



DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

Lee County School District

Legislative Quarterly Report

July – September 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 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, 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 Herringer, Educational Ombudsmen and DESE Literacy Specialist, and Sandy Shepard, DESE Lead Regional RISE Specialist, assist the district with implementation of literacy instructional approaches and materials aligned with the science of reading.

During this quarter, support efforts have focused on the district's continued implementation of the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) model through close partnership with Solution Tree as well as the implementation of the reading and English Language Arts high quality instructional material to ensure the instruction aligns with the science of reading and is grade level appropriate. The district received the results of the state administered assessments and has been working to disaggregate and analyze the data in order to determine strengths and areas of immediate need that will be utilized to develop its plan of action to support improvement efforts. The OCSS team has worked with Lee County School District administrators, the DESE Fiscal Services and Support unit, educational consultants from

Solution Tree, and literacy and math specialists from DESE to provide support in all district systems.

Academics

In July, DESE released the preliminary results from the ACT Aspire assessment administered in Spring 2023. The score reports detailed improvement in all grades except third, fifth, and tenth grade for reading and in fourth, seventh, and ninth grades for mathematics. However, the level of improvement was significant enough to positively impact the ESSA School Index (ESI) Report released at the end of September, with overall improvement shown for both schools within the district. Anna Strong Learning Academy (ASLA) improved its ESI rating from 57.01 (F) in 2022 to 59.39 (D) in 2023, a 2.38 point increase and an improved letter grade. Lee High School improved its ESI rating from 51.68 (F) to 52.55 (F), a 0.87 point increase. The Office of Education Policy at the University of Arkansas recognized both schools as having High Overall Growth in the Southeast Region for 2023 in its annual Outstanding Educational Performance Awards report. The incremental positive growth from both campuses validates that the district's improvement efforts are resulting in increased achievement for students in literacy and math and improved school quality.

Both ASLA and Lee High School highlighted specific areas for growth in their respective school improvement plans with focus on increasing reading and math achievement by 10% and decreasing the number of students at the lowest performance category in both reading and math by 10%. To assist the schools in meeting their school improvement goals, the district adopted DESE-approved high quality instructional materials (HQIM) for the implementation of grade-level content in literacy. The district implemented Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) for grade K-5 to support the development of foundational reading skills as well as reading comprehension and vocabulary. My Perspectives by Savvas Learning is implemented at grade 6-12 as the primary literacy curriculum, which supports and enforces reading comprehension and close reading strategies for college and career readiness. The district provided professional development for teachers on these curricula prior to the start of school. The district K-12 Instructional Support Specialist, building literacy support staff and DESE RISE specialist, Sandy Shepard, are providing on site support to the teachers at the elementary school as they are launching the new reading program. As with the implementation of any new program, there is a learning curve to overcome. Consistent support will be needed throughout the remainder of the year to ensure effective implementation.

At the high school, a Successful Outcomes for Arkansas Readers (SOAR) grant was awarded. A coach will be provided to assist teachers and the building coach with the implementation of My Perspectives. A need for this support has been identified through the data collected during focus walks. The district leadership continues to conduct said focus walks at both schools, joined by school building leaders and with support from OCSS and DESE specialists. After each walk, the team reviews the data from the focus walks and identifies glows, grows, and next steps. With support from OCSS, the building administration at ASLA and Lee High School established routines for instructional observation and support. The work included refining processes for different types of classroom visits and defining next

steps for the instructional support staff after needs were identified through the observations. Although there is evidence of conducted observations with feedback to support instructional improvement, continued professional development is needed to ensure that the instruction is both appropriately paced and rigorous. The building leadership appears to reflect on practices. The new high school principal has warranted more intensive support for instructional support from the OCSS Building Leadership Coach. The district's instructional support staff observes and supports instruction in classrooms under direction of the building leadership; however, observations and conversations have revealed a need for additional clarification around the roles and responsibilities of the instructional support staff.

Student Support

The implementation of behavioral intervention processes is part of the multi-tiered system of intervention support. Efforts are being made to focus on methods for collecting behavioral data in the classroom in order to assess student behavioral needs and inform best practices. The district still has some weaknesses and inconsistencies in widespread implementation of Tier I behavioral supports; however, it has embraced the collaborative team meeting process to support students that need to move into Tier II for behavior. The district is working to address inconsistencies and build further collaboration and support for its Tier II processes. One specific area of need is a system to address students who need Tier III behavioral support as the district has not yet adopted a Tier III behavioral support process. OCSS staff will continue to provide the district with resources to address these needs.

Julie Amstutz, OCSS Special Education Leadership Coach, works closely with both schools to build capacity among special education staff and strengthen its levels of support provided to students with disabilities. She has arranged for several professional development opportunities to assist in these efforts. District staff received professional development from Robin Stripling and Tabitha Reindeau at the DESE Office of Special Education to assist in its implementation of inclusive practices to support special education students. The goal was to ensure that all staff understood the basis behind providing inclusive practices in classrooms and to encourage discussion for obstacles and next steps to bolster implementation efforts. The team cited the need for subsequent professional development in January to continue these efforts. Easter Seals also provided professional development that targeted self-contained teachers and LEA supervisors across the GRESC member schools to address how inclusive practices could effectively support students with extensive cognitive support needs. In addition to the professional development opportunities provided in implementing inclusive practices, the district LEA supervisor received direct support for identification of student sensory and behavioral needs through a site visit to Lakeside Hot Springs arranged by Julie Amstutz. The LEA supervisor was able to observe different types of sensory reset areas, stations, and rooms that could be considered for potential implementation within the district to support students in sensory crisis.

The district and building leadership continue to meet regularly to develop processes to support student intervention in literacy through the establishment of dedicated intervention time, called Trojan Time at ASLA and Enrichment at Lee High School. To support the intervention, the district purchased the 95 Percent Group Core Phonics as an intervention resource to address

foundational reading gaps. Teachers utilize the Phonics Chip kits and phonics lesson library for interventions and small group instruction daily. The i-Ready individualized instruction is used as a supplemental program to provide support and additional practice on skills taught. In addition to the Enrichment time at LHS, students identified as being in need of support are enrolled in Strategic or Critical Reading. For students identified as having characteristics of dyslexia, the district continues its implementation of Take Flight dyslexia intervention as its primary dyslexia intervention system and currently has five interventionists fully trained in delivery of the Take Flight system. The district has developed a process for identification of students through screening efforts and is consistently engaged in providing dyslexia interventions across both campuses. Much improvement has been made regarding the district's identification and intervention process. The K-12 Reading Instructional Support Specialist has worked closely with DESE's Vicki King to ensure the screening process, data collection and analysis and intervention schedules are in order.

Human Capital

The district employed several new key staff this school year with the inclusion of a new high school principal, district LEA supervisor, and high school counselor in addition to new teaching staff. The district has worked closely with OCSS staff and has hired a consultant to ensure appropriate mentoring and support is provided to the new staff members. At the beginning of school, the district was still looking for at least one special education teacher at the elementary level. OCSS staff worked with the district LEA supervisor and DESE Office of Professional Licensure staff to assist in possible pathways for licensure for prospective candidates who might not be fully licensed.

The district began the process of developing professional growth plans and engaging in a plan for observations. With support from DESE Office of Educator Effectiveness, administrators obtained access to all teaching staff through the Educator Effectiveness System (EES) to review and modify Professional Growth Plans and conduct TESS observations. In addition to the TESS process, the school has been developing tools to monitor instructional practices in the building through focus walks as part of its comprehensive instructional review process.

Family and Community Engagement

There have been great strides to engage the community into the school environment through intentional planning of community and school events that encourage stakeholder engagement and participation. With the start of school, the district implemented open houses on both campuses. The local clinic partnered with the district to make sure students were updated on all vaccinations prior to the start of school. For school supplies, community members gathered together resources to ensure that students and teachers had all the supplies they needed. Parents at ASLA also adopted classrooms to help give additional support and resources to teachers. The district also conducted its annual report to the public, which was well received. An anecdotal report from the district indicated one parent's desire to go back to school because she wanted to help her child with her homework. The district connected that parent with the adult education provider so that she could potentially improve her reading skills to support her child. In September, the district hosted Granola with Grandparents, in which over

400 grandparents participated. The level of participation actually presented a problem as grandparents wanted to attend both ASLA and Lee High School, but the events conflicted. The district decided to make the high school a lunchtime program next year to avoid conflicts with the elementary school.

Facilities and Transportation

Superintendent Dr. Michael Stone met with architects to discuss future projects within the district. One such immediate project is the development of the Teaching Housing Project, a housing community of four duplexes and eight total housing units exclusively for district teachers to be constructed on the district owned property near the administration office. The initial plan for the Teaching Housing Project was presented to DESE leadership as well as a virtual meeting with the DESE federal programs staff and national federal programs representatives to address concerns, answer questions, and identify next steps. The construction management company submitted a finalized plan to the Division of Public Facilities and Transportation for prior approval. Before construction can begin the old Nunley Elementary School that is located on the new construction site must be razed. Because asbestos is located in areas of that building, an abatement company has been hired to remove those areas of concern. This has created a minor delay, but the groundbreaking is projected to be sometime in mid November.

Additionally, the district applied for State Academic Facilities Partnership Program funding for construction of a K-12 facility. Applying for Partnership Funding is a critical step for the district as it would provide the potential for the district to secure state funding to help offset the financial burden to the district. Partnership Program projects are reviewed by the DESE based on need, and if approved, DESE would provide state funds for the project relative to a funding formula referred to as a "wealth index". If the funded project, the application is approved and funded the district's share of the project would be 35.24% of the actual cost. The district is now working on the development of a millage campaign to secure the amount of funding needed to cover the district's portion of the projected construction costs.

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 ESSER II funding and budget preparation in addition to monitoring debt requests and upcoming cycle reporting. 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. The gradual release of responsibility from the APSRC staff to LCSD staff has been an ongoing process. Regular check-ins are occurring to ensure sufficient support is provided and that the LCSD Business Office will be able to operate day-to-day independently with monitoring and oversight from DESE Fiscal Services and APSRC. The Superintendent has worked with APSRC and Fiscal Services to gain a better understanding of school finance and closely monitors daily operations as he learns the process.

The district's technology staff collaborated with Dexter Miller at OCSS to conduct a technology needs analysis and to establish procedures for conducting timely technology repairs. The analysis team reviewed various technology-related issues and identified areas for improvement in technology processes. One of the key areas centered around the need for an upgraded network. Moreover, the team inspected the technology infrastructure in the professional development room and determined the need for additional equipment and connection support. The team secured E-Rate funding and identified a vendor to complete the necessary network upgrade as well as successfully connect the professional development room. The technology staff received training on the Operations Hero application, which helps streamline work order ticket procedures and makes it easier for staff to track progress on various tasks. To assist in development of a media classroom in the high school, Dexter secured equipment that was unused at Arkansas River Educational Service Cooperative to be donated to the school. The media program is now functioning in the school, which provides additional career pathway opportunities for students.