



DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

Earle 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 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 (ESD). 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. 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. Jason Miller and Renee Holland with OCSS provide the district with assistance and support in all fiscal matters. 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 ESD 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.

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 academic support provided to Earle School District this quarter included initiatives aimed at enhancing instructional quality and student support across grade levels and classrooms. At the elementary level, the collaboration between the SchoolKit Group and Great Minds continued to enhance teachers' pedagogical skills and to strengthen lesson internalization through the implementation of classroom-based training sessions for K-4 teachers. For grades 5-12, Educational Epiphany (EE) provided targeted support to teachers and leadership teams through the modeling of on-site lessons to showcase effective instructional practices. The positive impacts of the training at both levels were reflected in feedback provided by the classroom teachers. The district will continue its emphasis on lesson internalization over the course of the summer and into

the upcoming school year.

Efforts in assessment and intervention were also significant during this quarter. Administratively, the primary focus was on maintaining operational efficiency in administration of the ATLAS assessments. The district leadership team facilitated professional development efforts on testing protocols to ensure coordinated processes were implemented across the district. Moreover, the team outlined the proper avenues for communicating and addressing technical issues during administration of the assessments. The result of these measures yielded a 100% participation rate in the ATLAS assessments, which was applauded by district leadership. The district also remained proactive in identifying and supporting students with dyslexia characteristics, through the culmination of Level II screener administration and seeking qualified dyslexia interventionists to expand dyslexia intervention services to identified students. Meanwhile, the commencement of high-impact tutoring sessions facilitated by BookNook provided targeted academic support to enhance student learning outcomes at both elementary and high school levels.

Student Support

Dr. Michael Watson from OCSS has been working with the district to reinforce Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) programs at each campus. District leaders have been collecting and reviewing behavioral data to identify potential candidates for Tier II and Tier III interventions, specifically those who could benefit from inclusion in an Alternative Learning Education (ALE) program. The data review highlighted discrepancies between information in the PBIS Rewards system and what was showing in eSchool through the SmartData dashboard. Upon investigation, the district leadership discovered the discrepancy resulted from a lack of major referrals being entered into eSchool even though they were placed into the PBIS Rewards system. To address this, Dr. Watson recommended the district conduct daily updates between eSchool and the PBIS Rewards system so that the data from both systems are accurate and in sync. Dr. Watson also led district leadership in review of DESE's ALE templates, created a Google form to record ALE referrals, and redesigned the existing student conference document to allow for additional district-specific information to be recorded for the purposes of referral and evaluation.

Regarding special education, the district prepared for the upcoming school year while transitioning to a newly hired Director of Student Services. Julie Amstutz with OCSS worked with the district to organize and centralize documentation in preparation for the change in leadership. Meetings with the Superintendent and the new Director of Student Services confirmed the Special Education department is well-prepared for the upcoming school year, with all evaluations completed and reports submitted. The outgoing LEA supervisor handled the majority of annual reviews and evaluation paperwork due to the lack of certified staff to support those processes. Key responsibilities highlighted during the transition meetings included handling records requests and communication with service providers and establishing procedures for evaluations and billing. Additionally, the district reviewed the required number of teachers and related service providers needed and expected for the 2024-25 school year. One challenge noted involved the frequent changes in the locations of special education rooms, which has complicated the setup of sensory areas and delivery of accommodations for personal care needs. District leaders acknowledged the need for stable service locations and committed to ensuring stability moving into the next school

year. Next steps for the district include plans to implement ARMAC for medicaid reimbursements and to manage high-cost occurrences as well as a review of processes to ensure compliance and readiness for the upcoming school year.

Human Capital

During this quarter, the district concentrated on implementing a reorganization plan and actively recruiting qualified professionals to fill vacancies. Superintendent Burgess hired three new district leadership positions under the approved reorganization plan: Director of Programs, Director of Operations, and Director of Support Services. These additions provide greater focus and leadership in essential areas to ensure compliance and quality service delivery. The district also appointed new principals for its two schools, bringing renewed energy and fresh ideas.

Superintendent Burgess's recruitment efforts have been particularly successful in filling hard-to-fill vacancies, hiring several fully-licensed professional staff, including a library media specialist, a school counselor, a student support specialist, two dyslexia interventionists, and multiple licensed classroom teachers. Many of these hires have benefited from the district's \$5000 recruitment and retention incentive. While this incentive has improved the district's ability to secure the necessary human resources for the upcoming school year, challenges remain in certain areas, particularly special education. This issue is prevalent statewide, especially in the delta region, where competition for limited resources is intense. Despite these challenges, district leadership remains committed to showcasing Earle School District as an attractive workplace. Combined with the recruitment and retention incentive, this commitment is poised to yield even greater benefits in the future.

Family and Community Engagement

The district's collaboration to enhance strategic partnerships with area businesses and civic organizations continues to gain momentum. The district received a \$1500 donation from Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church that is earmarked to support the academic success of ESD students. Additionally, the district is planning its next Strategic Partnership meeting prior to the start of school. Engaging community stakeholders through strategic partnerships is an ongoing focus for ESD, and district leadership anticipates forming more partnerships in the upcoming months.

Facilities and Transportation

The district secured bids and has initiated several critical projects aimed at enhancing safety and security at the high school. Utilizing School Safety Grant funds, the district plans to install a new intercom system, replace and re-key all door locks, and renovate the entrance to install an electronic controlled access point at the high school. Installation of the new intercom system as well as replacement and re-keying of all door locks at the high school has been initiated with work scheduled to be concluded prior to the start of school. The district is currently pricing options for installing an electronic controlled access point at the high school and hopes to secure a contract during the summer. Aligned with the 2024 Facilities Master Plan, these upgrades to high school will enhance our capacity to secure that facility and

maintain a safe environment for students, faculty and staff.

Fiscal Governance and District Operations

In partnership with OCSS, the district leadership conducted a comprehensive review of staffing needs and analyzed funding to support the implementation of reorganization strategies. Sections 3 and 8 of the district's policies, which deal specifically with personnel, were revised to align with legal standards. The district also revamped salary schedules to improve fiscal efficiency. Moreover, the reorganization of leadership proposed by Superintendent Burgess had a positive impact on the finances of the district. Given the district's stringent budget constraints, enhancing fiscal efficiency is crucial to ensure sufficient funding for maintaining partnerships with external providers offering job-embedded professional development. 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.

Given the inexperience of the staff in the finance department, it was clear that additional support would be needed especially as the close of the fiscal year was approaching. As plans were being made to ensure more direct support would be available the business manager resigned, this new challenge did not deter the team. ESD leadership stepped in and under the direction of the DESE Fiscal Services and the services of a third party contractor the 2023-24 fiscal year closed on time. Mr. Burgess has sought the approval from Secretary Oliva to outsource financial services for the district for the 2024-25 school. The district has tried to maintain its own fiscal services, however due to the lack of qualified applicants in the region this has been a struggle and continues to plague the district. Outsourcing will be more efficient and allow the district to oversee the process as compared to attending to the daily accounting duties.

The district's limited authority board consistently attends the monthly meetings. They question agenda items for better understanding and review financial reports thoroughly. Mr. Burgess is planning regular work and training sessions throughout the school year to ensure they are prepared when the board is granted full authority.

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.