



Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind

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Jacob Oliva
Secretary

K. Nicole Walsh
Superintendent

ARDB Superintendent Report April 2026

Update

Our high school students took an incredible trip to Northwest Arkansas, where they visited Crystal Bridges, stayed overnight at Camp War Eagle, and toured the University of Arkansas. It was a wonderful experience that gave them hands-on learning opportunities, exposure to college and career paths, and time to connect with one another.

We recently participated in a morning news interview with 5News while in Northwest Arkansas, to share updates on the new instructional building and the continued work to expand access to ARDB services across the state.

Students wrapped up the goalball season with a fun final game that included alumni and even a few staff members, creating a great opportunity for connection and school spirit.

We also recognized National Deaf History Month by participating in Deaf Awareness Day at the Capitol, followed by a book signing event that supported ARDB and brought together community members and partners.

Students enjoyed a schoolwide Eggstravaganza, thanks to the efforts of our amazing staff and community partners Elijah Youngblood and the EOD unit of the Little Rock Air Force Base who assembled and placed the eggs for our hunt. The event was a big success.

We had a great time recognizing our support staff with a small appreciation event to thank them for everything they do behind the scenes to keep things running smoothly at ARDB. Coffee was provided by 7 Brew Coffee!

ARDB Board Workshop to be held on May 19, from 9:00 to 11:00 at the ASB Conference Room. Discussion items will be Map Data, Building Updates, and Budget Revisions. Workshop to include classroom walkthroughs and lunch in the cafeteria.

Human Capital Update

1. New Hires/Rehires

- a. Edward Limmer, Maintenance Technician
 - b. Melissa Pierson, Education Paraprofessional
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Operations Update

Kurt Swartzlander, Division Fiscal Administrator & Director of Operations

Projects in Progress

- **Finance:**
 - Continued budget planning for the next fiscal year
 - Ongoing conversion of bank accounts from separate schools to a combined school account
 - Preparation for conversion to S/4HANA (new accounting software) with a July 9 go-live date
- **Facilities:**
 - Focused efforts on addressing items identified during the State Fire Marshal inspection to bring buildings into compliance
 - Continued maintenance and repairs for older buildings
 - Initiated development of a campus-wide Master Building Program in coordination with the Superintendent
- **Inventory:**
 - Began the annual inventory audit, to be completed before the end of the fiscal year

Data Highlights

- Primary focus for the month of March was fire inspection-related work and compliance efforts

Challenges or Needs

- Staffing updates include:
 - Conducted interviews for a Skilled Trades position and an open housekeeping position
 - One maintenance technician retired; position has been posted
 - One new maintenance technician has started

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Await delivery of physical address numbers for installation on all buildings
 - Develop and implement a key control program for the new building
 - Plan and deliver in-service training related to the new building
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Education Update – Deaf Department

KaAnn Varner, Principal

Major Accomplishments

- Read Across America Week celebrated with themed dress-up days and activities, including “Fox in Socks”, “Green Eggs and Ham”, Wacky Wednesday, “The Cat in the Hat”, and “The Sleep Book”
- Holly Woodruff with Kids First visited campus
- Juniors and Seniors attended the Be Proud Draft Event at UA-PTC
- Special Olympics Basketball in Austin, Arkansas
- Dr. Powell, The Tooth Doctor, presented to students and provided them with toothbrushes and toothpaste
- MAP testing completed with noted student growth
- Special Olympics held at Maumelle High School
- Severe storm during arrival; students safely remained in buses and vehicles until conditions cleared; school resumed on time
- High school track meet
- Career Exploration Day at UA-PTC
- 5th and 6th grade students participated in tree planting at ARDB
- Zoo trip for ECC through 6th grade students
- Successful completion of the Social Emotional Learning curriculum for the year
- Clear and consistent utilization of school-adopted curricula

Projects in Progress

- Development of the 2026–2027 school schedule
- Identification of staffing needs for the 2026–2027 school year
- Completion of ALPs and TLPs for teachers
- Planning for summer camp

Data Highlights

- Enrollment: 56 lower school students and 35 upper school students
- Attendance: Lower School 99.12%; Upper School 98.50%

- Average number of referrals per day: 2.44
- Locations of most referrals: Classroom (33.33%), Dorm (30.77%), Playground (10.26%), Cafeteria (10.26%)
- Referrals by grade: 8th (13), 7th (10), 4th (9); most referrals are attributed to students on Behavior Intervention Plans
- Referrals by behavior: Defiance/Insubordination (4 incidents), Physical Aggression (4 incidents)
- Suspensions: 1 in-school suspension and 1 out-of-school suspension

Challenges or Needs

- Staffing needs include additional paraprofessionals and substitute staff

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Complete ALP and TLP requests
- Finalize staff requests for the 2026–2027 school year
- Develop a Deaf Department History and Culture course for the 2026–2027 school year, including course description and submission to ADE for approval
- Finalize agreement with Camp Aldersgate for summer camp following recent on-site meeting
- Implement SLPI rollout plans

Cross-Department Collaboration

- Implementation of the American Reading Company curriculum
- Adoption of Kendall Hunt as the new ARDB math curriculum
- Participation of the ARDB Administrative Team in the March 20 Town Hall for school and community
- Continued collaboration between principals on summer camp planning for Camp Aldersgate
- Schoolwide yearbook photo taken in front of our new school building

Education Update – Blind Department

Lori Cole, Principal

Major Accomplishments

- March was a fast-paced month with key activities including Read Across America Week, Music in Our Schools Month, the Braille Challenge, and vocational trips planned by Ms. Erika Morris

- Successful hosting of the Braille Challenge, with 17 guests in attendance, including several families
- Student participation in the EAST Conference
- Continued academic progress as reflected in NWEA growth
- Strong student achievement, including perfect attendance and honor roll recognition (A and A/B students)

Projects in Progress

- Administration of the spring NWEA assessment season
- Student preparation for upcoming ATLAS testing and the spring concert
- Continued implementation of Focus Fridays, which have been going well (with a pause scheduled for the Easter Eggstravaganza)
- Development of the 2026–2027 master schedule, completed and submitted to Mrs. Jena McDonnell
- Ongoing classroom walk-throughs and coaching cycles
- Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and data collection scheduled for the April 6 PD day

Data Highlights

- Enrollment: 27 elementary students and 25 secondary students
- Assessment snapshots: coming soon
- Compliance updates: working with Mrs. Jena McDonnell's team to address Science of Reading requirements
- Safety/behavior data: four detentions recorded in March; no suspensions
- Continued collaboration with Mr. Kurt Swartzlander to address fire safety inspections
- Safety and Security efforts include weekly building checks and emergency drills, supported by emergency drill logs, Operation HERO logs, and documentation/photos

Challenges or Needs

- Concern regarding the current state of the Division of Services for the Blind (DSB); several counselors have recently returned, and Jump Start is being prioritized
- Staffing needs remain
- Identified training gaps in behavior and classroom management
- Facilities and operations needs include continued work with inventory to locate listed items, checking on pen-making tools, and clearing items in Huckabee Hall

- Need for continued communication regarding facilities, including follow-up on the visitor sticker machine repair
- Policy consideration regarding braille proficiency requirements: recommendation to replace the current Level 1 requirement (UEBonline) with Hadley's Basic.Braille.by.Sight.(reading.and.writing); UEBonline could remain as a pathway option along with Hadley's Contracted Braille series for Level 2; Levels 3 and 4 would continue to require proficiency assessments

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Next 30 days: focus on getting books to students for ARC, support students and staff during assessment season, and continue classroom walk-throughs for instructional excellence
- Next 60 days: work with key summer planning staff to develop summer programming, continue mapping the 2026–2027 schedule, and support staff with lesson plans, resources, and pacing

Cross-Department Collaboration

- Ongoing collaboration with Special Education, Residential Services, and Nursing to support overall organizational health
- Continued communication across departments to address student and operational needs
- Joint efforts for summer programming and development of the 2026–2027 school schedule
- Shared alignment of staffing roles and responsibilities across departments
- Collaboration on student and family engagement efforts, including the Braille Challenge and upcoming Family Literacy Night

Interpreting Services Update

Clayton Higgins

Major Accomplishments

- Continued high level of service delivery despite the shortened month due to spring break
- Strong national interest in the internship program, including applicants from programs such as Gallaudet University
- Successful coordination of interpreting services for off-campus experiences, including the Crystal Bridges trip, University of Arkansas visit, and Be Pro Be Proud

event, providing students with exposure to appropriate interpreter use in public settings

- Collaboration with the Nursing Department to develop a new service schedule for the fall to better align interpreter and medical staff support
- Implementation of increased advance notice requirements for interpreter requests, with communication provided to all staff

Projects in Progress

- Streamlining internal processes and opening bids for contracting agencies to improve scheduling efficiency and reduce costs
- Working to secure approval for a third staff interpreter based on budget analysis indicating cost effectiveness
- Coordinating with Inventory and Facilities to secure housing in Huckabee Hall for out-of-state interns
- Investigating a new spoken language interpreter service provider/contract
- Establishing workshops for interpreters across Arkansas
- Scheduling interpreters for long-term needs, including events through the 2027 school year, Summer Optional programming, and Back-to-School professional development
- Developing an interpreter training video for use in new-hire orientation
- Completing contracts and bid processes for interpreting services

Data Highlights

Service Totals:

- Educational: 16 (March) | 273 (YTD)
- Mental Health Sessions: 15 (March) | 148 (YTD)
- Medical Assignments: 8 (March) | 164 (YTD)
- IEP Meetings: 20 (March) | 111 (YTD)
- Staff Meetings: 35 (March) | 224 (YTD)
- After-Hours: 6 (March) | 23 (YTD)
- Spoken Language: 7 (March) | 51 (YTD)
- Other Events: 14 (March) | 216 (YTD)

Total: 121 (March) | 1,210 (YTD)

Challenges or Needs

- Approval of a third staff interpreter remains a critical need to support service demand and cost efficiency

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Secure approval for a third staff interpreter
- Finalize housing arrangements for out-of-state interns
- Complete contracts and bid processes for interpreting services
- Continue monitoring effectiveness of updated interpreter request timelines and maintaining established expectations

Cross-Department Collaboration

- Ongoing collaboration with Nursing to align interpreter services with student medical needs
 - Coordination with Facilities and Inventory to support intern housing and program logistics
 - Continued efforts to support students and staff across departments through effective interpreter scheduling and service delivery
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Development Department Update

Kevin Lentz, Director of Development

Grants and Federal Programs

- Submitted a \$330,000 grant request to support ARDB's School Based Health Center.
- Obtained a Federal UEI for ARDB, ensuring alignment with Federal standards and requirements.

Community Engagement and Support

- Planning is underway for upcoming ASL and braille community classes taking place 2026-2027.
- Represented ARDB with informational booth at the UALR School of Education Fair.
- Planned Deaf Awareness Day at the capitol on April 7.
- Worked with the Delta Zeta sorority from ATU to conduct a book drive for ARDB. They donated two boxes of books from their drive—thank you, DZs!

Social Media

- The most popular post the past month, based on “Likes”, was on the recent Braille Challenge, with 69 likes.
- Current following:
 - 4,959 Facebook followers
 - 1,525 Instagram followers
- Metrics show growth over the past month, and ARDB's Facebook page should reach 5,000 follows soon.

- Visit the ARDB Linktree to find our socials: <https://linktr.ee/ardeafblind>

Events Support

- Planning spring staff appreciation events, with the first occurring April 9th for support staff.
 - Helped facilitate 54 campus events over the past month.
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Special Services Update

Teresa Doan, Director of Special Services

(Special.Education?Mental.Health.™.Counseling?Related.Services?Statewide.Services?Residential.Life?Health.Services?Child.Nutrition?Gifted..™.Talented)

Health Services

During the month, Health Services recorded 207 infirmary visits:

- 196 students returned to class
- 10 students were sent home for further care
- 1 student required emergency transport
- 4 acute mental health admissions were recorded, highlighting the ongoing need for intensive mental health support

The majority of visits resulted in students returning to class, indicating effective on-site care and minimal disruption to instructional time. Mental health continues to be an area of focus, with ongoing coordination across teams to ensure timely intervention and support.

Mental Health & Counseling Services

Major Accomplishments

- Facilitated four hospitalizations for students in crisis and ensured continuity of care following discharge
- Notable decrease in behavior incidents from February to March
- Two students successfully exited Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) after meeting goals and demonstrating significant improvement
- Continued implementation of PBIS supports, including the ROAR Store, reinforcing Responsibility, Organization, Achievement, and Respect
- Coordinated weekly Friday Food Bag deliveries to support students and families

Projects in Progress

- Ongoing delivery of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) instruction, including Inside.Out and Inside.Out.8 lessons with lower school students, focusing on emotions, self-regulation, and behavior
- Continued implementation of Tier 2 support groups addressing friendships, communication, perseverance, responsibility, and conflict resolution, including a session for grades 4–6 on puberty and personal hygiene
- Regular dorm-based SEL lessons in collaboration with residential staff, focusing on cooperation, sharing, and expectations, along with ongoing student check-ins for emotional support
- Continued communication with families through ParentSquare to provide PBIS updates and support student engagement

Data Highlights

- Total of 39 behavior incidents, averaging 2.44 incidents per school day (down from 50 incidents and 2.78 per day in February)
- 10 major incidents and 29 minor incidents
- 54% of incidents occurred during the school day; 46% occurred after school hours

Challenges or Needs

- Continued need for intensive mental health support for students experiencing crisis situations
- Ongoing monitoring and support for students requiring Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Continue reducing behavior incidents through targeted PBIS and SEL interventions
- Support additional students in meeting goals for potential BIP discharge
- Maintain consistent delivery of SEL instruction and support services across school and residential settings

Food Services

March Meals Served:

- Breakfast – 1416
- Lunch – 1642
- Days Served – 16

Eligibility Numbers as of March 31, 2026:

- Free: 56
- Reduced: 8
- Paid: 80

Major Accomplishment

Successfully completed the Administrative Review (conducted every three years) with zero findings! Review cycle is anticipated to transition to a five-year rotation.

Gifted and Talented

During the month of March, students engaged in a variety of activities designed to support creativity, critical thinking, and self-awareness, promoting both academic enrichment and social-emotional development for gifted and talented students.

- Created animals with unique “superpowers” to encourage imaginative thinking and problem-solving
 - Expanded on art class lessons by exploring and applying concepts of lines of symmetry
 - Designed interactive board games with built-in braille accessibility
 - Explored growth mindset concepts as they relate to personal characteristics of giftedness
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SPED

Major Accomplishments

- Continued collaboration with the Psycho-Educational Examiner to ensure evaluation reports accurately reflect student needs
- Maintained compliance with required timelines while continuing to hold a high volume of SPED meetings
- Successfully managed departmental operations, including meetings and documentation, during the transition of offices and files

Projects in Progress

- Ongoing work with the legal team regarding an additional Due Process Complaint stemming from the Expedited Hearing and Facilitated IEP meeting held March 11, 2026
- Upcoming legal dates for April to be determined

- Preparing to implement DESE-approved Indirect vs. Direct Services Training for staff once scheduling is finalized
- Awaiting DESE approval for Procedures for Evaluations Training, with plans to schedule immediately upon approval

Data Highlights

- A total of 142 SPED meetings have been held to date, with the department entering its busiest season of the school year (out of 190 total school days)
- Timelines for meetings and evaluations continue to be closely monitored and remain on track
- Teachers are actively building capacity and knowledge related to all components of the IEP process

Challenges or Needs

- Continued coordination with the admissions team to streamline and simplify paperwork related to inquiries, admissions, enrollment, and registration

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Strengthen transition planning to ensure it is more meaningful and impactful for students
- Continue planning and preparation for the upcoming school year

Related Services

Major Accomplishments

- Continued focus on strengthening service delivery, improving efficiency, and aligning interventions with student access to instruction and functional outcomes
- Ongoing professional learning to refine eligibility, service delivery recommendations, and dismissal practices, supporting data-informed decision-making
- Strong Medicaid billing performance, with \$45,441.76 billed and \$43,317.98 received year-to-date in coordination with ASPYRE
- Positive family impact noted, including increased student independence at home through implementation of visual schedules, reflecting effective collaboration between staff and families

Projects in Progress

- Expansion of integrated and push-in service delivery models to improve consistency and reduce missed instructional time

- Development of internal training resources through occupational therapy internship support
- Continued implementation of clinical training placements, including OT and SLP student interns, to build service capacity and support workforce development
- Ongoing collaboration with UAMS to establish audiology partnership for ABR testing, with a projected start date of July 1

Data Highlights

- Service completion rates show improvement from February to March, though missed service minutes remain an area of focus
- Current completion rates by discipline:
 - Occupational Therapy: 88%
 - Speech-Language Pathology: 72–74%
 - Physical Therapy: approximately 73%
- Variability in service delivery attributed to staff absences, approved leave, and scheduled school closures

Challenges or Needs

- Continued need to improve service completion rates and reduce missed service minutes
- Staffing coverage challenges due to absences, including one staff member on maternity leave for the remainder of the school year (coverage plans in place)
- Ongoing need to strengthen scheduling systems and evaluate reliance on contracted therapy services to support long-term sustainability

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Continue improving service completion rates across all disciplines
- Further refine eligibility, service delivery, and dismissal procedures to ensure individualized, functional programming
- Expand integrated and push-in service delivery models
- Strengthen staffing coverage and scheduling systems to minimize service disruptions
- Maintain accurate documentation and billing practices
- Evaluate contracted service usage and develop plans to increase in-house capacity

Cross-Department Collaboration

- Continued collaboration with Counseling and the Deaf Department to provide integrated social-emotional learning (SEL) programming, including use of the Inside Out curriculum for grades K–6
- Planning for end-of-year student recognition activities tied to SEL programming, with transition to a Lilo & Stitch-based curriculum for the upcoming year
- Partnership with UAMS to expand audiology services and early identification efforts
- Ongoing collaboration across departments to support student access, service alignment, and program sustainability

