



DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

Earle 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 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 designated superintendent as needed, coordinating various external resources to maintain consistency in efforts. Ryan Burgess, OCSS Leadership Coach was appointed as Superintendent for the Earle School District on October 2nd for the remainder of this school year. Tish Knowles, remains in the district serving as Assistant Superintendent supporting Mr. Burgess. Focus on instructional practices and outcomes is paramount for the district. Mr Burgess will work 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 and Mr. Burgess, State Leadership Development Coaches 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 Herring, 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.

During the first quarter of the 2023-24 school year, OCSS has focused efforts on providing instructional leadership guidance for the purposes of improving student achievement and on continuing to support local staff in a manner that allows for maximum local capacity in all fiscal matters. 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 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.

Academics

In July, DESE released the preliminary results from the ACT Aspire assessment administered in Spring 2023. The score reports detailed improvement in all grades except third and sixth grade for reading but only in fourth, fifth, and seventh grades for mathematics. Unfortunately, these data negatively impacted the ESSA School Index Report with overall decline shown for both schools

within the district. Earle Elementary School dropped from 55.22 (F) in 2022 to 51.83 (F) in 2023, a 3.39 point decline. Earle High School dropped from 54.41 (D) to 52.19 (F), a 2.22 point decline and a lowered letter grade.

To support its improvement efforts, the district entered into a partnership agreement with Dr. Donyall Dickey from Educational Epiphany to provide staff in grades 4-12 with professional development in the areas of instructional design and delivery designed to improve literacy and overall academic outcomes for the 2023-2024 school year. Contracted services include delivering professional development sessions, conducting on-site observations and feedback, and providing high-quality instructional materials along with training on proper use of materials. Additionally, Dr. Dickey provides supplemental instructional leadership coaching support for building and district leaders to ensure full implementation of effective instructional practices and strategies modeled through the program. Teachers and staff received their inaugural training on July 19 with follow-up training conducted on August 9. The OCSS team will work closely with the district and Dr. Dickey to ensure the integrity of program implementation. A focus walk tool has been developed to collect data that will be used to determine the level of implementation and needed professional learning opportunities. District and building leadership, OCSS and external consultants conduct walks consistently at both schools.

In many high school classrooms, there has been a noticeable inconsistency in the implementation of Educational Epiphany focus strategies. A clear disconnect between the stated learning targets and the actual instruction was observed. On the other hand, in K-3 elementary classrooms, teachers are making use of HQIM reading materials to deliver reading lessons that align with the science of reading. However, significant challenges arise as the current phonics program lacks a scripted structure. This gap highlights the need for a more profound understanding of explicit phonics instruction, which is vital for delivering effective reading lessons, especially for many novice teachers. To address this issue, the district is in collaboration with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) on-site coach and OCSS team to select a phonics program that can offer teachers the necessary support for planning and executing explicit phonics lessons successfully. The elementary is currently using 95% Group to provide Tier II Intervention as well as Wit and Wisdom by Great Minds to teach comprehension. Ryan Burgess, OCSS State Leadership Coach, is providing ongoing support to the new high school principal to ensure teachers receive the support they need to implement the focus strategies. In addition, Terri McCann is on site 3-4 days/week mentoring the principal, coaching teachers and ensuring consistent implementation of the school's reading materials.

Student Support

As part of its weekly collaborative team meeting process, the district is focusing its data collection efforts to pinpoint specific areas of student need both academically and behaviorally. Kelly Stone, state RISE literacy specialist, has been assisting the OCSS team and school leadership in the organization, delivery, and implementation of HQIM and has been leading efforts to administer, collect, and analyze beginning of the year assessments in foundational reading as required by law. The data have been used to group students for skills-based instruction using 95% Group.

Despite the attempt to implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), it's evident that many teachers are still primarily using a reactive approach to behavior management. While school-wide behavioral expectations have been clearly identified, these expected behaviors are not consistently observed throughout the schools. Dr. Watson, the OCSS Behavior Support Specialist, remains dedicated to providing training and ongoing support. However, it's important to emphasize that the success of PBIS hinges significantly on the commitment and leadership of both the building and district levels. Their active involvement and dedication are pivotal in ensuring that positive behavior interventions are consistently and effectively implemented with integrity across the district

Increasing school safety has been addressed through the employment of School Resource Officers (SROs) at both schools, along with the installation of kiosk entry systems that keep external doors securely locked. Additionally, there is a clear expectation that internal doors remain locked for enhanced security. However, OCSS has noted instances where this expectation is not met, as internal doors have been found unlocked, and in some high school classrooms, doors have been left open during class periods. These concerns have been diligently conveyed to both building and district leaders to ensure that appropriate actions are taken to rectify these safety lapses and maintain a secure environment for students and staff.

At present, there is one dyslexia interventionist who has received training in the Take Flight program and is providing dyslexia interventions to students identified as exhibiting characteristics of dyslexia. Efforts are actively underway to bolster the dyslexia program by recruiting another employee who will undergo Certified Academic Language Training (CALT) training scheduled for November. Enrollment in this program is required for an individual to provide interventions using the Take Flight program. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, steps are being taken to reach out to retired dyslexia interventionists in the local area. The aim is to secure part-time support from these experienced professionals to bridge the gap until a new employee can be trained and integrated into the team.

Human Capital

The district struggles with an ongoing challenge regarding human capital. To address staffing vacancies, the district has resorted to employing long-term substitutes, teachers with emergency teaching licenses and the Act 1240 waiver to ensure classrooms are adequately staffed. In an effort to provide support and enhance the quality of instruction, the district has hired a K-12 instructional facilitator (IF) who works directly with teachers. However, as this is a new role for the IF, additional support and resources to be effective in the position is needed. Initially, the roles and responsibilities of the IF were not clarified, but the OCSS team is working with district leadership to resolve this issue. OCSS staff and the DESE RISE Specialist are attempting to provide direct support to ensure the IF has a positive impact on instructional practices as well as access to a curriculum aligned to the Arkansas State Standards. It's also important to note that the high school has a new principal who, despite willingness to learn, has limited experience in instructional leadership. This adds another layer to the ongoing human capital challenge, emphasizing the need for professional

development and mentorship to ensure that the new principal can provide effective instructional leadership and support for the teaching staff. In light of these complexities, a comprehensive and collaborative approach is necessary to address the district's human capital issues and enhance the overall educational experience for students.

Family and Community Engagement

At the beginning of the school year, the Arkansas Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commission hosted a "Stop the Violence" rally for the district at Earle High School. The MLK Commission incorporated several high school students in the rally into prominent roles. The event was well attended by the community. After the rally students were allowed to take pictures with the celebrity guest speaker, Pooch Hall, and then attended break out sessions throughout the afternoon on the topics of non-violence, anti-bullying and financial literacy. Improving the relationship between the district and community stakeholders has been an ongoing challenge. There is a need to create opportunities for positive interactions and meaningful conversations with key stakeholders. This will be a focus during the upcoming quarter.

Facilities and Transportation

The Superintendent had hoped to utilize ARP ESSER funds for a HVAC system replacement at the high school, but due to the need for additional funds to address learning loss at both schools the decision was made to postpone the project and apply for the next cycle of partnership funding. Because of the wealth index of 0.1666, if approved and funded the district's portion of the project would be approximately \$390,535.

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 ESSER II funding and budget preparation. DESE Fiscal Support staff conducted a financial operations analysis to ensure that the district remained on-track after being released from fiscal distress this past June. The district's fiscal staff continues to participate in training as needed. 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 technology staff collaborated with OCSS to conduct a technology needs analysis and to establish procedures for conducting timely technology repairs. The analysis team reviewed various technology-related issues and identified areas for improvement in technology processes. One of the key areas centered around virtual classroom instruction. The team monitored ongoing virtual classes and provided guidance on best practices for

teachers to make the most of technology tools. Moreover, the team inspected classroom equipment to ensure that all equipment was current and functioning properly. The technology staff received training on the Operation Hero application, which helps streamline work order ticket procedures and make it easier for staff to track progress on various tasks.

The district was awarded a USDA Healthy Meals Incentive Grant for \$146,000 to support purchases for equipment, supplies, and farm to school activities.

The limited authority board has demonstrated a strong commitment to its role by actively participating in training sessions conducted by members of the Arkansas School Board Association. Although these training efforts have effectively equipped board members with a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, it is recognized that to further enhance the effectiveness of the board, continued training is essential, particularly in the areas of school finance and policy development. These aspects are crucial for sound decision-making and governance in education, and ongoing education in these areas will equip the board with the knowledge and skills required to make informed and impactful decisions for the betterment of the school district. From observations of board meetings, it is clear that the board needs additional training in the rules of order to effectively conduct meetings. This will be addressed through additional training and work sessions with the board.