



DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

Helena-West Helena School District

Legislative Quarterly Report

July - September 2023

Submitted by

Office of Coordinated Support & Service

Sheila Whitlow, Associate Deputy Commissioner

October 2023

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 HELENA-WEST HELENA SCHOOL DISTRICT

On June 22, 2022, the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) provided written notification to the Helena-West Helena School District (HWHSD) that it would be recommending the District be classified as being in need of Level 5—Intensive Support at the State Board of Education (SBE) meeting on July 14, 2022. HWHSD did not appeal DESE’s recommendation, and a hearing to consider the recommendation was held at the regular meeting of the SBE on July 14, 2022. Evidence presented at the hearing from both DESE and HWHSD staff reflected that the district was experiencing instability with its staffing as well as irregularities in its master scheduling process, which adversely impacted student learning. Upon consideration of the evidence and recommendation by DESE, the SBE placed HWHSD under Level 5—Intensive Support and transferred authority of the HWHSD Board of Directors to make personnel decisions to the Commissioner of Education. The SBE also directed the Commissioner to conduct a comprehensive analysis of all district systems and make recommendations for additional action at subsequent SBE meetings. DESE officials conducted this analysis and presented a report to the SBE meeting on September 8, 2022, which outlined several concerns throughout all systems within the district including but not limited to the following:

- Lack of sufficient, strategic organizational leadership both in the central office staff and the board of directors;
- Inadequate procedures for developing master schedules and organizing staff to fill scheduling needs;
- Failure to provide adequate public school transportation through established routes and to obtain appropriate training and certification for transportation staff;
- Inadequate control processes for monitoring special education services; and,
- Insufficient access to high quality instruction supports and curriculum resources.

The issues cited in the comprehensive analysis report reinforce the recommendation by the SBE for Level 5—Intensive Support and the replacement of the Interim Superintendent with a state appointed superintendent who was hired on July 25, 2022 to lead the district.

Current DESE Quarterly Report

Submitted: Sheila Whitlow, Associate Deputy Commissioner

Overview

The Office of Coordinated Support and Service (OCSS) team in coordination with the Division of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) has continued to provide support to the Helena-West Helena School District (HWHSD). Sheila Whitlow, Associate Deputy Commissioner and OCSS Director, delivers direct guidance to the state-appointed superintendent as well as 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, and Andress Scott, DESE Lead Regional RISE Specialist, assist the district with implementation of literacy instructional approaches and materials aligned with the science of reading.

During this quarter, OCSS has focused efforts on the district's continued development of district and building leadership structures essential for ensuring effective and efficient school systems. To assist in its efforts, the district has been working with Solution Tree to support implementation of the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) model throughout the district. The district received the results of the state administered assessments and has been working with the OCSS team to disaggregate and analyze the data in order to determine strengths and areas of immediate need that will be utilized to develop its plan of action to support improvement efforts. The OCSS team has worked with HWHSD administrators, the DESE Fiscal Services and Support unit, educational consultants and literacy specialists from DESE to provide support in all district systems.

Academics

In July, DESE released the preliminary results from the ACT Aspire assessment administered in Spring 2023. The score reports detailed significant improvement in sixth, eighth, and tenth grade for reading and in third and fourth grade for mathematics. The level of improvement was significant enough to positively impact the ESSA School Index (ESI) Report released at the end of September, with overall improvement shown for both schools within the district. JF Wahl Elementary improved its ESI rating from 56.16 (F) in 2022 to 56.25 (F) in 2023, a 0.09 point increase. Central High School improved its ESI rating from 51.75 (F) to 53.52 (D), a 1.77 point increase and an improved letter grade. The incremental positive growth from both campuses validates that the district's improvement efforts are resulting in increased achievement for students in literacy and math and improved school quality; however growth was not substantial enough to indicate consistent improvement across grade levels within content areas. Additional coaching, professional development and continued focus on improving instructional practices is needed.

Both JF Wahl Elementary School and Central High School continue to develop processes to support student academic achievement with support from OCSS, DESE literacy specialists, and embedded coaches. The district adopted DESE-approved high quality instructional materials (HQIM) for the implementation of grade-level content in literacy. The district implemented 95 Percent Group Core Phonics in Grades K-3 as its primary curriculum to support foundational reading skills in phonics and phonological awareness and continues utilizing those curricular resources in Grades 4-8 for intervention. To support comprehension and vocabulary development, the district implemented McGraw Hill Open Court in Grades K-2 and McGraw Hill Wonders in Grades 3-6, but is in the process of reviewing other programs with a plan to move to a more robust comprehension program for the 2024-25 school year. My Perspectives by Savvas Learning is implemented at grade 7-12 as the primary literacy curriculum, which supports and enforces reading comprehension and close

reading strategies for college and career readiness. The district is in the process of supporting the building in the development of units of study utilizing these curricula in reference to the state standards. In response to their identified student needs, Central High School introduced a double period block of reading classes for grades 7 and 8 and a Cougar Connection period into the daily schedule. The double reading block provides extra support in reading development, while the Cougar Connection period supports remediation or intervention for students in order to address areas of deficiency. A goal for ALL students to demonstrate growth in both reading and math has been set and communicated by the Core Leadership Team. This team conducts weekly focus walks to coach building leaders in the area of improving instruction through actionable feedback to teachers, collect data to be used to guide decisions and conversations during the District Academic Leadership Meetings, and to stay better informed as to the implementation of the district's instructional model.

Student Support

The district special education department has continued to receive intensive technical support provided by Julie Amstutz from OCSS. The district's newly hired Executive Director of Student Services has engaged in weekly meetings with Ms. Amstutz to enhance oversight activities for services in special education, dyslexia, 504, and related student services. The team has been focused on addressing findings related to a compliance action plan and ensuring that services are on-track for the current school year. As a means to maintain integrity of programs, Ms. Amstutz outlined a series of procedures needed at the district level including but not limited to the following: procedures for identification and proper placement of special education students when newly enrolled in the district, procedures for requesting student records including individualized education programs (IEPs), procedures for annual review conferences and communication with counselors for enrollment in appropriate courses. Ms. Amstutz has also provided daily support for the district's newly hired Student Services Lead Teacher, ensuring that she has the proper training to conduct activities related to supervision of special education processes and paperwork. The inclusion practices phase-in plan was developed to support implementation of inclusive practices within the instructional program in classrooms. District and building leaders received professional development on best practices to support inclusive practices implementation. As part of its Inclusive Practices PLC Project Grant, J.F. Wahl Elementary leadership and key staff received initial professional development training on implementation of inclusive practices to ensure all students are learning at high levels and practices align with individual student needs. Professional development is slated to continue throughout the school year.

The district has also continued its efforts related to implementation of trauma-informed instructional practices with technical support provided by Dr. Michael Watson from OCSS. Dr. Watson assisted the district with development of a multi-tiered system of support framework to provide core expectations for all learners and interventions for students with significant adverse behaviors or repeated patterns of adverse behavior. With Dr. Watson's assistance, the district established core expectations for staff as it relates to understanding which behaviors need to be managed in the classroom and how to document those behaviors. A

T-chart for classroom versus office managed behaviors was created for both schools for teachers to utilize in their classrooms when behaviors arise. Dr. Watson also assisted the district with an analysis of its school discipline data through the Smartdata dashboard. The analysis yielded a list of students with the greatest frequency and degree of adverse behaviors to identify as at-risk for potential Tier II and Tier III behavior intervention.

The superintendent has attempted with no success to locate agencies willing to be onsite regularly to provide counseling services. As a result, he reached out to UAMS and is working closely with staff there to create a plan for providing additional mental health support for students

Human Capital

Superintendent Dr. Keith McGee unveiled a new organizational structure for district leadership to assist in effective management of the district. The district leadership team is composed of Superintendent Dr. McGee, Deputy Superintendent Xavier Hodo, Executive Director of Student Services Dr. Andrew Schroeder, Executive Director of Learning Services Traci Holland, and Executive Director of School Performance Dionne Britton. The district also employed several new key staff this school year with the inclusion of a District Student Services Lead Teacher, a District Test Coordinator and ESOL Coordinator, a new elementary school principal, and a Speech Language Pathologist in addition to new teaching staff. The district has worked closely with OCSS staff to ensure appropriate mentoring and support is provided to the new staff members. OCSS staff worked with the Executive Director of Student Services and DESE Office of Professional Licensure staff to assist in possible pathways for licensure for prospective candidates who might not be fully licensed.

Leadership at each school began the process of developing professional growth plans with the teachers and engaging in a plan for observations. With support from DESE Office of Educator Effectiveness, administrators obtained access to all teaching staff through the Educator Effectiveness System (EES) to review and modify Professional Growth Plans and conduct TESS observations. In addition to the TESS process, the school has been developing tools to monitor instructional practices in the building through focus walks as part of its comprehensive instructional review process. The district is also working to develop a data collection instrument that allows district practitioners to collect information on student strengths and challenges as well as patterns of instruction, student intervention needs, and teacher preparation needs.

Facilities and Transportation

The district moved forward with the construction of the proposed wellness area on the JF Wahl Elementary campus. The district released a request for proposals through its construction manager, Baldwin and Shell Construction Company, to obtain competitive bid packages for completion of the project. The projected groundbreaking date is November 13, 2023. Additionally, the district utilized ARP ESSER (American Rescue Plan Elementary

and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds to purchase new buses in order to expand its transportation fleet.

Preliminary discussions for potential improvements for JF Wahl Elementary began this summer with Superintendent McGee and the local school board investigating the potential for the district to apply for State Academic Facilities Partnership Program funding in 2025-2027 biennium for construction of a new K-6 elementary school facility. For HWHSD, the current calculated wealth index is one of the lowest in the state at 0.179. This means that for an approved Partnership Program funded project, the district share of financial participation is 17.90% of the actual cost, and the state would provide the remaining balance in state funding, which would be approximately 82.10% of the actual cost. The district will not have to obtain a millage increase as it plans to pay for this construction project through its building fund.

Fiscal Governance and District Operations

Superintendent McGee continues to work with the HWHSD board to refine its roles and responsibilities for governance of the district. At the summer board retreat led by Dr. McGee, board members revisited chapter one of the Leading PLCs @ Work District-wide, reviewed roles and responsibilities of members, received training in School Finance 101, and developed a strategic plan and board goals for the upcoming year including long range planning for data presentations on student achievement to be provided at each monthly meeting as required under the LEARNS Act. This retreat set the stage for the work that needs to be accomplished during the upcoming year in accordance with the shared vision of Dr. McGee and the Board.

Local School Board would benefit from training on roles and responsibilities of board members. Revisiting board protocols and district communication would be helpful to move the board forward as a cohesive team with the district administration.

With the newly formed executive leadership team, Dr. McGee conducted a three-day summer institute that focused on building guiding coalitions, clarified roles and responsibilities of the district collaborative team in providing leadership and support to schools, and established goals for the team aligned with the goals established during the board retreat. Dr. McGee also contracted with an external provider to provide a two-day academic leadership team institute and conducted a book study using Leading Beyond Intention by Spiller and Power.

The DESE Fiscal Support and Services Unit in coordination with OCSS provided ongoing support to the district through on-site visits and remote assistance in all fiscal matters. During this quarter, guidance centered on ESSER II funding and budget preparation in addition to monitoring debt requests and upcoming cycle reporting. DESE Fiscal Support staff conducted a financial operations analysis to ensure that the district continued to implement sound fiscal processes. Budget prep training was provided as an integral component of professional development offered to superintendents. This training aimed at equipping superintendents with the necessary skills and knowledge to develop a well-rounded budget plan. The training encompassed various aspects such as understanding revenue sources, analyzing expenditure trends, and forecasting future fiscal needs. The district's fiscal staff continues to participate in training as needed. To ensure oversight and provide support to the district's current general business manager, the district has contracted with APSRC to assume the fiscal operations in the district's finance department. A plan has been initiated collaboratively with the district leadership and APSRC to ensure a smooth transition and to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the APSRC consultants and district staff. The district recognizes the need for its Central Office to effectively support its own business and financial transactions and is working with APSRC to establish standard operating procedures that support effective and efficient business management processes.