



## DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

# **Lee County 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 LEE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT**

On March 25, 2019, the State Board of Education found 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 Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) recommended to the State Board of Education (SBE) 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 SBE 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, the Arkansas Department of Education identified the Lee County School District as a school district in fiscal distress on May 9, 2019. The Arkansas Department of Education made this identification because the Lee County School District met the fiscal distress indicators 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, Associate Deputy Commissioner**

The Division of Elementary and Secondary Education's Office of Coordinated Support and Service (OCSS) provides direct support to Lee County School District (LCSD). Sheila Whitlow, Associate Deputy Commissioner and OCSS Director, delivers direct guidance to the state-appointed superintendent weekly, 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 Herring, Educational Ombudsmen and DESE Literacy Specialist, Sandy Shepard, DESE Lead Regional RISE Specialist, and Andress Scott, DESE 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 LCSD administrators, the DESE Fiscal Services and Support unit, and literacy and math specialists from DESE to provide support in all district systems.

In the second quarter of the 2023-24 academic year, OCSS dedicated its endeavors to enhance Tier I instructional practices by offering instructional leadership guidance. This initiative centered on the ongoing adoption of the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) model, in collaboration with Dr. Karen Power at Solution Tree. Additionally, external coaching support from The New Teacher Project (TNTP) played a pivotal role in augmenting these efforts. The collective aim was to fortify the educational framework and foster continuous improvement in teaching methodologies.

Additionally, the OCSS team examined enrollment and student attendance trends based on information presented in the state Cycle 2 report. According to the report, LCSD reported an October 1 enrollment of 621 students, marking an increase of 41 students (7.07%) compared to the preceding year. Nevertheless, the district has demonstrated an overall trend of declining enrollment, experiencing a loss of 70 students (-10.13%) over the past five years, as illustrated in the table below.

**FIVE-YEAR ENROLLMENT TREND**

**School District:** Lee County SD

Year	# Enrolled	Prev Year Diff	Prev Year % Diff
2018-2019	691	BASE	BASE
2019-2020	617	-74	-10.71%
2020-2021	678	61	9.89%
2021-2022	591	-87	-12.83%
2022-2023	580	-11	-1.86%
2023-2024	621	41	7.07%
<b>FIVE-YEAR ENROLLMENT DIFF</b>		<b>-70</b>	<b>-10.13%</b>

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

**FIVE-YEAR ATTENDANCE RATE TREND**

**School District:** Lee County SD

Year	Average ADA	Average ADM	Attendance Rate
2018-2019	605.14	649.97	93.10%
2019-2020	598.46	621.57	96.28%
2020-2021	599.56	618.10	97.00%
2021-2022	556.63	589.79	94.38%
2022-2023	548.53	578.81	94.77%
2023-2024 Q1	585.58	603.71	97.00%
<b>FIVE YEAR AVE</b>			<b>95.41%</b>

The statistics revealing a decline in enrollment underscore the obstacles encountered by LCSD. Insufficient economic initiatives in the region hinder population growth in the district, directly contributing to the enrollment decrease. Despite this, the recent increase in student enrollment suggests optimism, possibly attributed to community-building efforts initiated by Superintendent Dr. Michael Stone. Dr. Stone remains committed to diligently assessing enrollment data and making necessary budgetary adjustments. This ongoing effort aims to proactively ensure the financial stability of the district amidst challenges.

## Academics

The academic landscape presented a mixed picture of progress and challenges for this quarter. Anna Strong Learning Academy (ASLA) made commendable strides in instruction and discipline, featuring a well-monitored instructional program and successfully implementing the HQIM. Positive indicators showcased through district focus walks included the evident effectiveness of the instructional program and the implementation of behavioral expectations and a well-functioning reward system. TNTP coaches are dedicating time weekly to support the ASLA team in the initiation of Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA). While instructional improvements are clearly visible at ASLA, continued progress toward building internal consistency in instructional delivery and implementing effective academic and behavioral intervention processes is a critical next step for the school.

Conversely, Lee High School (LHS) faced significant hurdles this quarter. Observational reports indicated a lack of clarity and consistency in upholding instructional and behavioral expectations at the classroom and office levels. Clarity regarding chain of command, discipline protocols, communication and planning are areas identified as needing improvement. Support from external providers has remained largely underutilized at the high school level; improved follow up and consistent attendance during meetings by all key staff members are essential for maximizing the benefits of these organizations. The use of a district focus walk tool at the high school revealed some growth but underscored the necessity for a comprehensive improvement plan due to a lack of clear instructional expectations among staff. These observations and concerns have been shared with both district and school leadership. In an effort to shift the trajectory, the OCSS State Leadership Coach as well as other members of the team are devoting a substantial amount of time each week at the high school to provide direct intensive support in an effort to build leadership capacity within the high school. In addition, Dr. Stone and the Learning Services Team are dedicating time weekly to provide ongoing support on the high school campus. Dr. Stone and the OCSS Team meet monthly to review the work of the on-site team, share celebrations, concerns and determine support focus for the upcoming month. This collaborative effort is an attempt to align the work of both teams and maintain a laser-like focus on improvement and professional growth. The district team efforts are directed toward establishing a robust instructional structure, emphasizing distributed leadership, and implementing academic and behavioral intervention strategies. Collaborative work sessions and discussions in the district focused on supporting building leadership, addressing material shortages, and planning professional development sessions. The learning services team outlined objectives for a coaching session with an external provider to address lingering issues. The district continued to provide support through monthly meetings with the superintendent and learning services team, reviewing principals' schedules, and prioritizing goals for the third quarter. Positive momentum near the end of the quarter was observed; but the overarching theme remains the need for consistent implementation of the HQIM, effective planning, and robust support for building leadership to drive meaningful improvements in the educational landscape, particularly at LHS. Ongoing collaboration and strategic initiatives are identified as essential components for sustained progress in the coming months.

## **Student Support**

The district grapples with challenges in implementing Tier II and Tier III behavioral processes within its multi-tiered system of intervention support (MTSS). ASLA has effectively incorporated behavioral expectations and rewards for Tier I processes. However, the school's management of more challenging behavior lacks clarity, revealing an absence of documented incidents or evidence of interventions crucial for identifying and supporting Tier II and Tier III behaviors. LHS experienced a breakdown in the Behavior Management Plan (BMP) process within classrooms, prompting the leadership team to consider revisiting the process. The district faces ongoing struggles in establishing a system to address students requiring Tier III behavioral support, as it has not yet adopted a Tier III behavioral support process. OCSS staff will continue to provide resources to address these needs.

Julie Amstutz, the OCSS Special Education Leadership Coach, actively collaborates with both schools to bolster the capabilities of special education staff and enhance support for students with disabilities. Ms. Amstutz organized additional professional development opportunities, including sessions with Robin Stripling and Tabitha Reindeau from the DESE Office of Special Education, focusing on inclusive practices. The emphasis is on implementing inclusive practices to benefit special education students, fostering a collective understanding among all staff. The team aims to conduct additional professional development sessions in January, tailored to the anonymous responses received from the Inclusive Education Staff Survey released in December.

Ongoing regular meetings led by district and school leadership are focused on implementing effective literacy interventions within the academic Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. To address foundational reading gaps, the district invested in the 95 Percent Group Core Phonics, utilizing Phonics Chip Kits and the Phonics Lesson Library for daily interventions. The supplementary program i-Ready is employed, and LHS offers Strategic or Critical Reading during Enrichment for additional support. Sandy Shepard and Andress Scott at DESE analyzed the screening data and categorized students based on skill deficits. They plan to collaborate with Ms. Felita Reed in the district office to formulate a plan for utilizing My Perspectives and 95% Group in the strategic or critical reading classes. The district further utilizes the Take Flight dyslexia intervention, staffed by five trained specialists, for students exhibiting dyslexic characteristics. The student identification and intervention process has undergone refinement, with significant progress demonstrated through collaboration with Vicki King, Sandy Shepard, and Andress Scott from DESE, ensuring organized screening, data collection, analysis, and intervention schedules.

## **Human Capital**

The district consistently faces challenges regarding the availability and quality of human capital resources. The ongoing struggle to secure qualified candidates for open positions is compounded by the risk that successful candidates may lack the necessary professional licensure for their roles. As a response, the district has resorted to emergency teaching permits

and waivers obtained through the State Board of Education to address staffing shortages. The district utilizes an external provider who collaborates with Melissa Jacks from the DESE Office of Professional Licensure, to ensure that staff in roles requiring licensure are on appropriate pathways as well as actively collaborating with educational entities to enhance recruitment efforts, aiming to acquire and retain high-quality instructional staff. Additionally, efforts are made to encourage non-licensed instructional staff to pursue professional educator licensure resulting in all but one employee currently on a path to licensure.

### **Family and Community Engagement**

During this quarter, LCSD actively organized events to promote parental and community engagement in their children's education. Initiatives like "Muffins with Moms" and "Donuts for Dads" strengthen the bond between home and school, acknowledging the crucial role parents play in their children's learning journey and making the campuses a place in which caregivers feel welcomed.. Furthermore, the district arranged a STEM night, where students assumed the role of educators, sharing the lessons learned during the instructional day with their parents. The positive reception from parents reflected a strong interest and enthusiasm for these interactive initiatives, fostering a sense of anticipation for future events. Superintendent Stone continues to be actively involved in community organizations to maintain a healthy working relationship and to share the great work being done as well as the challenges faced by the district.

### **Facilities and Transportation**

The district is making progress according to its timeline for the Teaching Housing Project. The finalized plan for constructing four duplexes and a total of eight housing units exclusively for teacher use at the old Nunley Elementary School site has received approval from the DESE Division of Public School Facilities and Transportation. The construction is currently underway, with the demolition of the old Nunley Elementary building nearing completion. The commencement of framing for the housing units is scheduled to begin in January 2024.

Additionally, the district is actively pursuing the construction of a K-12 facility. Superintendent Dr. Michael Stone held a phone conference with a facilities consultant to outline a timeline for the development of a construction application. Dr. Stone has already submitted an application to secure funds from the State Academic Facilities Partnership Program and is optimistic about receiving approval soon. He is also working with the community leadership on a millage campaign. In order to see the K-12 facility project to fruition a millage increase is needed. Currently, the Lee County School District has the lowest millage rate in the state.

### **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 ensuring that debt requests are submitted as well as providing support for ESA Matching Grant and ESA platform changes. The district continues

to outsource its fiscal services through APSRC but participates in fiscal training through DESE as needed in order to build capacity to transition those services onsite. On November 30th, Renee Holland met with Nellie Freeman to address the School Improvement Grant 1003 application and the ESSER Survey, both due by December's end. The new application had a reduced amount due to unspent funds from previous years. The Superintendent was involved in planning to correct the issue, setting a goal for all information and data submission by December 19th. Throughout the week of December 4th, discussions with the Federal Programs Coordinator focused on various options and next steps for 1003 needs. A December 11th call with district leadership covered documentation for creating an amendment regarding intervention technology needs using last year's 1003 funds.

OCSS Technology Support Coach Dexter Miller has been working to support the technology needs of the district in the absence of the school's technology director. Duties included setting up user accounts for new students, addressing forgotten password issues, configuring new computers for students and staff on an as-needed basis, and resetting passcodes in the GoGuardian application for teachers. The district has implemented the Operation Hero system to identify technology issues and provide timely maintenance and support; however, the system is not being properly utilized and therefore lacks effectiveness. The district has been working on strengthening its partnership with the local educational service cooperative technology representatives, as some have faced challenges in understanding the parameters of technology support available to the school district from the local educational service cooperative.

The district has been chosen to participate in a grant offered by the U.S. Department of Education's Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), which is administered by the University of Central Arkansas (UCA). This grant, known as the GEAR UP Arkansas College Ready Navigator (GUAR-CRN) project at UCA, aims to boost enrollment in postsecondary education. It specifically targets 6th and 7th-grade student cohorts in both urban and rural Arkansas school districts by implementing enhanced preparedness measures for students and their families. Additionally, the grant includes college scholarship opportunities upon cohort completion at the end of high school. This presents an excellent opportunity for LCSD students to have an additional pathway for accessing postsecondary learning.