

## **BLYTHEVILLE SCHOOL DISTRICT**

### **APPEAL OF LEVEL 5 – INTENSIVE SUPPORT DESIGNATION**

Submitted to the Arkansas Department of Education

To: Secretary Jacob Oliva  
Arkansas Department of Education  
Four Capitol Mall  
Little Rock, AR 72201

Date: May 21, 2025

Dear Secretary Oliva,

The Blytheville School District (“BSD”) respectfully appeals the recommendation that the district be designated as Level 5 – Intensive Support. BSD has worked tirelessly to implement the recommendations provided by the Arkansas Department of Education (“ADE”) and has demonstrated both measurable academic progress and consistent good faith efforts to comply with all directives. We respectfully ask that you reconsider the Level 5 classification in light of the following facts and clarifications:

#### **1. Full Compliance with ADE Recommendations**

Since the Arkansas State Board of Education convened in Blytheville in 2024, BSD has embraced and executed every recommendation from the ADE with no resistance or delay. Specific actions include:

- Contracting with Myra Graham, as recommended by ADE.
- Hiring Educational Directions, a school improvement consulting firm, and implementing all of their recommendations.
- Increasing the number of fully licensed educators within the district.
- Assigning experienced mentors and coaches to novice teachers to ensure continuous professional development.
- Developing structured plans for non-licensed personnel to achieve licensure within appropriate timelines.

## **2. Academic Improvement Already Demonstrated**

Contrary to the characterization of “chronic student underachievement,” BSD is already achieving tangible academic gains. One of our schools has improved from an F grade to a C grade within a single academic year—a remarkable achievement indicative of strong instructional progress and effective interventions. This development undermines the claim of persistent academic failure and shows that the district is on a meaningful upward trajectory.

## **3. Leadership and Governance Efforts**

We strongly disagree with the characterization of “absence of coherent leadership” or “inconsistent governance.” In Fall 2024, BSD conducted interviews for interim superintendent candidates. At that time, a representative of ADE, specifically recommended that BSD retain the current interim superintendent due to her effectiveness. BSD followed this advice.

In addition, BSD retained a professional search firm, again per ADE recommendation, to identify a permanent superintendent. That firm consulted with local stakeholders and developed comprehensive criteria for the new hire. In April 2025, the BSD Board reviewed materials including videos of finalist candidates. However, because the board had not received certain requested information, they voted to delay interviews. Unfortunately, the ADE observer left the meeting without seeking clarification, which may have inadvertently contributed to subsequent misunderstandings about governance stability.

## **4. Legal Governance Structure and Support**

BSD operates under the model policies promulgated by the Arkansas School Board Association (ASBA). When policy issues arise, we seek legal guidance from ASBA attorney Lucas Harder or our district attorney Robert L. Coleman. There is no known instance in which the district has failed to follow legal or regulatory guidance provided by these sources or the ADE.

Additionally, the BSD Board operates under a unique governance structure required by a 1993 Federal Voting Rights Act Court Order, resulting in an eight-member board. Despite this, tie votes have not occurred in recent years, and most board decisions are unanimous, reflecting a spirit of cooperation. We acknowledge that one member occasionally diverges from the consensus, but Arkansas law does not allow recall or expulsion of elected board members. The remainder of the board continues to function



cohesively and constructively. In fact, the dissenter, usually votes with the majority resulting in mostly unanimous consent on most matters.

## **5. Mischaracterization of District Performance and Outlook**

We take issue with the narrative that BSD is a “failure factory,” a phrase used in public discourse that undermines the morale of educators and students. BSD has shown measurable, recent academic progress, full cooperation with the ADE, and has made comprehensive systemic changes.

It is difficult to accept a designation of Level 5 – Intensive Support while actively doing everything we were advised to do. Rather than punitive reclassification, we respectfully submit that BSD’s path would be better supported by continued partnership, encouragement, and recognition of its progress. Acknowledging success—such as the F-to-C school improvement—would reinforce the efforts of educators and attract families back into the district.

### **Conclusion**

BSD remains fully committed to student success and systemic improvement. We respectfully request reconsideration of the Level 5 designation and invite further dialogue with ADE to ensure continued transparency, collaboration, and mutual accountability.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Blankenship  
Interim Superintendent

Desmond Hammett  
President, Blytheville Board of Education

Blytheville School District  
405 Park St.  
Blytheville, AR 72315  
870-762-2053

