



## DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

# Helena-West Helena School District

## Legislative Quarterly Report

January – March 2024

Submitted by

Office of Coordinated Support & Service

Sheila Whitlow, Associate Deputy Commissioner

April 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.

## **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 third quarter of the 2023-24 school year, OCSS focused efforts on providing instructional leadership guidance for lesson internalization and integrity of instruction, preparing for statewide assessment, and conducting staffing reviews and organizing budgets for the upcoming school year. Helena West Helena School District has collected various performance data from a variety of assessments, which highlight areas of growth as well as areas for continued improvement. The charts below provide an overview of the assessment results from the iStation ISIP Fall and Winter administrations in both reading and math for Grades K-2 with the level of growth experienced at each grade level. The iStation ISIP assessment is the state-mandated assessment for Helena-West Helena School District for Grades K-2.

HELENA-WEST HELENA SCHOOL DISTRICT: I-STATION ISIP READING PERFORMANCE SY 2023-2024							
GRADE	# TESTED	TIER 1		TIER 2		TIER 3	
		FALL 2023	WINTER 2023	FALL 2023	WINTER 2023	FALL 2023	WINTER 2023
K	67	34%	24%	35%	29%	31%	47%
1	69	39%	26%	22%	23%	39%	51%
2	81	40%	38%	21%	16%	39%	46%

HELENA-WEST HELENA SCHOOL DISTRICT: I-STATION ISIP MATH PERFORMANCE SY 2023-2024							
GRADE	# TESTED	TIER 1		TIER 2		TIER 3	
		FALL 2023	WINTER 2023	FALL 2023	WINTER 2023	FALL 2023	WINTER 2023
K	67	37%	43%	24%	31%	39%	26%
1	69	34%	30%	33%	33%	33%	37%
2	81	21%	10%	28%	21%	51%	69%

According to the iStation ISIP data, the percentage of students performing at the Tier 1 level (the grade-level performance category) dropped from the fall administration to the winter administration in both reading and math at all grade levels, except for math in Kindergarten. Conversely, the percentage of students performing at the Tier 3 level (the lowest performance category in which students are performing significantly below grade level) was higher in the winter administration than in the fall administration in both reading and math at all grade levels, except for math at Kindergarten. These data in isolation paint a discouraging picture of the state of reading and math performance at Grades K-2 in HWHSD. However, the district also conducts interim assessments using the iReady assessments in both reading and math as part of its approach to a comprehensive assessment system. The growth data for the iReady assessments are provided below for Grades 1-4 in reading and in Grades 1-6 in math.

HELENA-WEST HELENA SCHOOL DISTRICT: I-READY READING PERFORMANCE SY 2023-2024							
GRADE	# TESTED	AT OR ABOVE GRADE LEV		1 GRADE LEV BELOW		2+ GRADE LEVS BELOW	
		FALL 2023	WINTER 2023	FALL 2023	WINTER 2023	FALL 2023	WINTER 2023
1	65	13%	39%	78%	55%	9%	6%
2	67	24%	33%	33%	40%	43%	27%
3	51	22%	22%	27%	35%	51%	43%
4	48	4%	11%	46%	54%	50%	35%

HELENA-WEST HELENA SCHOOL DISTRICT: I-READY MATH PERFORMANCE SY 2023-2024							
GRADE	# TESTED	AT OR ABOVE GRADE LEV		1 GRADE LEV BELOW		2+ GRADE LEVS BELOW	
		FALL 2023	WINTER 2023	FALL 2023	WINTER 2023	FALL 2023	WINTER 2023
1	64	2%	13%	89%	73%	9%	14%
2	71	3%	8%	41%	51%	56%	41%
3	51	4%	8%	49%	57%	47%	35%
4	51	0%	1%	26%	55%	74%	44%
5	61	1%	5%	23%	23%	76%	72%
6	48	6%	17%	23%	31%	71%	52%

According to the iReady assessment data, the percentage of students performing at the highest performance category (the grade-level performance category) was at or higher in the winter administration when compared to the fall administration in both reading and math at all grade levels. Conversely, the percentage of students performing at the lowest performance category (two or more grade levels below performance category) was lower in the winter administration than in the fall administration in both reading and math at all grade levels, except for math at Grade 1. On the surface, these data appear to contradict each other in some places; however, it should be noted that the iReady assessments are utilized in coordination with the implementation of the high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) used by the district, which could explain the perceived higher level of performance on that assessment. Despite this, there is commonality among the data from both assessments in that a high percentage of students at each grade level are performing significantly below grade level in reading and math at all grade levels identified. This reality is being utilized by the district to set performance goals with the expectation that all students will demonstrate growth and the percentage of students at the lowest performance category would greatly diminish. It should also be noted that the district has considered implementing interim assessments that could be administered for reading and math in grades 7-12. The district plans to implement the interim assessments that are being developed by DESE as part of the ATLAS system when those assessments are released in the near future.

## Academics

Throughout January and February, a series of meetings and events shaped the trajectory of the quarter. Specifically, discussions at JF Wahl Elementary, led by the building principal, centered on concerns regarding staffing and administrative support, highlighting inconsistencies in providing instructional supervision. This led to a recommendation for the adoption of daily monitoring schedules and continuous observations recorded within the Educator Effectiveness System (EES). To aid in these endeavors, administrators from JF Wahl visited Anna Strong Learning Academy in the Lee County School District to observe their procedures for classroom

observations and teacher feedback. This collaboration facilitated valuable discussions and connections between the schools and districts. OCSS has been collaborating with the principal to implement these processes. Continued support from OCSS and district leadership is needed to ensure the process of direct observations with meaningful feedback is consistently provided. Observations show that the school is implementing some best practices in instruction, including the development and implementation of lesson plans that utilize high-quality instructional materials (HQIM).

At Central High School, the leadership team concentrated on crafting master schedules for the forthcoming school year. Led by the principal, the team participated in the DESE Master Schedule work session to streamline the creation of a student-centered master schedule. Following the session, the team gained a comprehensive understanding of the process and identified actionable steps for the future. Despite the positive outcomes, there were lingering concerns regarding the readiness of some of the staff to effectively oversee student course progression. Consequently, additional professional development will be essential for the staff to adeptly manage and support student success plans.

As the quarter progressed, efforts intensified toward instructional support and assessment readiness. In February, external providers offered additional professional development support to address staff needs. Despite the positive intent of this support, concerns arose regarding the lack of a cohesive vision guiding these efforts towards district goals. In March, site visits and mid-year reviews highlighted both achievements and challenges. Effective dialogue within core team meetings showcased a commitment to student achievement, yet concerns persisted regarding incomplete testing plans and the necessity for enhanced teacher feedback.

### **Student Support**

OCSS has been working with the district's Executive Director of Student Services, to ensure positive momentum in the district's special education program. This quarter, efforts have centered around the completion of evidence for the Letter of Long Standing and preparation for the on-site DESE Office of Special Education (OSE) monitoring and fiscal assessments that occurred in March.

The district has been working to develop systematic processes for identifying and supporting students who have been identified as potentially needing dyslexia intervention services through initial screening. Ms. Vicki King from DESE has provided direct support to the district by administering Level 2 screening assessments for identified students as well as training district personnel to administer these assessments. Through this process, the district is determining the extent for which students need direct systematic instruction in dyslexia intervention and is building capacity for providing the necessary support.

At JF Wahl, the special education team has been participating in the PLC at Work initiative; the team engaged in fruitful discussions concerning best practices in writing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), particularly focusing on Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP). That work has yielded improvements in the quality of IEPs as noted during recent monitoring sessions. Moreover, OCSS has been working with the

building leadership to facilitate enhancements to the structured learning room, including additional safety measures, personnel training, and instructional support.

OCSS has been actively involved in providing district support for academic and behavioral intervention. There has been continued commitment towards effecting change within the district, despite challenges stemming from staff turnover. In January, collaborative efforts at JF Wahl focused on supporting the CBI room and strategizing the rollout of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). In February, systemic issues affecting the district were highlighted, including the integration of students from therapeutic foster care homes. Throughout March, OCSS continued to engage with district leadership, focusing on MTSS implementation and addressing concerns regarding dyslexia services for students. Moving forward, continued collaboration and proactive measures will be essential in addressing challenges and fostering positive outcomes for students within the district.

Partnerships with organizations like CAYSI, EARS, BSS, and Easter Seals Outreach continue to benefit district students with unique needs, with on-site visits, assessments, and recommendations being provided. Efforts to support transitioning students, especially those with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 plans, remain a priority. Furthermore, discussions with Easter Seals Outreach emphasize the importance of accessibility, particularly in light of new playground construction at JFW, advocating for inclusivity for students with physical challenges. Recommendations to expand consultative services to the high school community-based instruction (CBI) room underscore the commitment to ensuring all students' needs are met effectively.

### **Human Capital**

The district maintains its commitment to actively recruit skilled professionals to enhance its programs. A primary focus this quarter involves evaluating staffing needs for the upcoming school year and assessing current staff members' intentions regarding their continued tenure within the district. The district and OCSS team members have conducted a comprehensive staffing analysis aimed at determining the optimal quantity and variety of staff required for the forthcoming academic year, funding sources and staffing budget for the 2024-25 school year. This assessment may entail reassigning individuals to different roles within the district and adjusting the number of positions based on identified requirements. The results of this analysis will form the basis for any district restructuring and guide future recruitment endeavors.

### **Family and Community Engagement**

The community experienced a water shortage crisis this quarter resulting in many families and staff members not having access to water in their homes. The District worked closely with community leaders and civic groups to coordinate assistance efforts including providing impacted students and families as well as impacted faculty with access to shower and laundry facilities. Also, HWHSD administration, faculty, staff, and student volunteers helped to distribute water and care packages to impacted families.

This quarter, Superintendent McGee emphasized the significance of student achievement in

reading by planning and organizing a monthly reading tour, Moving the Needle in Reading. This monthly event emphasizes the crucial role of literacy in fostering student success by having volunteers read a favorite children's book to each classroom in grades K-2. Various community members, district administrators, and state officials participate in conducting the reading tour each month.

### **Facilities and Transportation**

The district remains committed to enhancing facilities at JF Wahl Elementary. The ongoing construction project, which involves the addition of a wellness area on campus, is currently in progress and aims to offer recreational amenities for students. Funding for this project comes entirely from 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. The DESE Fiscal Support team conducted an analysis of financial operations to verify the district's adherence to sound fiscal practices. Additionally, a Financial Support Zoom session delved into topics including the ESSER exit strategy and funding projections in preparation for next year's budget. The district's fiscal personnel remain engaged in ongoing training sessions as required. During the quarter, the local board approved the outsourcing of fiscal operations through Arkansas Public School Resource Center (APSRC). This additional support will provide oversight in daily operations as well as creating a more streamlined system for purchasing and payroll practices.

The district successfully secured a High-Impact Tutoring Grant from DESE to bolster academic instruction, specifically focusing on reading. As part of the grant agreement, the district committed to offering additional instructional sessions beyond core curriculum, at least three times per week during regular school hours, with no more than four students per group. The district anticipates that this grant will aid in narrowing the reading achievement gap.