



## DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

# **Lee County School District**

## **Legislative Quarterly Report**

April - June 2024

Submitted by

Office of Coordinated Support & Service

Sheila Whitlow, Associate Deputy Commissioner

July 2024

Pursuant to Ark. Code Ann. § 6-13-112, a quarterly status report is provided for each school district currently under state authority. The following report is submitted to the State Board of Education, the Chairs of both the House and Senate Education Committees, and others prescribed by law

## **Current DESE Quarterly Support**

### **Submitted: Sheila Whitlow, Associate Deputy Commissioner**

The Division of Elementary and Secondary Education's Office of Coordinated Support and Service (OCSS) provides direct support to Lee County School District (LCSD). Sheila Whitlow, Associate Deputy Commissioner and OCSS Director, delivers direct guidance to the state-appointed superintendent weekly, coordinating various external resources to maintain consistency in efforts. Dr. John West, State Leadership Development Coach, provides onsite support to the principals in the district. Julie Amstutz, State Special Education Leadership Development Coach, supports school and district staff in their efforts to improve instruction, enhance teacher growth, and increase student achievement for students with disabilities. Dr. Michael Watson, State Behavior Leadership Coach, supports school and district staff in their efforts to build a safe, collaborative culture for all students. Dexter Miller, State Technology Development Coach, assists district technology staff in the development and implementation of an effective technology infrastructure to support student learning and instructional efficiency. Carol Herringer, Educational Ombudsmen and DESE Literacy Specialist, Sandy Shepard, DESE Lead Regional RISE Specialist, and Andress Scott, DESE Regional RISE Specialist, assist the district with implementation of literacy instructional approaches and materials aligned with the science of reading. The OCSS team has worked with LCSD administrators, the DESE Fiscal Services and Support unit, and literacy and math specialists from DESE to provide support in all district systems.

During the fourth quarter of the 2023-24 school year, OCSS focused efforts on closing out the 23-24 school year, as successfully as possible. Also, planning for the 24-25 school year was paramount to the OCSS work for this quarter. Staffing and strengthening of Tier I instructional support was a primary focus and will continue to be as we move forward.

### **Academics**

The Lee County School District spent the fourth quarter of the 2023-2024 school year finishing out the year and also extensive planning for the 2024-2025 school year. ATLAS testing was conducted on both campuses with only minor issues primarily surrounding connectivity and primarily issues beyond the control of the district. With the implementation of high quality instructional materials (HQIM) and the fidelity of data tracking, primarily at the K-6 building, the district is anxious to see ATLAS data and what adjustments need to be made to continue in a positive direction.

The use of HQIM continues to be paramount as the district seeks to offer consistent, quality instruction at a higher rate of integrity. This challenge relates directly to the human capital component and as such, the district has worked to develop a professional development plan that will strive to build the capacity of teachers, both veteran and new to the district. The district understands that to close learning gaps, there must be more astute attention to consistent, grade level instruction. The district has realized that consistent attention to reading instruction, coupled with proper tracking of student progress can lead to positive change. The challenge will be the development of capacity among staff to maintain the standards.

The implementation of Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) at K-5 and My Perspectives at 6-12 which are both aligned to the Science of Reading has built in the necessary mechanisms to equip staff for success. The New Teacher Project (TNP) continues to be a support and that has had a positive impact thus far. The district hopes this will continue moving forward, particularly, since there will be some new staff at the secondary English level. Moreover, instructional coaches will still be provided in the coming year. One area that will need continued focus is the usage of those coaches to maximize student outcomes. Reflecting on how coaches can actually empower classroom teachers to better develop their craft will be critical. Right now, one will see active teachers throughout the vast majority of classrooms in the district, which is a wonderful sight. However, the consistency, depth, and response to this instruction is mixed and needs a tight lens of support from both internal and external coaches who are supporting the district at this time.

### **Student Support**

In April, the district special education supervisor met to discuss staffing and student needs for the coming school year. Support for building administration was provided at the high school level on developing a more concrete understanding around behavior management plans and functional behavior assessments for students who are in need of such services. The district special education supervisor has been out on leave and will not be returning, therefore, OCSS has taken a very pronounced role in ensuring the continued support of neurodiverse students in the district. Processes such as checklists, check-ins, and support have been put in place, with the hope of ensuring a smooth transition to new leadership.

Behavior concerns among students with individualized education programs (IEPs) does present a challenge, so understanding of the process of providing safeguards to both students and staff has been a core focus this quarter. The district is aware and proactive to have a stronger understanding in this area as we move into the new school year.

The meaningful access of participation for students with disabilities into the general education setting continues to be a focus as the district plans for professional development to start the 2024-25 school year. At the elementary level, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and other student supports have been put in place. The district held a PBIS rewards day which showcased the positive actions of students and was a wonderful celebration for students who have met schoolwide expectations put forth by building leadership. The high school also had a "CTE Fest" that supported all students with a greater understanding of career and technical industries in the area and what skills a student might need to pursue if they choose to be about that industry.

### **Human Capital**

The Lee County School District continues to reduce the amount of teachers who are non-licensed in their district. While this number continued to decrease as the year progressed, the reality is that a pool of certified teachers available for the 2024-2025 school year is simply not available. Despite regular job postings, connections of colleges and universities, and support from OCSS and DESE, the district was not able to fill all positions with certified

teachers. Many teachers, new to the district, will need support regarding licensure. The district remains committed to ensuring that all non-licensed teachers are on a pathway to licensure and receiving targeted support from internal and external coaches on not only the craft of teaching, but the path to licensure as well. The district will partner with OCSS prior to and during the beginning of the upcoming school year to ensure all new staff, who are non-licensed, are set up on the best path for licensure as well supports are in place for attainment.

Development of a quality teacher workforce is likely one of the most glaring challenges facing the district. There is a greater degree of turnover among non-licensed teachers simply because they do not have a credential keeping them in the profession. So, striving to get them licensed and develop their craft is an essential focus for the district. The work they have done in the area of human capital is admirable and should be applauded; however, the reality is that an insufficient teacher pipeline exists to best staff a district in the rural Arkansas Delta.

### **Family and Community Engagement**

The district worked closely to partner with external partners to ensure safety measures were in place for both prom and graduation at the high school. To that end, both events were carried out without incident. The proactive action taken by district leadership is to be commended. Frequent communication among local safety officers, county resources, and city officials led to a concrete plan of support for both events. Events around graduation were held to highlight student academic achievements as well as undergraduate students.

At Anna Strong Learning Academy, the school held both kindergarten and sixth grade graduations with parents and loved ones throughout the community taking part. Plans for field day also led to opportunities for community engagement and local partnerships. The school ensured that much of this was tied to PBIS as well.

Finally, the district, for the third consecutive year, had an Odyssey of the Mind (OM) team qualify to represent the state of Arkansas at the 2024 OM World Finals at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. The team traveled and represented Arkansas at the highest level. Infusing opportunities, such as this, that bring forth those core skills of divergent thinking and creative problems solving skills has been a very successful undertaking for the district. This has been incorporated into the after school programming the district provides.

### **Facilities**

The teaching housing units continue to be on track for use at the start of the 2024-2025 school year. Currently four of the units have licensed teachers who plan to utilize them in the coming year. This will greatly aid in teacher recruitment and retention. These units will be available to fully certified teachers as a means to support and retain them even further beyond the traditional school setting. Below is a rendering of the ARP ESSR funded project.



## **Fiscal Governance and District Operations**

During the regular monthly meeting on May 9, 2024 the State Board of Education released the district from fiscal distress status. This achievement was the product of the district's commitment to ensuring sound financial practices as well as meeting the objectives outlined in the Fiscal Distress Plan. It should be noted the district will continue to partner with the Arkansas Public School Resource Center (APSRC) for fiscal oversight and ongoing support as well as continuing the support provided through DESE. With careful budgeting and prioritizing of expenditures to ensure students needs were met, the district celebrated the close of the fiscal year with a healthy ending legal balance. Dr. Stone employs a variety of methods to ensure financial soundness including maintaining an efficient staff to student ratio; effective use of restricted funds; site-based budgeting; training leadership on school budgets and providing updates on the district's finances.

As stated in previous reports, Lee County School District has the lowest millage rate in the state and despite the tireless efforts of Superintendent Stone and many in the community the recent millage election failed. However, the team is not willing to give up on the effort to win a millage campaign which would fund a much-needed K-12 facility so plans for a future campaign are already in the works for the Spring of 2025. It is the hope of the District that release from fiscal distress, continued academic growth and financial stability will improve community perception and gain the confidence needed to earn the votes of all stakeholders in the Lee County Community.

## **BACKGROUND ON LEE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT**

On March 25, 2019, the State Board of Education found Lee County School District and Lee High School to be in probationary violation of the Rules Governing the Standards for Accreditation (Sections 1-C.2.1 and 1-C.2.2 respectively). The Division of Elementary and

Secondary Education (DESE) recommended to the State Board of Education (SBE) that the Board place the District and Lee High School on probationary status for these violations. The District appealed the Department's determination; however, the SBE did not approve the appeal. Under Ark. Code Ann. § 6-15-207(c), the superintendent and school board were removed and the district was placed under state authority.

Pursuant to Ark. Code Ann. § 6-20-1905, the Arkansas Department of Education identified the Lee County School District as a school district in fiscal distress on May 9, 2019. The Arkansas Department of Education made this identification because the Lee County School District met the fiscal distress indicators as set forth in Ark. Code Ann. § 6-20-1904. The school district, under the leadership of Superintendent Willie Murdock, requested continuation of level 5 support from the SBE on May 13, 2021.