



DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

Helena-West Helena School District

Legislative Quarterly Report

April – June 2024

Submitted by

Office of Coordinated Support & Service

Sheila Whitlow, Associate Deputy Commissioner

July 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.

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. 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.

In the final quarter of the 2023-2024 school year, OCSS concentrated efforts on ensuring effective administration of state-required ATLAS assessments, on providing strategic guidance for organizational management, master scheduling, staff allocation, and educational programming for the next school year, and on safeguarding the integrity of business operations upon approaching the fiscal year end. Through proactive planning with the district leadership and coordination of efforts among district partners, the district laid the foundation for beginning the next school year with confidence and stability.

Academics

The district has been working to develop a strategic approach for improving academic and behavioral outcomes. The executive leadership team reviewed progress toward implementation of academic and behavioral interventions through a multitiered system of support based upon insights gathered from a visit to a neighboring district. This review included district and building leadership as well as school counselors to establish clear expectations and next steps for progress. Additionally, Superintendent McGee accompanied by district and building leaders conducted instructional sweeps of classrooms across both campuses to capture both strengths and areas for improvement. The feedback from those sweeps will be used to guide building administrators in planning future actions surrounding the prioritization of professional development activities and embedded coaching support. These efforts position the district to

start the new school year on secure footing.

Significant progress was made in assessment and transition support during the quarter. Both schools successfully administered the ATLAS assessments, with the district leadership team facilitating professional development on testing protocols to ensure consistency across the district. The team also outlined procedures for communicating and addressing technical issues during assessments. Additionally, planning discussions focusing on implementing summer programs and staffing for the next school year set the stage for successful transition into the next school year.

Some of the key areas identified for improvement continue to be establishing routine practices that support the improvement of instruction, particularly through coaching for principals on evaluation of instruction and providing instructional feedback. Creating an effective and efficient master schedule, particularly with regard to ensuring program compliance in literacy and expansion of career pathways. The high school is meeting the state requirements for H2 pathways for the 24-25 school year, but a more strategic effort is needed with community partnerships to ensure that career pathways are strongly aligned to community needs. In addition, hiring a certified teaching staff continues to pose a challenge for the district. Lastly, the consistent turnover at the high school counselor position, tasks such as creating schedules and auditing transcripts, for example, do continue to pose a challenge as the district prepares for the start of the school year. DESE support has been and continues to be provided both onsite and virtually. This has been vital to setting the district up for success as they start the school year and will continue moving forward.

Student Support

The district continued to make progress in enhancing special education programming this quarter. The district expanded partnerships with outside agencies to facilitate support for students with disabling conditions including consultation and transportation for students with hearing devices and outreach assistance for speech therapy services and transition conferencing. The district also prepared for a monitoring visit from the DESE Office of Special Education, where emphasis was placed on the need for continuous training for special education personnel and for general education teachers to support the transition to implement inclusive practices. Consequently, district leadership emphasized the importance of developing a plan for meaningful access and participation and ensured support for all environments within the master schedule. One particular issue of concern regarded the safety of staff when contacting parents for special education conferences. In response, district leadership coordinated efforts with local authorities to ensure safety during home visits conducted by staff. These efforts showcase the district's focus on providing quality support programming for all students.

With regard to behavioral support, the district has been moving forward in its implementation of a behavior management process. The district leadership engaged in a showcase of the behavioral management process in a neighboring district, which led to meaningful progress toward implementing actionable steps in developing a holistic approach to student behavioral support. The district used this momentum to establish a Tier II behavioral support team and

organized meetings that focused on understanding the purpose and responsibilities of a Tier II behavioral team. The district also presented a manual that outlined procedures for successful implementation of Tier II behavioral strategies and supports. A plan for a more robust multi-tiered system of support is being refined and should be ready for implementation by the beginning of the new school year.

Human Capital

Dr. Keith McGee has accepted another job. Dr. Xavier Hodo has been appointed as Interim Superintendent. Dr. Hodo has been serving as Deputy Superintendent in Helena West-Helena this past year, and is well positioned to lead the district.

The district has made significant strides in acquiring quality human capital to implement educational initiatives. Efforts to reduce the number of non-licensed teachers have been successful throughout the year, yet there remains a shortage of certified teachers for the 2024-2025 school year. Despite regular job postings, connections with colleges and universities, and support from OCSS and DESE, the district has not been able to fill all positions with certified teachers, thus leading to a workforce with many that require a high level of support in developing the craft of teaching, which they are often lacking as unlicensed teachers. However, the district is committed to ensuring all non-licensed teachers are on a licensure pathway, receiving targeted support from internal and external coaches in both teaching skills and licensure processes. The district will partner with OCSS before and during the upcoming school year to set non-licensed staff on the best path for licensure and ensure necessary supports are in place. Developing a quality teacher workforce remains one of the district's most significant challenges. Non-licensed teachers have a higher turnover rate due to the lack of a credential anchoring them in the profession. Thus, prioritizing their licensure and professional development is crucial. While the district's efforts in human capital development are commendable, the reality is that there is an insufficient teacher pipeline to adequately staff many districts in the rural Arkansas Delta.

Family and Community Engagement

The district faced a significant challenge with the death of a current student after the prom at Central High School. This event prompted the district to implement a comprehensive plan to support students and staff through the grief process. The plan included collaboration with an external mental health provider to secure on-site therapy, demonstrating an effective approach to helping stakeholders process grief. Unfortunately, due to the rising number of violent incidents in the community, the district is becoming more adept at managing grief, highlighting the need for a coordinated effort with community and state officials as well as civic leaders to address this issue.

As a precautionary measure, the district developed plans for increased security at graduation to prevent potential violence. Collaborating closely with external partners, the district ensured robust safety measures were in place for the event, resulting in no incidents of violence. The proactive actions of district and building leadership are commendable. Frequent communication among local safety officers, county resources, and city officials led to a solid support plan and

established a protocol for all future events.

Facilities and Transportation

The district remains dedicated to improving facilities at JF Wahl Elementary. The ongoing construction project, which includes adding a wellness area to the campus, aims to provide recreational amenities for students. This project is fully funded by ARP ESSER (American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds.

Fiscal Governance and District Operations

The DESE Fiscal Support and Services Unit, in collaboration with OCSS, offered continuous assistance to the district through both onsite visits and remote support, addressing various fiscal concerns. Throughout this quarter, the focus of guidance revolved around funding allocations, unrestricted budget assistance, and oversight of debt requests, and end-of-year fiscal closeout. The DESE Fiscal Support team conducted an analysis of financial operations to verify the district's adherence to sound fiscal practices. Additionally, the district worked to ensure that the federal programs application initiated through the AR App was submitted prior to the end of the fiscal year. The district continued to receive direct financial guidance and support from the Arkansas Public School Resource Center (APSRC). This additional support provided oversight in daily operations as well as created a more streamlined system for purchasing and payroll practices. For the upcoming year, APSRC will manage financial transactions with district employees working in conjunction with them to provide documentation and information needed for daily financial transactions under the direction of the Superintendent.

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.