

**OFFICIAL MINUTES FROM THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES MEETING  
ARKANSAS SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF AND BLIND**

The Board of Trustees of the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind held its regular monthly meeting on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2026. The next meeting will be held on April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2026.

Chair Dr. McAllister called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m.

**Present:**

Dr. John McAllister, Chair  
Jerry Belew, Board Member  
Philip Powell, Board Member  
Cary Smith, Board Member  
Rob Fagan, Board Member  
K. Nicole Walsh, Superintendent  
Interpreters  
Members of the Community

**Absent:**

Phillip Miller, Deaf Department Parent Representative

**26-DB-74 Motion to Approve Meeting Minutes, Financial Statements, and Personnel Items**

Board Member Rob Fagan made a motion to approve the meeting minutes, financial statements, and personnel items. Board Member Philip Powell seconded the motion. The motion to approve the meeting minutes, financial statements, and personnel items unanimously passed.

Board Member Cary Smith asked about the titles listed next to some positions and asked if that was related to their ASL rating. Superintendent Nicole Walsh explained that these weren't Office of Personnel Management (OPM) labels but are instead for total qualifications for the role and that they are a working title of sorts that is used on campus.

Board members Cary Smith, Rob Fagan, and Board Chair Dr. John McAllister asked about ASL and Braille training required of staff and how they achieve differentials.

The winner of our school Spelling Bee led the Pledge of Allegiance

## **26-DB-75 Motion to Approve Board Positions and Rotation**

Board Chair Dr. John McAllister will rotate off as Board Chair in January of 2027. Board Member Jerry Belew will become the Board Chair until January 2028 with Board Member Cary Smith 2029, Board Member Phillip Powell 2030.

Board Member Rob Fagan made a motion to move forward with Dr. John McAllister as Board Chair until January and to add Jerry Belew as Vice Chair with Board Member Cary Smith as Secretary. Board Member Philip Powell seconded the motion. The motion to move forward with the board rotation unanimously passed.

## **Superintendent Report**

Student Advisory Council (SAC) and staff toured the new building, and it was a great opportunity for everyone to see the process of the building coming together. Both staff and students were very happy that their voices were being heard on the new building and shared excitement for the future.

Final documents were submitted for the Parnell renovation. We've applied for the Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council (ANCRC) Grant for \$1.2 million dollars, and we received the full request for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) improvements to Parnell Hall. This will be our central offices in the future with the downstairs still being "kid friendly." Our goal is to renovate it back to its former glory. This looks to cost close to \$12 million, and we have applied for another ANCRC grant for \$4.8 million dollars, so this will have to be done in phases.

We have been locking down our budget and determining what we really need and if we already have it. Next year we will be building our budget from scratch and overall, leadership has been very excited about that.

New positions are to be posted in April. Superintendent Walsh is going to work with school leadership to find out what positions we really need. We are working with several schools to hone in on opportunities for students. We are aiming to post when others traditionally post so that we can be competitive in our hiring. We have attended several universities job fairs as well to put the word out.

We have a lot of outreach happening on campus right now. Nurse Deana Shields is hosting nursing interns from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS,) Interpreter Coordinator Clayton Higgins has a partnership with the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) and has hosted multiple sets of interns, and our Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) have hosted numerous University of Central Arkansas (UCA) interns.

Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind | Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes

Prepared by Blair Anderson

Approval Date:

Kate Spontak from Master Gardeners of Central Arkansas donated 32 trees to our school. She and her staff helped our students plant them around campus.

The Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) came to campus to see how we can partner to support deaf and blind students that need services.

Board Chair Dr. John McAllister asked Superintendent Nicole Walsh about the dates for Summer School and asked if she could email that to him.

Superintendent Nicole Walsh also spoke about the Division of Services for the Blind (DSB) has been furloughed twice in the last six months awaiting funding. This was followed by the retirement of DSB, Cassondra Williams, and the appointment of Interim Director Nathan Winter. Superintendent Nicole Walsh had a meeting scheduled with them as well as the Arkansas Department of Commerce the following day. Superintendent Nicole Walsh also explained that there are arrears of services from October, and there were still services being authorized into February. She has been assured that Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) is a priority as well as Jumpstart.

Board Member Cary Smith asked how things at DSB will affect our students with the role that they play in transition of service. Superintendent Walsh said that our students aren't meeting with their counselors and have not been paid for their work studies on campus. She also mentioned that there was enough funding in the "rainy day fund" at World Services for the Blind (WSB) for us to maintain our Life Skills class on campus several days a week. Unfortunately, this change does impact former students as several of them were sent home from WSB due to lack of funding, though some were able to receive scholarships to extend their stay for a month or so. Board Member Rob Fagan expressed his gratitude for the ASB Foundation for giving scholarships to allow some of the WSB students to continue receiving services. Board Member Cary Smith asked what the Special Needs Fund is being allotted for and if it was only for student needs that are still at ARDB, and Superintendent Walsh confirmed that it was only for student needs that are enrolled in our school. She also explained that it is intended to close the gap for clothing needs and others for our students.

Board Chair Dr. John McAllister stated that Educational Services for the Visually Impaired (ESVI) has also had their budget cut and asked if we were able to support any of their students. Superintendent Walsh expressed surprise that the funding for ESVI had been cut. They are currently under the Arkansas Department of Education so ARDB is able to help if needed. Board Chair Dr. John McAllister said that he would be interested in reestablishing our affiliation with ESVI and Services for the Deaf and Blind.

Board Member Cary Smith gave a shout out to the ARDB Track and Wrestling Teams and said that the coaches are doing an awesome job.

Board Member Jerry Belew asked what will happen with the football program next year and if we have enough students. Superintendent Walsh explained that we do not have enough students to participate in it but we are in discussion with a local private school to see if they would be willing to allow our students to join their football team.

Board Member Rob Fagan asked what dates our students would be going on the Crystal Bridges trip and Superintendent Walsh stated that they are going to Crystal Bridges on March 31<sup>st</sup> and the tour of the University of Arkansas will be on April 1<sup>st</sup>.

### **26-DB-76 Motion to Adjourn**

Board Member Rob Fagan made a motion to adjourn. Board Member Philip Powell seconded the motion. The motion to adjourn was unanimously passed.

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Dr. John McAllister, Board Chair

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Cary Smith, Board Secretary