



DIVISION OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

Earle 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 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.

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.

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. ESD 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 NWEA Fall and Winter administrations in both reading and math with the level of growth experienced at each grade level.

| EARLE SCHOOL DISTRICT: NWEA MAP READING PERFORMANCE SY 2023-2024 | | | | | | | |
|--|-----------|-----------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------------|
| GRADE | FALL 2023 | | WINTER 2023 | | GROWTH | | |
| | AVG RIT | AVG %TILE | AVG RIT | AVG %TILE | RIT DIFF | % IMPROVED | % MET GROWTH |
| K | 140.55 | 60.42 | 146.12 | 47.73 | 5.57 | 81.81 | 27.27 |
| 1 | 151.76 | 39.86 | 158.14 | 32.05 | 6.38 | 80.00 | 35.00 |
| 2 | 166.72 | 37.00 | 168.19 | 25.30 | 1.47 | 70.83 | 16.67 |
| 3 | 179.34 | 37.03 | 183.77 | 32.11 | 4.43 | 72.72 | 27.27 |
| 4 | 177.77 | 20.34 | 180.20 | 15.43 | 2.43 | 53.53 | 16.67 |
| 5 | 198.22 | 40.56 | 202.10 | 40.04 | 3.88 | 52.94 | 35.29 |
| 6 | 200.52 | 31.81 | 200.61 | 26.15 | 0.09 | 56.52 | 39.13 |
| 7* | 205.57 | 33.20 | 199.31 | 19.81 | -6.26 | | |
| 8 | 203.16 | 28.63 | 208.05 | 27.95 | 4.89 | 31.25 | 25.00 |
| 9 | 200.23 | 21.97 | 205.03 | 25.03 | 4.80 | 71.43 | 67.86 |
| 10 | 205.29 | 24.71 | 211.70 | 31.61 | 6.41 | 66.67 | 66.67 |

* Note: Growth for Grade 7 could not be established as a different reading assessment was administered in Winter than in Fall.

| EARLE SCHOOL DISTRICT: NWEA MAP MATH PERFORMANCE SY 2023-2024 | | | | | | | |
|---|-----------|-----------|-------------|-----------|------------|------------|--------------|
| GRADE | FALL 2023 | | WINTER 2023 | | DIFFERENCE | | |
| | AVG RIT | AVG %TILE | AVG RIT | AVG %TILE | RIT DIFF | % IMPROVED | % MET GROWTH |
| K | 141.94 | 54.76 | 151.52 | 53.03 | 9.58 | 93.94 | 48.48 |
| 1 | 159.48 | 48.24 | 163.10 | 31.76 | 3.62 | 80.00 | 20.00 |
| 2 | 171.63 | 41.78 | 174.37 | 28.89 | 2.74 | 69.23 | 19.23 |
| 3 | 179.79 | 30.93 | 181.96 | 19.69 | 2.17 | 80.95 | 9.52 |
| 4 | 180.08 | 14.25 | 185.68 | 13.81 | 5.60 | 81.82 | 27.27 |
| 5 | 197.21 | 27.32 | 203.38 | 27.95 | 6.17 | 76.47 | 41.17 |
| 6 | 205.81 | 32.15 | 207.48 | 28.63 | 1.67 | 54.17 | 41.67 |
| 7 | 204.77 | 23.77 | 211.41 | 27.34 | 6.64 | 73.08 | 53.85 |
| 8 | 214.81 | 32.00 | 216.05 | 29.40 | 1.24 | 70.59 | 47.06 |
| ALG I | 211.44 | 18.78 | 217.07 | 22.50 | 5.63 | 80.77 | 57.69 |

Additionally, DESE RISE Specialist Kelly Stone works weekly both onsite and remotely to provide ongoing support and ensure consistency of instruction. Ms. Stone provided the following summary of a comparison of beginning and middle of the school year assessment data:

Earle Elementary School conducted DIBELS and the 95% Phonics Screener Inventory (PSI) for mid-year progress monitoring during the month of December that shows growth in students' reading ability. In grades 2-6, all students completed the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency to show that 97% of students increased the number of words read correctly per minute compared to the number of words read correctly in August 2023. This data also reveal that students in Kindergarten and first grade showed growth in alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness. With the 95% Group PSI mid-year assessment, 90% of students in grades 1-3 passed the level in which intervention occurred with 52% of those students advancing two or more levels. In grades 4-6, 85% of students passed the level in which intervention occurred with 78% of those students advancing two or more levels. The PSI

was administered to Kindergarten students for the first time in December for grade-level intervention to begin this semester. This assessment shows that 35% of our Kindergarten students have mastered decoding basic closed syllables which is an end of the year goal based on Arkansas State Standards.

Overall, the data from the fall and winter administrations of the NWEA assessments in both reading and math in Grades K-10 and the DIBELS and PSI screeners in Grades K-6 show promising growth for the district. On the NWEA in both reading and math, every grade level demonstrated improvement in the average Rasch Unit (RIT) scale score from the fall administration to the winter administration. Moreover, more than fifty percent (50%) of students at each grade level showed improvement in every grade level and subject, except for Grade 8 Reading. The next step for the district is to focus on how to make improvement at the level that will close achievement gaps, as the percent of students meeting the growth expectation was lower than the percent of students who just made improvement. Given that the district is implementing the practice of students reviewing their own data and setting goals for future assessment administrations at the high school level, it appears that the environment is being transformed for the necessary improvement to be realized.

Academics

Throughout this quarter, the Earle School District showcased a comprehensive effort to enhance academic systems, with particular focus on lesson internalization, high quality instruction, and adept intervention supports. The building leadership engaged in collaborative team meetings to discuss intervention groups and data entry and conducted visits to classrooms to address concerns such as teacher engagement and student activity. The leadership demonstrates dedication to instructional excellence and leverages the support provided by consultants and educational partners to identify problems and provide solutions.

The partnership with the SchoolKit Group and Great Minds for implementation of the Wit and Wisdom literacy curriculum continues at the elementary school, focusing on enhancing the pedagogical skills of elementary teachers and lesson internalization in order to build strong literacy foundations. Furthermore, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH) is offering coaching support to implement the math curriculum and utilize the high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) acquired by the district. In grades 5-12, Educational Epiphany (EE) continues to work closely with teachers and leadership. The EE representative is personally guiding ELA and Math instructors to deepen their understanding of previously introduced high-impact instructional strategies, providing practical methods for planning, delivering, and assessing instruction. With the ELA team, he has facilitated the creation of a planning document tailored to Arkansas standards in the tested area, ensuring thorough preparation for teaching these standards to a mastery level. This instructional support is anticipated to result in significant growth in ELA proficiency across grades 7-10 and overall student achievement. Ongoing support is provided to each school in the areas of literacy, mathematics and school improvement through the deployment of consultants, specialists from DESE Learning Services, and the OCSS team.

The adoption of high-impact instructional practices appears to be gaining momentum. Classroom observations conducted during this period reveal a strengthening commitment to utilizing the Arkansas content standards as the cornerstone of instructional planning. However, challenges persisted, notably in classrooms where instruction seems disjointed or lacks adequate structure. Some classroom observations revealed concerning practices, such as teachers not actively engaging students or lacking clear objectives. These observations served as opportunities for constructive feedback and guidance, illustrating a commitment to continuous improvement. Instances of teachers struggling to comprehend the importance of instructional models and facing difficulties in managing classroom dynamics highlighted areas for continued focused attention and support. As a result, support activities evolved to include addressing behavioral issues while continuing to refine instructional practices. Collaborative efforts with school leadership and consultants continue to be aimed at optimizing resources and aligning practices with the primary district priority of improving Tier I instructional practice. The EE representative dedicated time at the high school to model lab sessions observed by teachers and administrators. Through these sessions, effective instructional and classroom management techniques were demonstrated in both ELA and math classes. Students were actively through various instructional methods like group discussions, movement, and pre-reading activities. Each session was followed by a debrief with the teacher-observers to highlight new learning and clarify any misconceptions that may have arisen during the observations.

One of the key areas of academic focus envisioned by Superintendent Burgess is the enhancement of programs at Earle High School to prepare students to compete for high paying, high demand jobs in the workforce. To that end, Superintendent Burgess extended an invitation to Mr. Ross White, the Director of the Division of Career and Technical Education (DCTE), to meet with the district leadership team, the ESD board president, and the Earle Mayor in February. During the meeting, Mr. White showcased the high-demand, high-wage, and high-skilled jobs in the Earle area, stressing the school's role in preparing students for college and careers. He emphasized the need for a multifaceted approach involving intentional scheduling and effective use of student success plans. He underscored that schools must design curricula not only to meet academic standards but also to equip students with skills and knowledge essential for post-graduation success. Furthermore, he highlighted the significance of partnerships with local career centers and districts to provide resources and opportunities for students to explore career pathways, gain practical experience, and network with industry professionals. By integrating these elements into their educational programs, Earle High School can better prepare students to excel in higher education and the workforce.

As March approached, the district prepared for the administration of the ATLAS assessment, with the writing assessment taking place during the first two weeks of March. The transition to testing revealed logistical hurdles and miscommunications, underscoring the complexity of coordinating large-scale initiatives. Issues such as the availability of necessary equipment and coordination of test administrator training on the new platform highlighted the need for streamlined communication and proactive problem-solving among district leadership assigned to coordinate the testing administration efforts. Support from OCSS was provided.

Student Support

Throughout this quarter, the district actively enhanced student support opportunities. Partnering with BookNook, the district applied for and received a state grant to provide high-impact tutoring, launching the program in February at both campuses. Additionally, efforts were made to improve the identification process for students in need of dyslexia intervention. Collaborating with Ms. Vicki King and Ms. Kelly Stone from DESE, the district conducted Level II Dyslexia Screeners for students not meeting grade-level expectations.

Addressing behavioral support, the district collaborated with Dr. Michael Watson from OCSS to reinforce Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) programs at each campus. Funds were allocated, and donations obtained, to establish a positive behavior incentive program for students meeting PBIS expectations. The district plans to review current Tier II and Tier III systems to enhance practices further. The district's MTSS program is in the early stages of development, but moving forward with plans to develop strong collaborative teams that will ensure a strengthened Tier 1 approach to behavior as well as a Tier II plans that will support students before they are in need of more intensive support.

Regarding special education, Superintendent Burgess, district LEA supervisor and Ms. Julie Amstuz from OCSS hold weekly meetings to discuss related issues. During the onsite monitoring visit by the DESE Office of Special Education (OSE), Earle School district was found to be in compliance with state and federal regulations in the areas monitored and has no formal findings.

Human Capital

The district continues to actively recruit qualified professionals to bolster its programs. One crucial focus this quarter revolves around securing qualified bus drivers to support the Transportation program. A primary focus of the Interim Transportation Supervisor is driver recruitment; as a result of the recruitment focus, the district has attracted several candidates and is progressing them through the hiring and onboarding process to provide necessary training for obtaining a CDL permit. Additionally, the district has filled one active teaching vacancy with a certified teacher and is currently reviewing applications for other outstanding vacancies.

An essential aspect of this quarter involves evaluating staff needs for the upcoming school year and assessing the plans of current staff regarding their return to the district. Superintendent Burgess and the district business office staff have been collaborating with OCSS to conduct a staffing analysis. This review may involve reallocating individuals to different roles within the district and adjusting the number of positions based on district needs. The analysis will form the basis for district reorganization and future recruitment needs.

ESD was selected as one of three pilot districts for the Arkansas Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education (AWARE) 2023 grant program, aimed at improving mental health among educators. AFMC, an Arkansas-based health organization, received an \$8.8 million federal grant to manage a statewide teacher support line and offer mental health support both

online and in-person. This initiative has significant implications for the future, as it acknowledges the importance of prioritizing educators' mental well-being. By providing accessible support resources, educators can receive timely assistance, potentially reducing burnout and increasing overall job satisfaction. Additionally, fostering a culture that supports mental health among educators can lead to a more positive and productive educational environment for both staff and students.

Family and Community Engagement

Superintendent Burgess continues to enhance communication within the district, emphasizing professionalism and a focus on "customer service" when engaging with parents. One of his key priorities involves upgrading the district's website. With support from OCSS, efforts have been made to coordinate with the website developer, resulting in an improved web presence that integrates parent notification systems with various social media platforms. Superintendent Burgess anticipates that this upgrade will better inform families about news, updates, and district-related information.

Additionally, Superintendent Burgess has collaborated with the Earle Mayor and other local officials to organize a series of Strategic Partnership meetings aimed at fostering collaboration and support for various improvement projects among stakeholders. The inaugural Strategic Partnership Meeting, hosted by Superintendent Burgess in March, saw the participation of approximately 45 stakeholders, including state and local government officials. Superintendent Burgess believes that these meetings will benefit ESD students and the Earle community by strengthening support for project partnerships.

Facilities and Transportation

The district is actively engaged in the bidding process for several critical projects aimed at enhancing safety and security at the high school. Bidding is currently underway to procure approval for the purchase of a new intercom system, replacement and re-keying of all door locks, and renovation of the entrance to install an electronic controlled access point. The bidding period for these projects concluded in February 2024. Aligned with the 2024 Facilities Master Plan, these initiatives are integral to fortifying safety measures at the high school. Funds from the School Safety Grant will be used to complete the projects.

Fiscal Governance and District Operations

OCSS and Fiscal Services have provided guidance and direct support for the financial matters within the district. Both the staff members in the district's finance department are new to their current roles; they are welcoming the support that is provided and are eager to learn the skills needed to be proficient in their respective roles. Efforts this quarter have focused on various fiscal activities to ensure financial stability and responsible resource allocation within the district. This included payroll redistribution training and managing expiring funds from federal programs. Fiscal support activities encompassed monitoring revenue, expenditures, and debt requests. Additionally, a Financial Support Zoom session addressed topics such as ESSER

exit strategy and funding projections. As the quarter progressed, attention shifted to balancing carryover/allocation balances of federal funds and commencing budget training for the upcoming fiscal year. Discussions with DESE Federal Programs specialists were held regarding carryover notifications and allocations, with resources gathered from the AASBO Conference for budget preparation. As a result of an internal audit, adjustments were made to the current operating budget. Specifically, budget items previously categorized under the unrestricted budget were re-coded and assigned to other restricted funding sources within the budget. This initiative enhances ESD's capacity to address needs that cannot be covered by restricted funds. Through the end of the quarter, the focus remained on balancing federal fund balances and preparing the district's business office for the upcoming fiscal year's budget preparation process. Continued Zoom meetings and onsite support in the following quarter will aid in finalizing financial preparations once testing is completed. These efforts aim to ensure fiscal responsibility and efficient resource utilization district-wide.

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.