



Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind

2400 W. Markham • Little Rock, Arkansas • 72205 • (501) 324-9506 • (501) 296-1810

Jacob Oliva
Secretary

K. Nicole Walsh
Superintendent

ARDB Superintendent Report January 2026

Update

January marked a strong close to the first semester and a positive start to the spring term at the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind. Across the campus, staff worked diligently through the holiday period to maintain student services while advancing key priorities related to safety, facilities, instruction, and student support.

Significant progress was made in campus safety and infrastructure, instructional programming, and cross-department collaboration. Students across the Deaf and Blind Departments engaged in meaningful academic, extracurricular, and enrichment opportunities, including concurrent coursework, athletics, fine arts, and service learning. Specialized services, residential life, health services, and interpreting continued to provide steady and responsive support to students and families.

These accomplishments reflect the dedication of ARDB staff and the strength of our partnerships. As we move forward, our focus remains on staffing stability, instructional alignment, safety readiness, and strategic planning to ensure high-quality, accessible education and services for Deaf and Blind students across Arkansas

Human Capital Update

1. Resignations/Terminations
 - a. Chad Murach, Residential Care Coordinator
2. New Hires/Rehires
 - a. David Aldana, Skilled tradesman

- b. David Spillers, Teacher II
- c. Kishna Perkins, Cook

Operations Update

Kurt Swartzlander, Division Fiscal Administrator & Director of Operations

Overview

The primary focus for the month was preparation for Christmas Break, allowing several projects to begin or be completed while students were not on campus.

Major Accomplishments

Safety

- Continued implementation of the RAPTOR security system. Approximately 20 employees still need to be enrolled and logged into the system.

Facilities

- Installed a Gang Operated Air Brake (GOAB) to protect the campus-wide electrical system. This system will be used for the first time during the electrical changeover for the new building over Christmas Break.
- Completed exterior lighting upgrades at Shibley.
- Completed asbestos abatement in Huckabee Hall; floor refinishing remains pending.
- Completed all state-mandated elevator and fire protection inspections.
- Identified critical issues with the Learning Center chiller, including a failed Circuit B heat exchanger and one of three compressors shorted to ground.
- Launched a tree planting project sponsored by the Central Arkansas Master Naturalists. Two successful student planting events were held on December 10 and December 17, 2025.

Staffing

- Conducted several interviews in November, resulting in three job offers, all of which were accepted.
- David Aldana joined the Maintenance Department. Two additional staff members are expected to begin employment in January.

Projects in Progress

Finance

- Budget planning for the next fiscal year.
- Development of an investment policy and reinvestment of donated funds.

Facilities

- Resurfacing of concrete flooring in Huckabee Hall following asbestos remediation.
- Design and engineering work underway for the Parnell Hall elevator and renovation project. SCM Architects continues site visits to gather data and develop cost-effective design options.

Data Highlights

- During a two-and-a-half-week reporting period, 229 OperationsHERO work requests were created, while 56 were completed.
- The average monthly deficit over the past year is approximately 118 work requests, indicating current staffing capacity is not meeting demand.

Challenges or Needs

- Staffing remains the most significant challenge. Once the two additional positions begin, service delivery and response times are expected to improve.

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Conduct safety drills to test the RAPTOR system.
- Continue reinvestment of cash funds.
- Complete budget setup and planning for the new fiscal year.
- Finalize tankless water heater installations, anticipated to be completed over winter break.

Cross-Department Collaboration

- The Security Department continues to work closely with Facilities by providing escorts for inspections, identifying unsecured doors and equipment issues, and reporting facility concerns such as water leaks. This collaboration remains essential to maintaining campus safety and operational efficiency.

Education Update – Blind Department

Lori Cole, Principal

Overview

The Blind Department experienced a productive and engaging month highlighted by strong student participation, academic milestones, and successful schoolwide events. Despite some service interruptions outside of ARDB's control, staff continued to support students academically, socially, and emotionally.

Major Accomplishments

- Successfully hosted the Science Fair, classroom spelling bees, and Christmas concert, dinner, and classroom celebrations.
- Launched the ARDB Elementary Wrestling Club, bringing together 4 deaf students and 5 blind students in a shared extracurricular experience.
- Participated in the Naturalists Tree Project, providing students with meaningful volunteerism opportunities.
- Hosted the Wrestling and Cheerleading Tournament on December 6–7.
- Completed first semester/second quarter coursework and report cards.
- Senior braille student Bryson Selby successfully completed College Algebra through UALR.
- Secondary students completed their first semester of concurrent World History coursework through Arkansas Tech University.

Projects in Progress

- **PBIS / ROAR Store:** This initiative is new to the Blind Department and is centered on ECC core values—Responsibility, Organization, Achievement, Respect, and Safety. Staff are actively

analyzing PBIS data to drive positive student behavior and outcomes. Quarterly evaluations are conducted, with continued refinement planned. While implementation is underway, improvements are expected to increase effectiveness during the third quarter and beyond.

- **ARC Materials Accessibility Project:** A team is reviewing instructional materials to ensure accessibility in large print and braille. This is an ongoing, year-long effort, with a substantial portion expected to be completed during the current school year.

Data Highlights

- **Enrollment/Caseload:** 51 students
 - 25 elementary
 - 26 secondary
- **Attendance Rates:**
 - Elementary: approximately 94.1%
 - Secondary: approximately 93.6%

Behavior and Safety:

- 0 suspensions
- 3 office referrals
- Teachers are receiving support and strategies focused on emotional regulation and behavior management.

Challenges or Needs

- The Division of Services for the Blind (DSB) experienced a furlough, resulting in halted services such as Challenge Solutions, Superior Success, Pre-ETS, student employment supports, transition services, and life skills training.
- Although DSB has resumed operations, several of these services have not yet been fully reinstated, impacting student programming and transition supports.
- Staffing remains a concern with the resignation of Brandey Burnett, Braille Teacher, who accepted a position with the ADE CAYSI Project.

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Atlas assessment preparation and data review.
- Recruitment and hiring of an Assistive Technology/Braille Instructor.
- Continued implementation and refinement of PBIS strategies.
- January safety drills and continued health and sanitation efforts.

Cross-Department Collaboration

- Ongoing collaboration with curriculum teams to support ARC (American Reading Company) implementation.
- Participation in the selection of a math curriculum for the 2026–27 school year.
- Collaboration with athletic departments to identify additional in-state competitive opportunities for student athletes.

Staff Recognition

- Special recognition is given to Mrs. Debbie Mayes for her leadership and dedication to the Christmas Fund, Angel Tree, and food bag program, ensuring all ARDB students experienced a joyful holiday season.

Board Support Needed

- Approval of the Admissions Policy.

Education Update – Deaf Department

KaAnn Varner, Principal

Overview

November and December were very active months for the Deaf Department, marked by strong student engagement, successful academic and extracurricular events, and continued progress toward instructional and staffing goals.

Major Accomplishments

- Successfully hosted the Leopard Science Fair on December 18.
- Implemented a Student Amazon Wish List initiative in which students practiced real-life budgeting and online ordering skills by selecting items up to \$30 with support from “Amazon Elves.”
- Two teachers, Kris Miller and Katie Brown, are nearing completion of requirements to become mentor teachers.
- Welcomed David Spillers, ASD alumnus, to ARDB as an ASL Teacher.
- Continued strong support from the Behavior Therapist to ensure Behavior Intervention Plans are implemented and student behaviors are addressed effectively.

Event Highlights

- Senior pictures and school picture make-up day on December 2.
- Arkansas Natural Resources Museum field trip for grades 7–12 on December 3.
- Illinois Tiger Tip Off Basketball Tournament at the Illinois School for the Deaf on December 5–6.
- Christmas Tree Lighting in front of Sturgis and Flu Shot Clinic on December 10.
- Cajun Classic Basketball Tournament at the Louisiana School for the Deaf on December 12.
- Arkansas Naturalists tree-planting events on December 10 and 17, with Leopard and Lion students working together to beautify the campus.
- Santa’s visit to Leopard Town on December 17, supported by Amazon Elves.
- ROAR Store, Science Fair, Christmas Lunch, and Leopard Christmas Program on December 18.
- “Dip, Sip & Be Merry” staff Christmas celebration on December 19, reflecting increased collaboration and comfort between Leopard and Lion staff.

Projects in Progress

- Selection of an aligned math curriculum to benefit both Deaf and Blind Departments, with a goal of finalizing the selection in January 2026.
- Continued implementation of the Steps Reading Initiative.
- Launch of Atlas test preparation sessions on Fridays.

Data Highlights

Enrollment/Caseload:

- Lower School: 53 students
- Upper School: 38 students

Attendance:

- Lower School: 89.62%
- Upper School: 88.30%

Behavior and Safety:

- Average referrals per day: 5
- Primary locations of referrals:

Classroom: 43.59%

Dorm: 35.90%

- Referrals by grade:

7th grade: 9

8th grade: 6

10th grade: 4

- Referrals by behavior type:

Inappropriate Language: 4

Physical Aggression: 9

Defiance/Insubordination: 13

- Suspensions:

In-School Suspension: 0

Out-of-School Suspension: 4

Most referrals involve students with Behavior Intervention Plans.

Challenges or Needs

- Staffing remains a priority need, specifically:
 - One Agriculture Teacher
 - Two Paraprofessionals
- Job postings have closed, interviews are beginning, and additional applicants will be interviewed following Christmas break.

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Interview and hire an Agriculture Teacher and two paraprofessionals.
- Complete development of a Deaf Department History and Culture course for the 2026–2027 school year.
- Develop a plan for public school Deaf and ASL programs to visit the ARDB campus and museum.
- Begin work on the 2025–2026 master schedule.
- Expand student opportunities for the 2025–2026 school year, including Metro, UALR, Pulaski Tech, and other partnerships.
- Provide professional development related to the new TESS Evaluation System.
- Finalize the agreement with Camp Aldersgate.

Cross-Department Collaboration

- Ongoing collaboration among principals to streamline course offerings.
- Coordination with Athletics to prioritize club offerings, athletic programming, and out-of-state trips.
- Joint work between Deaf and Blind Departments to select a shared math curriculum.
- Collaboration between the Interpreting Department and Deaf Department leadership to revamp the SLPI process, including planning training and partnering with another deaf school or program to offset costs.

Staff Recognition

- Camillia (CJ) Lynch, Leopard Guidance Counselor and Teacher, has demonstrated significant professional growth. She developed Student Success Plans for every student and ensured all transition plans were completed and ready, strengthening both academic and postsecondary supports.

Special Services Update

Teresa Doan, Director of Special Services

(Special Education, Mental Health & Counseling, Related Services, Statewide Services, Residential Life, Health Services, Child Nutrition)

Quick Summary

December was a very busy and successful month across all Special Services areas. Services were maintained across Deaf and Blind departments entering the spring semester, with continued therapy delivery, residential programming, and student support initiatives. Several systems-level improvements and reviews are underway to strengthen service accuracy, compliance, and future funding readiness.

Major Accomplishments

- Maintained consistent delivery of related services across Deaf and Blind departments throughout Quarter 2.
- Completed supervision of the first two interns within Statewide Services.
- Delivered therapy services across all active caseloads, with expected interruptions due to holidays and student absences.
- Identified and began correcting inaccuracies in prescribed service minutes within ASPYRE to ensure accurate reporting and compliance.
- Documented \$95,879 in therapy services during Quarter 2 in preparation for future Medicaid submission once agency approval is finalized.
- Successfully completed required 1% Alternate Assessment training and submitted documentation to the state.
- Supported the ARDB Angel Tree Project, ensuring all 72 students received gifts; additionally supported three local children whose gifts were left at school.
- Child Nutrition served approximately 500 meals during Christmas Lunch for students, families, and staff.
- Child Nutrition raised \$240 through cinnamon roll sales.
- Hosted a successful flu vaccination clinic in collaboration with the Arkansas Department of Health.
- Residential Life provided consistent programming and holiday activities across both Deaf and Blind dorms, supporting student engagement and community building.

Projects in Progress

- Completion of the final component of the Corrective Action Plan (complaint non-monitoring), delayed due to holidays and awaiting DESE approval.
- Establishment of recurring joint and discipline-specific Related Services meetings to improve coordination and decision-making.
- Continued development of GT compliance documentation and initiation of in-service trainings for teachers with identified GT students.
- Collaboration with Community Engagement to develop family-facing informational materials and ParentSquare communications.
- Development of a Gifted and Talented page for the new ARDB website.
- Continued development of the Hearing and Vision Collaborative website through Statewide Services.
- Ongoing Child Nutrition fundraising efforts, including cinnamon roll and potential bread sales.
- Preparation for Medicaid provider activation, including documentation alignment and audit readiness.

Data Highlights

- **Health Services:**
 - Total health office visits: 146
 - Students sent home: 10
 - Students returned to class: 136
 - Emergency medication administrations and EMS transports: 0
 - Students currently inpatient for mental health care: 2
- **Behavior Data:**
 - Total incidents: 39 (average 2.6 per school day), down from 67 incidents in November
 - Major incidents: 14; Minor incidents: 25
 - 69% occurred during the school day; 31% during dorm hours
 - Four major incidents resulted in out-of-school suspensions totaling 19 days

- **Residential Life Enrollment:**
 - Blind Department: 13 students (Prewitt Hall and Schultz House)
 - Deaf Department: 31 students
- **Statewide Services:**
 - 82 infants and toddlers and their families served through Vision and Deaf teams
- **Child Nutrition:**
 - Lunches served: Free (681), Reduced (84), Paid (802)
 - Breakfasts served: Free (641), Reduced (67), Paid (661)
 - Eligibility totals: Free (59), Reduced (8), Paid (76)

Challenges or Needs

- Admission policy approval remains the primary challenge for Special Education, delaying enrollment consideration for some students.
- Once approved, statewide training is needed to address misinformation previously shared with cooperatives.
- Continued development of the Gifted and Talented program to fully meet DESE requirements while addressing student needs.
- Ongoing need for staff training related to appropriate prescribed service minutes and service delivery accuracy.
- Awaiting DESE approval for staff-wide training on indirect versus direct services.

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Improve transition planning to ensure meaningful post-secondary outcomes for students.
- Correct prescribed service minutes and establish an accurate baseline for service delivery (goal of fewer than 25% missed sessions).
- Continue coordination toward Medicaid provider activation and audit readiness.
- Prepare for Child Nutrition audit scheduled for March 9–13.
- Provide training for house parents focused on responsibilities and student independent living skill development.

Cross-Department Collaboration

- Partnering with IT to publish Admissions and Special Education policies on the ARDB website in family-, student-, and district-friendly formats.
- Collaborating with ADCC to develop a meaningful high school transition program aligned with post-secondary pathways.
- Ongoing collaboration with Academics, Residential Life, Facilities, BCBA, School Counseling, and Special Education teams.
- Continued consultation with ADE and the Central MITS Regional Advisor to support Medicaid activation and audit readiness.

Board Support Needed

- Approval of the ARDB Admissions Policy.
- Continued support for ASPYRE data correction and Medicaid activation efforts.
- Improved expediency in the hiring process to support program sustainability.

Interpreting Services Update

Clayton Higgins

Quick Summary

Despite an extended period with students off campus, the Interpreting Services Department remained highly active. Key efforts focused on advancing SLPI training planning, strengthening interpreter policies, and expanding recruitment and training initiatives to better support students, staff, and families.

Major Accomplishments

- Initiated nationwide recruitment efforts for interpreting interns to strengthen future staffing pipelines.
- Drafted a comprehensive contract interpreter policy designed to improve consistency, accountability, and protection for students and staff.

- Provided orientation training to new hires on working with interpreters and best practices when interacting with Deaf individuals.
- Began outreach to identify and secure emergency interpreters to support campus safety needs.

Projects in Progress

- Scheduling and securing funding for SLPI training on campus; project is temporarily managed by Interpreting Services while David Spillers transitions into his role.
- Initiated partnership discussions with Illinois School for the Deaf (ISD) to support SLPI training and collaboration.
- Investigating a new spoken language interpreter service provider to expand service options and coverage.
- Exploring the feasibility of hosting an interpreter conference or workshop focused on best practices.

Data Highlights

Interpreter assignments supported during December and year-to-date include:

- Educational assignments: 15 (196 YTD)
- Mental health sessions: 18 (87 YTD)
- Medical assignments: 23 (137 YTD)
- IEP-related meetings: 16 (71 YTD)
- Staff meetings: 17 (113 YTD)
- After-hours assignments: 4 (12 YTD)
- Spoken language interpreting: 3 (33 YTD)
- Other events: 17 (154 YTD)

Total assignments: 113 in December; 802 year-to-date

Challenges or Needs

- Increased need for training staff on appropriate and effective use of interpreters.

- Growth in non-standard interpreter interactions has highlighted the need to reestablish clear expectations and best practices across departments.

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Investigate the feasibility of hosting a statewide ASL interpreter training conference focused on best practices.
- Train designated emergency interpreters (hearing staff proficient in ASL) to support crisis and emergency situations on campus.
- Continue advancing SLPI training planning and scheduling.

Cross-Department Collaboration

- Ongoing collaboration between Interpreting Services and the ASL Department to support SLPI training and interpreter skill development.

Board Support Needed

- Approval of the contract interpreter policy to allow for implementation and enforcement.

Development Department Update

Kevin Lentz, Director of Development

Branding & Communications

- Led the rollout of the new ARDB logo and branding across platforms.
- Worked closely with ADE Communications to update all social media accounts and transition to joint Facebook and Instagram pages.

Staff Engagement & Fundraising

- Planned and hosted the ARDB Staff Christmas Party, securing more than 40 door prize donations from local businesses valued at nearly \$2,000.
- Organized and coordinated staff holiday gifts (ARDB polo shirts) and led participation in the Angel Tree and Christmas at ARDB initiatives.

- Created and distributed detailed Angel Tree gift information to streamline sponsorship for staff and community supporters.
- Successfully ensured 100% sponsorship of all 72 Angel Students, more than doubling participation from previous years, and raised over \$1,500 for the Angel Tree Fund.
- Raised more than \$1,000 for the Christmas at ARDB Fund, supporting students across the campus.
- Facilitated cinnamon roll fundraising orders through GiveButter and assisted with holiday meal ticketing and additional fundraising activities.

Events

- Planned and implemented the ARDB Christmas Tree Lighting event.
- Currently leading planning and implementation for the upcoming Topping Off Ceremony scheduled for January.

Website Development

- Provided website content and assets for the new joint ARDB website and are actively working with the web development team to push the project to completion and launch.

Arkansas Deaf Career Center Update

Mandy Akins, ADCC Director

Client Report

- ADCC continues to make strong progress as we prepare for an active and productive period ahead. Three clients are gearing up to return to the University of Arkansas–Pulaski Technical College (UAPTC), while others are continuing to make gains through our driver's education classes. We are also launching new budgeting workshops to further support clients' independent living and workforce readiness skills.

Relocation

- In addition to program growth, ADCC is undertaking the significant task of relocating to Huckabee Hall. This move represents an exciting opportunity to expand and strengthen vocational programming for students and clients at the Arkansas School for the Blind and Deaf. Our clients have worked alongside ADCC staff throughout this process, providing invaluable support and demonstrating teamwork, responsibility, and pride in their program.

We are grateful for the opportunity to move into such a wonderful building and look forward to the positive impact it will have on our services. And, as always, if any board members would like to help sweep, move boxes, or lend a hand, please let us know, we would love the support!



Hannah Hill student showing her
ASL skills!



Deaf & Blind Department students eating together in the cafeteria.



Related Services -
Speech Language Pathology



Related Services -
Orientation and Mobility