

Helena West Helena Overview

Reports from parents and community members prompted a site visit to Central High School in the Helena-West Helena School District at the start of the 2021-22 school year. In the course of the visit, the team discovered that the master schedule was not properly entered into eSchool resulting in some classes over enrolled and most students without schedules. Students were observed wandering in the halls and many in the gym under employee supervision. Although the impetus for the site visit was a response to reports that instruction was not occurring at the high school, the observations made by the DESE revealed other areas of concern resulting in additional site visits to assess needs and develop a plan of support.

Support

Under the direction of Deputy Superintendent Stacy Smith, the Office of Coordinated Support and Service team (OCSS) provided district and school leadership support in all systems of operation.

- Several classroom focus walks were conducted in both school buildings with members of the district leadership team and occasionally one or both of the high school co-principals. Elementary administration would often greet teams, but not consistently accompany district and OCSS staff on site visits. Instruction was occurring in the majority of the classrooms; with that said, observations revealed inconsistency of instruction at grade level rigor. In addition, the team observed that students were respectful, but engagement typically remained at that compliant level.
- The district's K-12 Literacy Specialist requested support from the team as well as the Great Rivers Education Service Cooperative (GRESK) Reading Specialist to ensure the new phonics program (95% Group) was implemented with integrity. She also sought assistance with planning for a District Leadership Team (DLT) meeting to review each school's improvement plan with the objective of updating the District Plan of Support.
- During the first semester, it was also brought to the attention of OCSS that dyslexia services at the high school were put on pause due to staffing challenges; this was investigated and was quickly addressed by Superintendent English with interventions resuming and the OCSS Team visiting the intervention rooms when on site to ensure schedules were created and followed.
- The district's general business manager is new to the position resulting in the need for members of the team to broker support and to field a variety of questions. Additionally, professional learning was provided by AAEA Finance Specialist and work sessions with Arkansas Public School Resource Finance Specialists (APSRC) were scheduled and facilitated by OCSS. Virtual meetings were organized to assist the district with the development of federal programs applications, expenditures and required documentation as well. Per the request of Superintendent English, OCSS provided support with board meeting preparation including a review of the APSCN Financial Board Report prior to meetings.
- As a result of classroom observations by the OCSS and DESE Office of Special Education (OSE) concerns were brought forth that resulted in a focused monitoring by

the DESE OSE Unit. Several areas of potential non compliance were documented from the DESE OSE unit. These potential areas of non compliance are required to be addressed by the district by the July 16th, 2022 due date. It should be noted the current LEA supervisor employed by the district has submitted a resignation with June 30, 2022 as her final day. OCSS continues to offer support provided the given circumstances. OCSS has scheduled and provided the required professional development in the areas of the IEP, Secondary Transition, and Evaluation. This training will be submitted as evidence to the OSE to complete partial requirements of the focused monitoring. The OSE financial department assists the LEA Supervisor and General Business Manager/Bookkeeper on a regular basis by providing guidance in the area of reporting, expenditures and obligations. The OSE finance has encountered a history of repeated delays from the district in carrying out needed corrections even after being notified.

- During Ms. English's final month as superintendent, OCSS assisted with a staffing analysis identifying needed positions for the upcoming school year based on enrollment projections and status of licensure pathways of 1240 Waiver teachers. The deputy superintendent provided needed information for these work sessions that was pivotal to assessing the overall human capital needs of the district.
- Throughout the school year, numerous virtual and on-site meetings were held to assist the high school counselor and principal with the development of the master schedule, student course selection, and student schedules. There was a lack of progress evident between meetings with state support. The vast majority of progress made was under the direct supervision of OCSS and the DESE Counseling Unit. The work to complete aforementioned tasks is continuing as this report is written. Again, while the district has been supported, a need for continued, direct support is necessitated.
- External vendor and consulting contracts were reviewed by the OCSS team. This resulted in DLT meetings with vendors to review expectations as it was discovered that many contracts were vague in their intent with a need for clear evaluative measures.
- Dr. Kiffany Pride conducted a site visit with a focus on the adoption and usage of high quality instructional materials. Building leadership and some district leadership were in attendance. While district and building leadership were receptive to this support, there did seem to be a continued misunderstanding regarding the evaluation of materials to drive instructional decisions.

Many other supports were provided by not only OCSS, but various DESE entities throughout the school year as well. Several standards for accreditation exceptions throughout the year resulted in responses from given entities as the need arose. With the various changes in central office staff, continued support will most certainly be needed moving forward.

Concerns

A primary concern is the number of teachers employed under the Act 1240 waiver with no district level support for said teachers during the upcoming school year. While GRESC has a Recruitment and Retention Facilitator, the volume of non-licensed teachers at the HWHSD necessitates consistent support from the local level. There was an attempt to repurpose the deputy superintendent, who was removed by the board in a reduction in force action, to support teachers in a wide array of areas; but this was not supported by the local school board. Given the number of teachers working under a waiver and the amount of turnover experienced at both schools, it is imperative that the district move quickly in filling positions when a qualified teacher is seeking employment. However, per Ms. English, the local board would not allow two certified applicants to be placed on the meeting agenda. This delay resulted in the applicants accepting teaching positions in other districts. In communicating with district staff, it appears some federal expenditures were not approved by the local board resulting in excessive balances the district is struggling to expend. It has been observed that the local board, at times, seems to be a hindrance to progress within the district. Simply viewing sign-in logs at the district office illustrates that board members are regularly onsite during the school day to influence day-to-day operations which is outside the scope of the roles and responsibilities of local board members. Finally, while the OCSS team was initially brought in to address issues related to the master schedule, a wide array of support has been provided as the team has consulted with building and district leadership. The response to support has been generally positive; but it must be stated that in most instances, the district still requires direct support by OCSS and DESE staff to meet the demands placed on any school district in the state.