched the Dorm Study Project. This is the preliminary step to take the request for new dormitory funding to legislation. While this is simply concept and cost factors, it allows us to begin looking forward to further campus improvements.
- MAP Testing- Students from both departments completed MAP testing. For the first time in Superintendent's tenure, we completed testing providing only IEP required accommodations giving us more clear picture of our students' progress.

Human Capital Update

1. Resignations/Terminations:
 - a. Elizabeth Spilman, Teacher I
 - b. Darren Thomas, Residential Care Supervisor
 - c. Patrick Hoover, User Support Analyst
 - d. Velise Burks, Residential Care Specialist
2. New Hires:
 - a. Meranda Upshaw, Education Paraprofessional
 - b. Meredith Wilson, Occupational Therapist
 - c. Katelyn Patterson, Residential Care Coordinator

Operations Update

Kurt Swartzlander, Division Fiscal Administrator & Director of Operations

Accomplishments

- 2 Housekeeping positions filled with employees beginning work October 12, 2026.
- 3 Security team positions offered and accepted with anticipated start dates of October 12, 2026.
- Conducted interviews for open position in finance, offer extended.
- Conducted Fire, Tornado and Lockdown Drills.
- Received approval to purchase two new vans for transportation pending complete bid procedures.
- Facilities dealt with two major power outages and one gas main rupture.
- Facilities worked with CAW to isolate 2 water leaks north of the new school building, isolation of the leak and capping of the pipe is complete.

Upcoming Projects/Priorities for the Next 30-60 Days

- Interview and select candidates to fill remaining security team positions.

- Schedule 2 vans to go to M/R.
- Complete keying plans for new building.
- Work with OSP to conduct RFP for HVAC services.

Large Costs or Savings

- Ordered replacement A/C coil for Breeding Cafeteria \$13,804.76 not including installation costs.

Education Update – Deaf Department

KaAnn Varner, Principal

Executive Summary

Since the start of the school year, the Leopard Principal has used the *Leopard Daily News* email to communicate daily operational updates, staff coverage assignments, professional learning opportunities, school activities, testing schedules, athletic events, facility concerns, and staff accomplishments.

Key areas of focus during this reporting period included MAP testing, athletic events, and International Week of the Deaf activities. On September 8, ARDB teachers met with Superintendent Nicole Walsh to discuss teacher licensure. A Leopard Spirit Rally was held on September 18, and Board Member Jerry Belew inspired Deaf students by sharing his life experiences and encouraging them to do their best.

Data Highlights

Attendance:

Elementary: Number of Students – 41

Secondary: Number of Students – 30

Staff Absentee Percentage = 8.74% Total Attendance = 91.26%

Student Absentee Percentage = 9.64% Total Attendance = 90.36%

International Week of the Deaf

During International Week of the Deaf, Principal KaAnn Varner provided daily communications that promoted awareness of Deaf culture, sign languages, educational access, and global issues impacting Deaf individuals and communities.

- Deaf culture and community achievements.
- Human rights and educational access for Deaf individuals.
- Recognition of sign languages as full and equal languages.
- Global challenges involving language deprivation and educational access.
- Awareness of multiple national sign languages across the world.
- The communications highlighted the importance of multilingual education and equitable access to language and instruction for Deaf students worldwide.

Accomplishments

- Successfully maintained instruction continuity across classrooms.
- Effectively managed daily operational updates, coverage assignments, testing schedules, and staff recognition using the *Leopard Daily News*.
- Facilitated and supported MAP testing during the latter part of September.
- Successfully coordinated school events and International Week of the Deaf activities.
- Communicated and reinforced clear staff absence notification procedures and expectations for advance supervisor notification.
- Superintendent Nicole Walsh, Principals KaAnn Varner and Lori Cole, LeAnn Brazil (ARDB LEA), and Beth Helms, Related Services Coordinator, attended the Training of Trainers (ToT) program held September 24-25, 2026, at the Arch Ford Educational Cooperative.

Upcoming Projects/Priorities for the Next 30-60 Days

- Develop and implement elementary weekly PBIS incentives that are separate from the ROAR store.
 - Finalize plans for Leopard and Lion Teachers to find their buddies for collaborative educational activities at least once monthly.
 - Analyze MAP score data.
 - Making preparations for Homecoming/Red Ribbon Week.
 - Staff assignment continues to be reviewed for most effective coverage and instruction.
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Education Update – Blind Department

Lori Cole, Principal

Data Highlights

Attendance:

Student: Daily attendance – 91%

Staff: Daily attendance – 87%

Elementary: Number of Students – 26

Secondary: Number of Students – 24

NWEA assessment growth:

- Elementary: 50% of student increased scores in math, 56% of students improved scores in reading.
- Secondary: 48% of students improved scores in math; 56% of students improved scores in reading.

Accomplishments

- NCASB track season completed, with the girls' track team winning 1st place at the conference meet.
- The second annual Abacus Bee (national competition) was held earlier in September.
- Five middle school students were approved for the Monarch Braille Tablet Pilot Program.
- New staff members: Meranda Upshaw, formerly with World Services for the Blind, joined the Braille Department as a paraprofessional; and Doris Pettis joined in an extra-help position as a paraprofessional supporting the Expanded Core Curriculum and *Bridges to Life* classes.
- Partnered with the Arkansas Foundation for the Blind to send 5th and 6th grade students to Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama.
- The TESS observation schedule was completed. POP cycles will begin with pre-observation conferences on October 9.

Upcoming Projects/Priorities for the Next 30-60-90 Days

- Conduct October's pre-observation/observation/post observation (POPs).
- Review NWEA results with teachers and make steps for meaningful growth for all students.

- Regularly meet with staff to reinforce shared expectations and commitments to education while encouraging strong partnerships.
- To be present in classrooms a minimum of 50% of the time and meet all deadlines regarding reporting.
- Successfully complete the second quarter of the 2026-27 school year.

Large Costs or Savings

Blind Department Athletic budget requires review and prioritization. Fundraising efforts are being discussed.

Interpreting Services Update

Cora Majan

Data Highlights

Category	September	YTD	FY26
Educational	52	120	335
Mental Health Sessions	20	34	209
Medical Assignments	9	12	198
IEP Related Meetings	6	10	161
Staff Meetings	25	90	397
After-Hours	4	9	47
Spoken Language	0	0	56
Other Events (PD, etc.)	15	82	270
TOTAL	131	357	1673

The table above reflects interpreting assignments where interpreter services were provided across educational, mental health, staff meeting, professional development, and other campus-related settings.

Accomplishments

- Crystal Bridges agreed to arrange and fund interpreting services directly for future visits.
- One new staff member has recently been determined ready to provide instruction without an interpreter. The phase-out plan is in place and check-ins to ensure comfort and continuity will be conducted.

Large Costs or Savings

- The department reduced its educational interpreting load this month by removing interpreters from one classroom, as the teacher has developed sufficient proficiency to operate independently. This change eliminates the need for a full-day interpreter five days a week, allowing those resources to be reallocated.
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Development Department Update

Kevin Lentz, Director of Development

Executive Summary

The Development Department focused on volunteer recruitment, community engagement, fundraising development, and support for major district events. Staff represented ARDB at the UCA Volunteer Fair, supported the Interpreting Department's recruitment efforts at the UALR Interpreting Fair, and continued preparations for Homecoming Week, the Homecoming Parade, and Trunk-or-Treat. The department also advanced development initiatives through the launch of the ARDB Bonfire storefront, coordinated the purchase of new ARDB-branded apparel for staff and students, and provided support for multiple fundraising initiatives across the district. Additional efforts focused on strengthening volunteer, fundraising, and communication systems to support ongoing district operations.

Accomplishments

1. Coordinated development of the ARDB Bonfire merchandise storefront, which will provide staff, students, families, and supporters with access to ARDB-branded apparel and promotional items.
2. Coordinated the purchase of new ARDB shirts for staff and students featuring the ARDB logo on the front and ASL and Braille artwork on the back.
3. Represented ARDB at the UCA Volunteer Fair and supported the Interpreting Department's recruitment efforts at the UALR Interpreting Fair.
4. Provided guidance and support for four active fundraising initiatives across the district, including planning, approvals, and implementation assistance.
5. Continued planning and coordination for Homecoming Week activities, the Homecoming Parade, and Trunk-or-Treat.
6. Continued refinement of development, fundraising, volunteer management, and communication processes to support district operations.

Upcoming Projects/Priorities for the Next 30-60 Days

- Launch and promote the ARDB Bonfire storefront.
 - Continue volunteer recruitment and community outreach efforts.
 - Execute Homecoming Week activities and Homecoming Parade operations.
 - Coordinate Trunk-or-Treat planning and implementation.
 - Expand Ghost Tours to a weekly schedule throughout October.
 - Support Angel Fund and holiday fundraising initiatives.
 - Continue refinement of communication, volunteer management, and development systems.
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ADCC Department Update

Mandy Akins, Director of ADCC

Accomplishments

- ADCC is excited to welcome our first intern, Bri Gibson. She will be working with us a couple of days a week to help with mock interviews, tutoring college students, and supporting the individual needs of our clients.
- ADCC has officially launched a client-led business enterprise called The 1849 Press! Our clients are currently designing and printing their own custom stickers using a Cricut Press and selling them during home games. With some additional training and practice, we will soon be expanding production into Christmas cards, custom tumblers, and hopefully Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind swag!

Upcoming Projects/Priorities for the Next 30-60 Days

Elevate clients are scheduled to tour Caterpillar Inc. next month as part of ongoing efforts to expose clients to a variety of industries and career pathways. These visits also support the development of community partnerships and potential future employment opportunities. Building on this initiative, clients toured Melzweldz, a locally owned welding business, on September 10.

Special Services Update

Teresa Doan, Director of Special Services

(Special Education, Mental Health & Counseling, Related Services, Statewide Services, Residential Life, Health Services, Child Nutrition, Gifted & Talented)

Health Services

Executive Summary

During September, Health Services continued to provide a high volume of direct nursing care while advancing several department-wide administrative and operational initiatives.

Accomplishments

- Managed increased clinical workload. The workload included scheduled PRN medications as well as specialized treatments and procedures.
- Continued standardization of Health Services operations: Work progressed on strengthening medication-management processes, nursing documentation expectations, provider-order management, and consistent procedures across school-day and residential nursing services.
- Advanced departmental systems and compliance work.

Upcoming Projects/Priorities for the Next 30-60 Days

- Continue recruitment and onboarding efforts
 - Continue implementation and refinement of Medicaid nursing-services documentation and reimbursement processes, including coordination with other departments involved in compliance and billing.
 - Continue strengthening Health Services procedures and documentation systems.
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Food Services

Executive Summary

The Child Nutrition Department's air conditioning system was repaired and is now fully operational.

Data Highlights

September Data: 18 School Days

Participants Approved		Breakfast Meals	Lunch Meals
Free	55	533	678
Reduced	12	147	160
Paid	68	575	759
Total	135	1,255	1,597

Upcoming Projects/Priorities for the Next 30-60 Days

30 Day:

The department will host the Tailgate Lunch on October 29 and support the Leopard Spike-Out weekend on October 30.

60 Day:

The department will coordinate and host the Thanksgiving Lunch on November 19.

Gifted and Talented

Executive Summary

September activities centered on modeling lessons for K–3 teachers and supporting the completion of student observation forms for GT lessons.

Accomplishments

- Worked through the first full month of new GT lesson structure.
- Classroom teachers participated in lessons by completing the student observation forms.

Upcoming Projects/Priorities for the Next 30-60 Days

- Schedule the annual GT Advisory Committee meeting and confirm committee membership.
 - Schedule the GT Eligibility Committee meeting.
 - Develop monthly lesson plan packets and instructional kits for K–3 enrichment for October and November.
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SPED

Accomplishments

- New students were admitted to both the Deaf and Blind departments.
- Ongoing efforts remain focused on ensuring compliance with required timelines.
- Significant progress has been made on the requirements outlined in the Corrective Action Plan (CAP) issued by the Hearing Officer.

- On September 22, 2026, DESE conducted a required three-hour training session, representing an important step toward completion of the CAP.
- The department completed the first two days of the Trainer of Teachers program and is scheduled to participate in a follow-up meeting on November 30, 2026.

Upcoming Projects/Priorities for the Next 30-60 Days

- The department is participating in the Trainer of Trainers program this semester, which includes a virtual follow-up session on November 30, 2026, and on-site training days at Arch Ford Education Service Cooperative on December 8-9, 2026.
- LeAnn Brazeal, ARDB's Local Education Agency (LEA) representative, is scheduled to attend the LEA Academy in Hot Springs on October 6-7, 2026.
- Stacy Swartzlander, ARDB's Gifted and Talented Coordinator, is scheduled to attend AGATE training in Benton on October 15, 2026.
- A team of four staff members is scheduled to attend the Arkansas Transition Summit in Hot Springs on October 27-28, 2026.
- A future goal is to provide training to education service cooperatives and school districts on ARDB's admissions process. Continued outreach is needed to address confusion among districts regarding referral and admission procedures for prospective students.

Related Services

Data Highlights

- Deaf Department Speech-Language services delivered 91.2% of prescribed minutes
- Deaf Department Physical Therapy delivered 93.9% of prescribed minutes
- Blind Department Speech-Language services delivered 68.5% of prescribed minutes.
- Blind Department Physical Therapy delivered 66.2% of prescribed minutes.
- Occupational Therapy delivery during the provider transition was 17.9% in the Deaf Department and 4.5% in the Blind Department.
- Planned compensatory minutes for the missed minutes is fully implemented. We expect all services to be caught up by December 2026.

Billing

Period	Billed	Received	Remaining Balance
September 1-30	\$14,258.38	\$3,094.74	\$11,163.64

Period	Billed	Received	Remaining Balance
August 1-September 30	\$34,358.62	\$10,254.14	\$24,104.48

Balances reflect ASPYRE records at the time of reporting and remain subject to billing follow-up.

Accomplishments

- Meredith Wilson, OTD, joined ARDB as a full-time Occupational Therapist on September 28. Her experience includes pediatric rehabilitation, neurorehabilitation, behavior support, and residential services.
- Laurel Slotter was hired as ARDB's first Speech-Language Pathology Assistant and will begin October 12. As a fluent ASL signer, she will expand intervention opportunities while increasing clinician capacity for evaluations and complex communication needs.
- Appreciation goes to Lyndal Green for continued support as a contracted Occupational Therapist during the transition period.
- Deaf Department Speech-Language Pathologists successfully maintained services, evaluations, IEP participation, classroom collaboration, and communication support despite staffing challenges.
- Pam Rogers and Haley Mitchell prepared students for Cane Quest and coordinated planning for White Cane Day activities on October 14.
- Madison Jones, a UAMS Audiology Intern, continued clinical training under the supervision of Dr. Henry, strengthening ARDB's partnership with UAMS and support of future professionals in the field.
- Related Services staff provided Blind Department staff with consistent guidance regarding OT service interruptions, and information was shared with families through ParentSquare. Families with ongoing concerns were offered individual reviews through the Related Services Coordinator.

Priorities for the Next 30-60 Days

- Complete onboarding and implementation of schedules for Meredith Wilson.
 - Welcome Laurel Slotter and establish training, supervision, and documentation procedures for the SLPA role.
 - Conduct an inventory of therapy materials and equipment needed for the in-house Occupational Therapy program.
 - Continue restoring consistent Occupational Therapy service delivery across both departments.
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