



DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

Helena-West Helena 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 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.

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.

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 continued implementation of the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) model in partnership with Solution Tree. Additionally, the OCSS team analyzed enrollment and student attendance patterns based on the insights presented in the state Cycle 2 report. According to the report, HWHSD recorded an October 1 enrollment of 920 students, reflecting a decrease of 69 students (-6.98%) compared to the preceding year. The district has consistently experienced a declining enrollment trend, with a cumulative loss of 324 students (-26.05%) over the past five years, as outlined in the table below.

FIVE-YEAR ENROLLMENT TREND

School District: Helena-West Helena SD

Year	# Enrolled	Prev Year Diff	Prev Year % Diff
2018-2019	1244	BASE	BASE
2019-2020	1199	-45	-3.62%
2020-2021	1147	-52	-4.34%
2021-2022	1116	-31	-2.70%
2022-2023	989	-127	-11.38%
2023-2024	920	-69	-6.98%
FIVE-YEAR ENROLLMENT DIFF		-324	-26.05%

Despite the declining enrollment figures, an analysis of the attendance rate trend shows that HWHSD is making slight improvements in its attendance rate percentage over the past five years as shown in the table below.

FIVE-YEAR ATTENDANCE RATE TREND

School District: Helena-West Helena SD

Year	Average ADA	Average ADM	Attendance Rate
2018-2019	1170.50	1245.67	93.94%
2019-2020	1143.87	1202.21	95.15%
2020-2021	1049.41	1155.11	90.85%
2021-2022	1008.96	1069.81	94.31%
2022-2023	908.49	968.09	93.84%
2023-2024 Q1	861.42	912.45	94.41%
FIVE YEAR AVE			93.73%

The figures on declining enrollment trends highlight the challenges faced by HWHSD. The lack of economic initiatives in the area pose significant barriers to growth in population in the district, which directly correlates to the decline in enrollment. Superintendent Dr. Keith McGee has been working with the board to review enrollment and make appropriate budgetary adjustments in order to sustain the financial solvency of the district.

Academics

The academic focus for the current quarter has focused on ensuring the thoroughness of instruction, aligning it with the implementation of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM). The district has established a cohesive leadership team that continually evaluates, measures progress, celebrates growth, and makes necessary adjustments. The commitment of the district's leadership team remains steadfast in coaching building leaders, collecting data, and guiding decisions through weekly focus walks. The main goal is to gather observational data on the degree to which teachers are effectively implementing HQIM and employing sound pedagogical strategies in their instructional delivery. Despite the district's cohesive approach toward achieving planned goals, the primary challenge lies in fostering growth among students and instructional staff.

Observational data derived from the focus walks indicates that a majority of teachers are utilizing the designated HQIM for instruction. However, the effectiveness of this instruction shows inconsistency, primarily due to a prevalent lack of lesson internalization in many classrooms. While leaders at both JF Wahl Elementary and Central High exhibit dedication to the instructional process, they face challenges when providing coaching support and in determining immediate priorities when implementing external support inputs. Coordination and prioritization of instructional support providers and time spent with administrators have been discussed with district and building leadership. As a result, a plan for a more cohesive and less disruptive approach is being planned for the second semester. Additionally, recognizing the crucial need for instructional leadership support within building leaders, Superintendent McGee has committed to collaborative efforts of the Core Leadership Team with OCSS and external service providers. The aim is to coach building leaders in developing robust instructional leadership instincts. This collaborative approach seeks to address the challenges faced by leaders in translating commitment

into effective coaching support and overcoming hesitancy in collaborative engagements. By fostering a comprehensive understanding of instructional priorities, this concerted effort aims to enhance the overall instructional effectiveness within the district.

Student Support

The district special education department has continued to receive intensive technical support facilitated by Julie Amstutz from OCSS. Despite the recent accomplishments and collaborative initiatives within the special education program that reflect notable strides in ensuring an inclusive and supportive learning environment, there is still much work to be done.

Collaboration with Easter Seals Project Prepare included two days of training for elementary self-contained teachers and paraprofessionals, sparking ongoing discussions about crucial elements such as class structure, leadership in the classroom, accountability, zoning plans, and expectations—a testament to the district's continuous commitment to improving special education practices. Engagement with the DESE Office of Special Education (OSE) during a scheduled on-site visit concerning the Letter of Long Standing yielded positive outcomes, with submitted folders cleared and procedures manual sections approved. The submission of the 1% Alternate Assessment Justification form led to the district being placed in Level 2 support, necessitating specific actions to address identified needs. A collaborative meeting involved key stakeholders discussing observations, recent Easter Seals visits, and devised next steps to reinforce classroom safety, provide training to elementary paraprofessionals, and ensure the proper use of curriculum resources. Ongoing reminders and follow-ups further demonstrated the district's continuous efforts to optimize special education support and foster an inclusive and supportive educational landscape. Concurrently, representatives from Yes, We Can at Solution Tree, with support from Robin Stripling through the DESE Office of Special Education, emphasized inclusive practices for teachers supporting students with various learning needs. Despite being exposed to valuable resources for incorporating inclusive practices, the professional staff responsible for serving students with the most significant needs currently lack experience and training in the latest best practices. Addressing this limitation will necessitate ongoing development and support from various district leaders and external service providers. It must be noted that the district has invested both financial and human capital resources to ensure the Special Education Program not only meets state and federal requirements, but it consistently provides the best possible services to the students with unique learning needs and the improvements are sustained over time.

The district has also continued its efforts related to implementation of trauma-informed instructional practices with technical support provided by Dr. Michael Watson from OCSS. Dr. Watson assisted the district with a review of student behavioral data within the SmartData dashboard. An analysis of the behavioral data at the high school indicated increased student behavioral incidents on Thursdays and a majority of adverse behaviors occurring within classrooms. In response, the district planned additional professional development training on classroom management for teachers, and Dr. Watson suggested an increased administrator presence in the classroom to observe and address classroom management issues and exploring strategies to unite groups of students around a shared purpose or goal. Dr. McGee's Superintendent Student Council also discusses concerns and possible solutions to student mental health, social and emotional needs. These consistent meetings at both the

district and building level demonstrate a desire to improve student voice at both schools.

Human Capital

The district grapples with persistent challenges in the availability and quality of human capital resources. Securing qualified candidates for vacancies is a recurrent struggle, with the added risk that successful candidates may lack the requisite professional licensure for their positions. Consequently, the district has sought recourse in emergency teaching permits and waivers obtained through the State Board of Education to mitigate staffing shortages. Melissa Jacks from the DESE Office of Professional Licensure has collaborated with the district to ensure staff in roles requiring licensure are enrolled in appropriate pathways. Despite these hurdles, district leadership actively partners with educational entities to bolster recruitment efforts and ensure the acquisition and retention of high-quality instructional staff.

Facilities and Transportation

The high school gymnasium underwent a comprehensive renovation completed in two distinct phases. In Phase I, the primary emphasis was on replacing the HVAC systems throughout the facility, ensuring an upgraded and efficient climate control infrastructure. Phase II focused on internal enhancements, encompassing seating improvements, goal installations, scoreboard upgrades, and various other modifications to enhance the overall functionality and aesthetics of the building. The extensive renovation project aimed to modernize and optimize the gymnasium's facilities for both practical use and visual appeal. Upon completion of Phase II, the revamped gymnasium is poised to offer an enhanced environment for various activities, contributing to the overall improvement of the high school's athletic and recreational spaces.

The district is continuing its efforts on improvements on the JF Wahl Elementary campus with the addition of a wellness area on campus. The project was initiated through a groundbreaking ceremony on December 12, and was completely funded by ARP ESSER (American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds. Superintendent Dr. McGee is continuing to pursue other enhancements to the elementary campus including the construction of a new K-6 facility, for which the district hopes to receive support from the State Academic Facilities Partnership Program to help offset costs. If Facilities Partnership funding is approved for the proposed construction project, the district will be able to utilize existing balances in its building fund to fully support the project without having to seek an increase in millage.

Fiscal Governance and District Operations

A key area of emphasis for this quarter centered around the strategic dedication of the local school board. Superintendent McGee affirmed his commitment to work with the HWHSD board to refine its roles and responsibilities for governance of the district, and the board president has expressed a commitment to work with fellow board members to ensure the positive momentum and growth demonstrated during the previous school year continues during the second semester of the upcoming year. It should be noted that

monthly work sessions during this quarter featured productive discussions with a renewed focus on student-related matters.

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 allocations and unrestricted budget support in addition to monitoring debt requests. DESE Fiscal Support staff conducted a financial operations analysis to ensure that the district continued to implement sound fiscal processes. 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 fiscal staff continues to participate in training as needed. To ensure oversight and provide support to the district's current general business manager, the district has contracted with APSRC to assume the fiscal operations in the district's finance department. A plan has been initiated collaboratively with the district leadership and APSRC to ensure a smooth transition and to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the APSRC consultants and district staff. The district recognizes the need for its Central Office to effectively support its own business and financial transactions and is working with APSRC to establish standard operating procedures that support effective and efficient business management processes.

Together with Dr. McGee and APSRC representatives, Ms. Whitlow analyzed staff compensation, focusing on identifying and correcting contracts, particularly for classified personnel. While they successfully addressed most classified contracts, the significant task revealed numerous inconsistencies between the actual contracts and eFinance data. This system verification should be an annual practice to prevent potential discrepancies and ensure accurate staff payment.

The district was selected to participate in a grant through the U.S. Department of Education's Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) administered by the University of Central Arkansas (UCA). Tapped the GEAR UP Arkansas College Ready Navigator (GUAR-CRN) project at UCA, the grant aims to increase enrollment in postsecondary education by targeting 6th grade and 7th grade student cohorts in urban and rural Arkansas school districts through expanded preparedness measures for students and their families and includes college scholarship opportunities upon cohort completion at the end of high school. This is a fantastic opportunity for HWHSD students to obtain an additional avenue to access postsecondary learning.