



DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

Earle School District

Legislative Quarterly Report

October – December 2023

Submitted by

Office of Coordinated Support & Service

Sheila Whitlow, Associate Deputy Commissioner

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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 EARLE SCHOOL DISTRICT

Pursuant to Ark. Code Ann. § 6-20-1905, the Earle School District received notice by certified mail as being identified by the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) for Fiscal Distress status. The District was classified in Fiscal Distress on October 12, 2017 due to the district failing to file an audit report within the nine month time period or within the time period under any extension granted by the Department of Education. The identification is based on acts or violations determined to jeopardize the fiscal integrity of the district including, without limitation, failure to fully develop and implement adequate corrective actions for previously identified audit findings and deficiencies.

Because of significant findings that jeopardized the fiscal integrity of the district, the State Board of Education assumed authority of the district and appointed an interim superintendent on November 6, 2017. As a result of the issues, ADE Commissioner Johnny Key exercised the authority granted under Arkansas Code 6-20-1901 et seq. to assume authority over the board of directors; however, Commissioner Key offered the board the opportunity to remain in place in an advisory capacity to the new superintendent. ADE personnel determined the following Fiscal Distress Indicators during an internal audit:

- Title I 2015-16 unallowable expenditures \$300,299.97; 2016-17 unallowable expenditures \$303,436.85
- NSL 2015-16 potential unallowable expenditures \$555,128.63; 2016-17 potential unallowable expenditures \$717,429.86
- Athletic/Activity Concessions had gate receipts unaccounted for: one football game, one in concession, two for basketball game 17 in concession 20.
- Payroll had some contracts that could not be tied to a W2 and some W2s had no contract.
- District website was missing documents listing legal balances, budget, salary reports, monthly expenditures reports, student handbook, audits, policy signature page, ASCIP plan, statistical report, and board minutes were not up to date.
- Credit card showed unmonitored use/unaccounted for documentation; potential cash advance to cover payroll.

On May 9, 2019, the State Board of Education approved a request from the Earle School district leadership and community advisory board to classify the district in need of Level 5 support.

On June 1, 2023, the State board of Education removed the Earle School District from Fiscal Distress Status and assumed authority of the district based on their classification of Level 5 Intensive Support. The Board also voted to establish a local Limited Authority Board for the district, utilizing the remaining members of the suspended board from 2017, and to determine a process to fill one open position.

Current DESE Quarterly Support

Submitted: Sheila Whitlow, Associate Deputy Commissioner

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 Earle School District. Sheila Whitlow, DESE Associate Deputy Commissioner and OCSS Director, delivers direct guidance to the state-appointed superintendent Ryan Burgess as needed, coordinating various external resources to maintain consistency in efforts. Mr. Burgess is working closely with the limited authority board to determine options and next steps for the district as they are in their final year of Level 5 support.

Terri McCann, State Leadership Development Coach, provided onsite support to the principals in the district throughout this quarter. 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 Kelly Stone, DESE RISE (Reading Initiative for Student Excellence) regional specialist, assist the district with the implementation of literacy instructional approaches and materials aligned with the science of reading. The OCSS team worked with Earle School District administrators, the DESE Fiscal Services and Support unit, educational consultants, and support specialists from Crowley's Ridge Educational Service Cooperative (CRESC) staff to provide support in all district systems.

During the second quarter of the 2023-24 school year, OCSS focused efforts on providing instructional leadership guidance for the purposes of improving Tier I instructional practice through the implementation of high-impact instructional practices schoolwide and on continuing to support local staff in a manner that allows for maximum local capacity in all fiscal matters. Additionally, the OCSS team examined enrollment and student attendance trends based on insights from the state Cycle 2 report. According to the report, Earle School District recorded an October 1 enrollment of 386 students, marking a decrease of 29 students (-6.99%) compared to the prior year. The district has consistently witnessed a decline in enrollment, with a cumulative loss of 154 students (-28.52%) over the past five years, as illustrated in the table below.

FIVE-YEAR ENROLLMENT TREND

School District: Earle SD

Year	# Enrolled	Prev Year Diff	Prev Year % Diff
2018-2019	540	BASE	BASE
2019-2020	527	-13	-2.41%
2020-2021	430	-97	-18.41%
2021-2022	419	-11	-2.56%
2022-2023	415	-4	-0.95%
2023-2024	386	-29	-6.99%
FIVE-YEAR ENROLLMENT DIFF		-154	-28.52%

Moreover, an examination of the trend in attendance rates reveals a decrease in the percentage of student attendance for Earle School District over the last five years, as depicted in the table below.

FIVE-YEAR ATTENDANCE RATE TREND

School District: Earle SD

Year	Average ADA	Average ADM	Attendance Rate
2018-2019	467.32	509.50	91.72%
2019-2020	447.43	473.46	94.50%
2020-2021	399.04	428.17	93.19%
2021-2022	388.25	418.10	92.86%
2022-2023	361.55	400.17	90.35%
2023-2024 Q1	346.90	380.15	91.25%
FIVE YEAR AVE			92.37%

These figures on declining enrollment and student attendance rates over the course of the last five years highlight the challenges faced by Earle School District. Improving student attendance rates is crucial for creating a positive learning environment and ensuring that students are actively engaged in their education. Despite these figures, it should be noted that there has been a spark of enthusiasm in the Earle community recently with a bold plan to seek opportunities for economic development and to capitalize on its close geographic proximity to Memphis. The district leadership is hoping to use that positive energy in the community to invigorate support for the school district.

Academics

The academic focus for the current quarter has centered around fidelity of high quality instructional material (HQIM) implementation and instructional practice. District and building leaders as well as OCSS and external service providers conduct focus walks on a regular basis in order to collect observational data on the level to which teachers are implementing HQIM as designed and are utilizing effective pedagogical strategies in delivery of instruction. Observational data from the focus walks show that most teachers are engaging in instruction using the adopted HQIM; however, the integrity of instruction is compromised by inconsistencies in instructional delivery and lack of student engagement. More concentrated effort to coach teachers to connect the HQIM with the individual needs of each student is critical. To assist with HQIM implementation of literacy at the elementary level, the state has partnered with SchoolKit, an external service provider, to support instructional leaders and teachers with planning and instructional coaching using the district's adopted literacy curricula. The SchoolKit coaches are onsite a minimum of four times per month to conduct focus walks in classrooms and facilitate instructional planning with teachers during collaborative team meetings in order to ensure that the adopted literacy curriculum is implemented with fidelity. The goal is to support teachers with internalization of the curricular components and lesson planning in order to bridge teacher practice with the intended

outcomes associated with the curriculum. Additionally, a DESE RISE Specialist works weekly both onsite and remotely to provide ongoing support and ensure consistency of instruction.

The district continues its partnership with Educational Epiphany to provide ongoing tailored professional development for teachers in grades 5-12 as well as high quality instructional materials. Through its partnership with Educational Epiphany, the district identified areas of critical need regarding the quality of instruction, student engagement, and student intervention processes in both academics and behavior. In response to those identified areas of critical need, the district implemented professional learning opportunities on high impact strategies for all instructional staff including leadership positions at the building and district levels, support for teachers through technical assistance and coaching in instructional planning and high frequency classroom visits with feedback that will be utilized to inform instruction. Currently, teachers are working toward full implementation of high impact strategy #1 (writing performance based objectives); however, focus walks conducted by Dr. Dickey, district and building leaders, and OCSS staff indicate inconsistencies among the staff in the level of development for the objectives. To address this, Dr. Dickey provided additional coaching and professional development support on deepening teachers' knowledge in constructing performance based objectives, while continuing implementation of high impact strategy #2 (vocabulary development). The district's K-12 Curriculum and Instruction Coordinator is working with staff to develop pacing guides in all core content areas.

Student Support

Dyslexia intervention is an area of concern for the district. The district recognizes that the current level of human capital is not enough to fully serve the needs of the students. Given that reality, the district has posted a position to obtain an additional interventionist, who should be able to start in January. In addition to insufficient staffing, the district identified a need to strengthen for conducting Level II dyslexia screenings. Vicki King, a Certified Academic Language Therapist-Qualified Instructor (CALT-QI) and Dyslexia Specialist from DESE, was contacted and plans to conduct a Level II dyslexia screening training in December for the dyslexia interventionists and ESD administrators, so the district will have personnel to conduct this screening as needed. Continued support from Ms. King and the DESE RISE Specialist assigned to the district are needed to ensure consistent faithful implementation of the Take Flight program for students currently receiving dyslexia intervention. With that said, Supt. Burgess has made staffing reassignments to address the deficit areas in an effort to improve services provided to both current and future students identified as needing these intervention services.

The district continues its implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Both the elementary school and the high school have identified and implemented school-wide behavioral expectations; however, staff are not consistent in their use of PBIS and data entry. The district has allotted funds to support incentive activities called Pop-Up Days that will encourage student and staff buy-in. District leadership with support from OCSS is in process to review its current support for each tier to determine if there are gaps and what resources can be used to address identified gaps.

Human Capital

A shortage of human capital resources is a reality that continues to plague the district. Despite being the middle of the school year, the district currently has several open professional positions posted on its website. This struggle is exacerbated by the fact that the open positions reflect areas of shortage across the state: special education, library media specialist, counselor, reading interventionist, etc. When the district does obtain a successful candidate to fill a vacancy, there is further potential that the candidate might not currently possess the professional licensure required for that position. As a result, the district has obtained emergency teaching permits and waivers through the State Board of Education to help address shortages in staffing. Melissa Jacks in the DESE Office of Professional Licensure has been working with the district to ensure that all staff serving in roles requiring professional licensure are enrolled in an appropriate pathway to licensure. Despite these challenges, the district leadership is working with partner educational organizations to support recruitment efforts in order to obtain and retain high-quality instructional staff.

Family and Community Engagement

Improving the relationship between the district and community stakeholders has been an area of focus for this quarter. At the start of October, Superintendent Ryan Burgess, the newly state-appointed superintendent for Earle School District, held an informal gathering with the limited-authority board members and community members at large in order to meet and greet patrons in the community and share his vision for the future of the district. The excitement continued into the following week with Homecoming activities, where school spirit and pride were on full display. School and community pride is one of the tenets Superintendent Burgess has been working to build. In early November, Superintendent Burgess and Earle Mayor Jaylen Smith announced a collaborative effort between Earle School District and The City of Earle for the first Earle Community Spruce Up Day taking place on Saturday, November 11, at Earle High School. This was an opportunity for community members and students to join forces to provide beautification services on the high school campus. Several community members participated in the event along with several students who were able to obtain community service hours. Superintendent Burgess received donations from local businesses for all the supplies needed for the event, including mulch, water, and food. He stated that this is the first of several community based initiatives he and Mayor Smith are planning.

Facilities and Transportation

In accordance with the 2024 Facilities Master Plan, the district is working to enhance safety and security at the high school with the renovation of the entrance to include purchase and installation of an electronic controlled access system and an updated intercom system. The district is also working to replace and re-key all internal and external door locks at the high school. The Superintendent is hoping to utilize ARP ESSER funds to help support these critical purchases and will obtain technical assistance from DESE to ensure procedural compliance in the bidding

process.

The district is also working to upgrade kitchen facilities and purchase new kitchen equipment using the \$146,000 grant awarded to Earle School District from the USDA Healthy Meals Incentive Grant. The district is working with DESE to obtain technical assistance on the proper procedures for securing bids.

Fiscal Governance and District Operations

The DESE Fiscal Support and Services Unit in coordination with OCSS provided ongoing support to the district through onsite visits and remote assistance in all fiscal matters. During this quarter, guidance centered on ensuring that debt requests are submitted as well as providing support for ESA Matching Grant and ESA platform changes. The district's fiscal staff continues to participate in training as needed. DESE Fiscal Support staff conducted a Finance 101 support training on October 19 to assist district fiscal staff with understanding the basics of school finance. During the quarter, OCSS team members have met with district finance department staff to review accounting practices and coding of expenditures in order to utilize restricted funds effectively. Additionally, OCSS provided support with a salary analysis using the fiscal coding of school employees in eFinance against the actual signed contracts and the approved salary schedules. Discrepancies were discovered and OCSS worked collaboratively with Superintendent Burgess, the district finance staff and DESE Fiscal Services, corrections have been made and operating procedures developed to ensure that this verification of systems is conducted in the future in order to avoid discrepancies.

In collaboration with OCSS Technology Coach Dexter Miller, the ESD technology department conducted a comprehensive Technology Needs Assessment, revealing a robust network with availability of backup switches. Mr. Miller provided several support efforts including coaching for virtual classes, resolving issues with inventory control systems and procedures, and identifying key priorities like DHCP/DNS Server and Intercom upgrades. Dr. Bobby Luckett, the district's technology coordinator, clarified job responsibilities for technology staff, which led to enhanced task prioritization. The department is proactively involved with Operation Hero, a maintenance application, to enhance work order tracking and are planning a website upgrade with feedback from district leaders. Ongoing activities, including monitoring virtual classrooms and reviewing the Technology Emergency Plan, demonstrate the district's commitment to actively addressing and improving technology support for both staff and students.