



DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

Lee County School District

Legislative Quarterly Report

January – March 2024

Submitted by

Office of Coordinated Support & Service

Sheila Whitlow, Associate Deputy Commissioner

April 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.

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.

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 Herring, 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 third quarter of the 2023-24 school year, OCSS focused efforts on providing instructional leadership guidance for lesson internalization and integrity of instruction, preparing for statewide assessment, and conducting staffing reviews and organizing budgets for the upcoming school year. Lee County School District has collected various performance data from a variety of assessments, which highlight areas of growth as well as

areas for continued improvement. The charts below provide an overview of the assessment results from the iReady Fall and Winter administrations in both reading and math with the level of growth experienced at each grade level.

LEE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT: I-READY READING PERFORMANCE SY 2023-2024							
GRADE	# TESTED	AT OR ABOVE GRADE LEV		1 GRADE LEV BELOW		2+ GRADE LEVS BELOW	
		FALL 2023	WINTER 2023	FALL 2023	WINTER 2023	FALL 2023	WINTER 2023
K	49	14%	63%	86%	37%	0%	0%
1	56	8%	32%	75%	59%	18%	9%
2	54	11%	30%	35%	44%	54%	26%
3	45	20%	31%	24%	36%	56%	33%
4	43	7%	16%	28%	47%	65%	38%
5	46	9%	22%	37%	37%	54%	41%
6	30	10%	17%	20%	23%	70%	60%
7	43	14%	18%	12%	12%	74%	69%
8	34	9%	18%	15%	32%	77%	50%
9	39	13%	15%	23%	28%	65%	57%
10	44	5%	14%	23%	20%	73%	66%

LEE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT: I-READY MATH PERFORMANCE SY 2023-2024							
GRADE	# TESTED	AT OR ABOVE GRADE LEV		1 GRADE LEV BELOW		2+ GRADE LEVS BELOW	
		FALL 2023	WINTER 2023	FALL 2023	WINTER 2023	FALL 2023	WINTER 2023
K	50	4%	22%	96%	78%	0%	0%
1	56	2%	18%	73%	66%	25%	16%
2	54	0%	13%	52%	67%	48%	20%
3	44	4%	9%	27%	61%	78%	29%
4	42	7%	7%	21%	40%	71%	52%
5	47	4%	15%	43%	43%	53%	43%
6	30	10%	20%	20%	40%	70%	40%
7	42	12%	14%	24%	19%	64%	67%
8	34	3%	6%	32%	29%	65%	64%
9	34	21%	30%	9%	12%	71%	59%
10	40	23%	35%	5%	8%	73%	58%

Overall, the data from the fall and winter administrations of the iReady assessments in both reading and math in Grades K-10 show promising growth for the district especially in the early grades. In both reading and math, every grade level demonstrated growth from fall to winter in the percent of students performing at or above grade level. Moreover, the percent of students who were two or more grade levels below in reading and math in the fall decreased in all grade levels in the winter administration, except for math in Grade 7. The next step for the district is to focus on sharply decreasing the percentage of students who are performing at two or more grade levels below in both reading and math as that performance category holds the majority of students at Grade 7 and above. The high school English Language Arts (ELA) Department is working closely with the coach from The New Teacher Project (TNP) to implement the high quality instructional material and to internalize lessons so prior to teaching the lesson the teachers are considering what they may want to focus on and key student tasks they want to analyze throughout the unit to know how students are progressing. Evidence of the response to coaching is not consistently observed across all grade levels, but this is being addressed.

Academics

Lee County School District continues to focus on strengthening instructional processes and implementing high quality instructional materials (HQIM) in classrooms throughout the district. Despite initiating planned activities aimed at enhancing staff development and improving systems, progress has been inconsistent across schools. Anna Strong Learning Academy (ASLA) showcased steady forward progress during the quarter, demonstrating established systems and personnel focused on the advancement of learning. The school is being used to model classroom observation procedures and instructional feedback processes to another elementary school in the area. Superintendent Stone has been consistently visible at the high school to assist with establishing and ensuring norms of behavior for both students and staff. This is due to the identified challenges in student behavior and instructional integrity during the school year. He is taking a hands-on approach to coaching leadership along with the intensive support provided by the OCSS State Leadership Coach. Dr. Stone has worked closely with the ELA collaborative team to improve the planning process as well as direct support from the district and school level instructional support staff. Although the district has had *My Perspectives* for several years, the consistent turnover in the ELA Department has resulted in inconsistent implementation of the high quality instructional material. To that end, the district applied for and received a grant that has provided an on-site coach from The New Teacher Project (TNTP) to work directly with the ELA Department and instructional support staff. Early in the third quarter, data collected regarding implementation of the HQIM reveal inconsistency across grades 7-12 as well as little or no use of the lesson internalization template; however, during the month of March district leadership and OCSS staff observed work that is being done with the TNTP coach in a majority of the ELA classrooms. They saw implementation of *My Perspectives* aligned to the state standards, learning target and proficiency scale in a majority of the classrooms. A restructuring of this department is planned for the upcoming year to strengthen both the core and the intervention classes in grades 7-12. Moving into the fourth quarter and planning for the upcoming school year, addressing the challenges with instructional leadership and classroom management that persist at the high school will require continued extensive measures to ensure effective support and accountability.

Approaching March, the district geared up for the ATLAS assessment administration, scheduling the writing assessment for the initial fortnight. In order to prepare students for the format and requirements of the updated assessment, the district introduced "Power Hour," an extension of the school day compensating for previous inclement weather closures. During this period, students are grouped into smaller cohorts where they engage in purposefully designed test preparation exercises with staff guidance to bolster their skills. The district anticipates that this focused assistance will underscore the significance of the assessments for students and furnish them with the necessary resources to excel on the assessment. During the writing administration, lapses in communication or failure to adequately plan may have led to some confusion early, but with assistance from district leadership efforts were coordinated. Before the next round of testing, it is imperative that equipment availability, student grouping and coordination of test administrators are reviewed and requests completed well in advance of the administration of the test.

Student Support

The district has been working this quarter to continue building positive progress in its special education program. In anticipation of extended leave from LEA Supervisor, Ms. Julie Amstutz from OCSS facilitated a series of planning sessions to ensure seamless operations within the district's special education program. These discussions encompassed several critical aspects of the program such as early childhood transition conferences, annual review conferences, and the Comprehensive Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CCEIS) application. Ms. Amstutz's involvement in the upcoming quarter will be instrumental in sustaining the positive trajectory of the special education program.

To assist the district in the implementation of inclusive practices, staff from DESE Office of Special Education (DESE OSE) conducted a comprehensive professional development session on inclusive practices for students with disabilities for all LCSD staff in January. The district will have to develop a plan of action with roles and responsibilities to ensure smooth transition.

During this quarter, the district welcomed additional support personnel through the hiring of a fully licensed special education teacher for the elementary resource room, addressing a recognized area of need. The district also received information regarding identification of an area of disproportionality in their CCEIS status. This prompted collaborative efforts between OCSS and DESE OSE to engage key district stakeholders in conducting a thorough program assessment. The focus was on addressing concerns regarding disproportionality, specifically in speech language services among white students. The district team actively participated in the OSE Disproportionality Institute to gain insights into triggers for disproportionality. Additionally, they scrutinized the district's referral and placement processes to ensure adequacy in identifying students and adherence to established protocols. With these measures in place, the district is poised to successfully submit its CCEIS application, ensuring that interventions are appropriately implemented to support all students effectively.

Addressing academic and behavioral intervention OCSS staff and district team attended the RTI at Work Conference. Their objective was to gain insights into effective intervention processes and bring this knowledge back to enhance the district's existing intervention systems. Upon return, the team plans to disseminate ideas and strategies to staff at each building and collaborate on establishing cohesive support systems based on shared expectations. Observations and discussions at the conference highlighted the presence of capable staff members at ASLA and Lee High School who are equipped and motivated to lead the RTI process at their respective campuses. These representatives shared innovative ideas aimed at enhancing their current support systems. Support from building principals, who were unable to attend the conference, will be critical to maintaining the positive momentum needed to develop comprehensive support systems with appropriate data triggers. Additionally, members of the LCSD team presented the district's MTSS Plan during a local district's Academic Leadership Meeting.

Human Capital

The district remains committed to actively seeking qualified professionals to strengthen its

programs. A key focus this quarter is assessing staffing requirements for the upcoming school year and reviewing the intentions of current staff regarding their continuation within the district. Superintendent Stone has partnered with OCSS to conduct a thorough staffing analysis aimed at determining the optimal number and variety of staff necessary for the upcoming school year. This assessment may involve reallocating individuals to different roles within the district and modifying the number of positions based on identified needs. The outcomes of this analysis will serve as the foundation for any district reorganization efforts and inform future recruitment strategies.

Family and Community Engagement

The district provided several opportunities to solicit family and community engagement over the quarter in order to enhance academic prowess. In January, LCSD became the official program partner for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library. The program provides children five years and younger with free books, which the district believes will promote early literacy in the area. The district sponsored a FAFSA Night for senior students in February. This event provided senior students with technical assistance in completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is required for students who plan to enter a postsecondary institution in order to be considered for financial aid. The district also conducted its Read Across America event at ASLA during the first week of March. The week-long event showcased the importance of reading by encouraging volunteers from the community to come read a favorite children's book to a classroom. To assist families with understanding finances, the district hosted a financial literacy workshop entitled "How Money Works!" in mid March. Then, in partnership with the city of Marianna, the district provided families with a Spring Break Kick-Off event to celebrate the upcoming spring break holiday.

Superintendent Stone has been working with community leaders to host a series of events designed to bolster support for the proposed millage increase, including meeting with patrons at the Delta's Chili Supper and a community forum at the Marianna Civic Center. Despite the positive messaging from the district regarding the proposed millage increase and the use of those funds to make necessary improvements to the academic facilities in the district, the millage campaign failed to garner the support needed to pass on election day. Superintendent Stone plans to seek support for the proposed millage increase again in the Spring of 2025.

Facilities

The district is on track with its timeline for the Teaching Housing Project, as construction is underway. Framing is presently in progress for the four duplexes, which will result in a total of eight units. This initiative aims to enhance the district's recruitment and retention endeavors by providing housing options for educators. Additionally, the district has been weighing the need for construction of a K-12 facility. Superintendent Stone has engaged in planning of a construction application and has been seeking approval from the State Academic Facilities Partnership Program to obtain matching funds. Unfortunately, the campaign to secure a proposed millage increase failed, which was the district's funding source for the project. As a result, the construction of a K-12 facility is currently on hold until funding can be secured.

Fiscal Governance and District Operations

OCSS and Fiscal Services provided guidance and support for the financial matters within the district and began the process for reviewing exit criteria from fiscal distress. This quarter, efforts concentrated on various fiscal activities to promote financial stability and responsible resource allocation. Activities included training on payroll redistribution and management of expiring funds from federal programs. Fiscal support initiatives involved monitoring revenue, expenditures, and debt requests. Additionally, a Financial Support Zoom session covered topics such as ESSER exit strategy and funding projections. Progressively, attention shifted to balancing carryover/allocation balances of federal funds and initiating budget training for the upcoming fiscal year. Discussions with DESE Federal Programs specialists addressed carryover notifications and allocations, with considerations for potential budget adjustments. Throughout the quarter, focus remained on balancing federal fund balances and preparing the district's business office for the upcoming fiscal year's budget preparation. The Business Office Manager participated in CASBO budget training, gathering resources and planning future budget work. A checklist for current budget tasks was discussed in preparation for the upcoming fiscal year. Ongoing Zoom meetings and onsite support in the following quarter will aid in finalizing financial preparations post-testing. These efforts are aimed at ensuring fiscal responsibility and efficient resource utilization district-wide. Recommendations for the district to exit fiscal will be made in an upcoming State Board meeting.

The district successfully secured a High-Impact Tutoring Grant from DESE to bolster academic instruction, specifically focusing on reading and math. As part of the grant agreement, the district committed to offering additional instructional sessions beyond core curriculum, at least three times per week during regular school hours, with no more than four students per group. Upon receipt of the grant, the district entered into a partnership with Varsity Tutors, where students receive dedicated face-to-face intervention support in reading and math at least three days per week via an online learning platform. The district anticipates that the implementation of Varsity Tutors resulting from this grant award will aid in narrowing the achievement gap in reading and math.