



DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

Lee County School District

Legislative Quarterly Report

October - December 2022

Submitted by

Office of Coordinated Support & Service

Stacy Smith, Deputy Commissioner

January 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.

LEE COUNTY BACKGROUND

On March 25, 2019, the State Board of Education found that the Lee County School District and Lee High School to be in probationary violation of the Rules Governing the Standards for Accreditation (Sections 1-C.2.1 and 1-C.2.2 respectively). The DESE recommended to the State Board that the Board place the District and Lee High School on probationary status for these violations. The District appealed the Department's determination; however, the State Board of Education did not approve the appeal. Under Ark. Code Ann. § 6-15-207(c), the superintendent and school board were removed and the district was placed under state authority.

Pursuant to Ark. Code Ann. § 6-20-1905, on May 9, 2019, the Arkansas Department of Education identified the Lee County School District as a school district in fiscal distress. The Arkansas Department of Education made this identification because the Lee County School District met the following fiscal distress indicator(s) as set forth in Ark. Code Ann. § 6-20-1904. The school district requested continuation of level 5 support from the SBE on May 13, 2021.

Current DESE Quarterly Support

Submitted: Sheila Whitlow, Assistant State Superintendent

The Division of Elementary and Secondary Education's Office of Coordinated Support and Service (OCSS) provides direct support to Lee County School District. Assistant State Superintendent Sheila Whitlow is on site approximately 2 days per week providing direct support to the district and building leadership coordinating various external resources to maintain consistency in efforts. Additional ongoing OCSS support is provided by Julie Amstutz and Dr. Michael Watson that are on site 1-2 days per week assisting and coaching the student support staff at both schools. Lee County is continuing the implementation of the Professional Learning Communities model and is working closely with Solution Tree coaches. This school year, members of the district leadership team are part of a cohort of teams from around the state participating in monthly meetings providing professional learning regarding leading the PLC process districtwide. Ensuring capacity building supports are aligned with an end-goal of gradually releasing responsibility for effectiveness and efficiency in all systems to the district and school leadership and staff will be the cornerstone of the support provided during the 2022-23 school year.

Academics

This quarter the district took time to celebrate statewide recognition following the release of the 2021-22 ACT Aspire scores. Anna Strong Learning Academy, the district's K-6 school, was recognized as a *School on the Move Toward Excellence* because of the significant progress on the ESSA School Index Report moving from a total index of 5.7 to 57.1. In

addition, both schools were recognized by the Office Education Policy (OEP) as a school that is “Beating the Odds” for academic growth. These OEP awards are for schools whose students are demonstrating high academic growth despite serving a population where at least 66% of the students participate in the Free/Reduced Lunch Program, which is based on low household income. Schools serving such student populations often struggle to demonstrate high academic achievement, subsequently receiving lower letter grades. Recognition for growth demonstrates the value added to each student and reflects how much a student improved their score from the prior year compared to what was predicted based on prior achievement history. While poverty can negatively impact student success, the Lee County School District’s Anna Strong Learning Academy and Lee High School were recognized because of their efforts to intervene at the student and skill level thus resulting in expected or exceeding growth for their students in both math and literacy thus “*Beating the Odds.*” It should be noted that although the district took time to celebrate, there was no pause in the efforts to ensure high levels of learning for all students through effective core instruction as well as providing skills-based Tier II interventions. Another positive outcome from the assessment results is a renewed belief in the PLC process and collective teacher efficacy which is that the staff of the school believe in their ability to positively affect students. The message seems to be clear that together teachers can achieve more in their efforts to impact student learning especially if they collectively believe they can do so.

Improving core instruction (Tier I) will continue to be the focus of all support from both internal and external support providers; even so, it is important to ensure there are effective Tier II interventions provided to close the achievement gap and to decrease the number of students requiring ongoing targeted interventions. To create a more cohesive plan for quality Tier II instruction in reading that is aligned to the science of reading, the district has purchased 95% Group instructional materials. All teachers and support staff attended training in the implementation of its various programs and plans have been made for implementation during each school’s intervention time during second semester. The DESE RISE Specialist, Dallas Henderson, has worked with the school’s instructional support staff and principal to plan for the intervention times and grouped students based on 95% Group assessment results. The high school will resume the implementation of 95% Group MultiSyllabic Routine Cards during Strategic and Critical Reading with the DESE Secondary RISE Specialists providing coaching and additional technical support as needed.

Student Support

A leadership position was added this school year with the responsibility of leading two collaborative teams: Response to Intervention Collaborative Teams for Academics and for Behavior. The teams are composed of support staff that include counselors, the school resource officer, instructional support staff, alternative learning leadership, school nurses, behavior specialists and interventionists. The teams use a variety of data points to identify students and to track progress; the data sources include attendance, office referrals, grades, interim assessment, teacher observations, etc. Because this team composition is unique to the area, LCSD has allowed leadership teams from a local district to observe CTMs in an

effort to learn more about the process, how it impacts student engagement, student achievement and the overall social and emotional health of students that are identified as needing more direct support. The visiting district was provided the opportunity to debrief with the teams as well as the building principals to better understand the role of building leaders in the PLC process.

At the end of the first semester, OCSS Behavior Support Specialist provided a status update to Supt. Stone; he shared that during the three years he has supported the district he has seen evidence of a culture shift with schools identifying tiers of support, strengthening the core, focusing on students that need more direct support and clarifying the roles of the support staff. He also shared that the addition of the assistant principal who is leading the collaborative teams has been key to the catapult of success in the district's multi-tiered system of support. That said, there is still work to be done. The teams need to clarify the procedure for students who are in need of services outside of the services provided by the district. All staff aware of the behavior expectations, teaching students those expectations and holding them accountable consistently will result in a better MTSS district wide.

The result of leadership and staff turnover over the past several years has created challenges for developing and sustaining a strong dyslexia support program. It is imperative that the district review, revise and follow the plan for timely identification of student needs through screeners, providing consistent dyslexia interventions, and retaining the data to be used to track student progress over time. To that end, it was determined that additional direct support is needed; Vicki King, the DESE Dyslexia Program Advisor is providing direct support to the District Dyslexia Coordinator. Ms. King has been on site working with the coordinator as well as instructional support staff and the Special Education Supervisor. She provided School Based Identification Training to said staff as well as Superintendent Stone and the two building principals. Ms. King has also worked with OCSS and the district leadership to identify staff that would qualify to register for training to become a Certified Academic Language Therapist and be qualified to provide dyslexia interventions using the Take Flight comprehensive intervention program. The first round of training will begin in January 2023. With the additional trained staff and the ability to serve six students/forty-five minute sessions, the district will be able to meet the needs of all students identified as needing Tier III intervention. Additional support will be provided by DESE R.I.S.E. specialists who are assigned to LCSD and a Great Rivers Education Service Cooperative literacy specialist.

Human Capital

There is a continued effort to ensure all staff working under the Act 1240 waiver are on a path to licensure and that any support needed is provided through the Recruitment and Retention Consultant, OCSS, the DESE Licensure Unit and the R & R from Great Rivers Cooperative. Superintendent Stone has clearly and frequently communicated the expectation that all staff employed as teachers will be working toward a teaching license and making adequate progress or the position will be advertised to be filled by a certified employee for the 2023-24 school year. A staffing analysis is currently underway as well as restructuring plans for the

instructional support staff to ensure highly qualified staff are having direct contact with students daily through modeled lessons, interventions, after school programs, etc. The analysis will assist with determining what, if any, additional staff will be needed for the upcoming school year. The district's investment in the instructional support team demonstrates the belief that consistent support for the teaching staff is key to growing and retaining teachers in an effort to provide a guaranteed curriculum to all students. To ensure this, the District Leadership Team is reviewing all roles and responsibilities of members of the support staff to determine the most effective and efficient use of each member's time and skill set. The ultimate goal is to capture as much student contact time as possible without jeopardizing the support provided to the classroom teachers and principals through facilitating collaborative team meetings, collecting data, assisting with administering screeners, progress monitoring, instructional material implementation and planning.

The outreach effort to colleges and universities to meet and recruit incoming education interns continued during the Fall Semester with site visits by University of Arkansas, Pine Bluff (21 interns) and Williams Baptist University (11 interns). During these visits, the interns were introduced to the principals, information about the district was provided by the Superintendent and interns taught lessons at each school. In a reflection assignment after the visit, an intern wrote, "I learned that I made the right decision sticking with education... Teaching this lesson [at LCSD] and interacting with the students showed me this is what I want to do. I learned I feed off of students while teaching and love watching them learn." It is also important to note that over 50% of the UAPB interns left resumes with Superintendent Stone. Stemming from last year's intern visit; leadership interviewed a recent WBU education major for a vacancy at the high school and has recommended him to the board to be hired for the second semester of this school year; the aforementioned applicant visited LCSD last school year as an intern. After the visit last year, he shared that he was struck by the respectful attitudes and eagerness to learn demonstrated by students at Lee High School and expressed his desire to return if there was ever an opening. His only challenge will be the long commute due to limited housing in the area. Lack of housing continues to be one of the greatest challenges the district faces when recruiting new teachers and retaining current staff. As mentioned in the previous quarterly report, the superintendent is continuing efforts to secure funding for providing housing for teachers and hopefully, develop a duplex community on the district owned property near the administration office. Of course, the plans are in the infancy stage, but knowing that student achievement in the district will continue to improve when the district has the human capital needed to provide high quality instruction in every classroom is of utmost importance so his efforts will continue.

Fiscal Governance and District Operations

The DESE Fiscal Support and Services Unit in coordination with OCSS provides ongoing support to the district through onsite visits and remote assistance. The gradual release of fiscal transactions from Arkansas Public School Resource Center (APSRC) is continuing as well as the implementation of the standard operation procedures developed during the previous fiscal year. The superintendent and APSRC have implemented an electronic

requisition/purchase order system to improve efficiency. As with any new process or procedure, there are learning curves and unintended consequences that must be addressed; as a result, continued support will be needed to create a system that is sustainable, effective and efficient.

Superintendent Stone is working closely with APSRC to begin the process of planning for the 2022-23 school year's budget by evaluating the current salary schedule, staffing needs, line item expenditures that can/should be adjusted and exploring additional funding opportunities such as the recent release of a grant to improve lighting in public schools. Mr. Stone is in daily contact with the district's business office staff and APSRC to ensure day-to-day operations are continually improving including paying invoices in a timely manner and following policy as it relates to financial transactions. Additionally, he will be working on an in depth review and revision of policies to be adopted for the upcoming school year. Assistance from ASBA and OCSS is being provided. Another source of celebration was the recent Legislative Audit Exit Meeting during which the auditor shared that there were zero significant findings and three supplemental findings that will be resolved this month.

Family and Community Engagement

Superintendent Stone has shared one of his focus points this year is to create a positive relationship with all stakeholders. A highlight this quarter was when he arranged for the Lee High School drumline and cheerleaders to join the pep rally at Lee Academy (a private school located in Marianna) as a send-off to the LA football team that made it to the championship game for independent schools. Lee High School students were greeted with cheers and the final performance earned a standing ovation from Lee Academy parents, students and Marianna community members. Other examples of community engagement and outreach include his attempt to involve local churches in the Every Arkansan program enrolling as Affiliates which would provide support to families in the community that may have needs that could be provided through the Dream Center. Mr. Stone provides regular updates to parents and community members through the LCSD Trojans app. He has also contracted with Sugar Ditch Communications to provide highlights of the positive things happening at each school on social media. A proactive approach to communication and transparency is in response to the community feedback received from a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) Analysis conducted during his first weeks as superintendent.