

Report Card

September 2026
www.arsba.org

THE JOURNAL OF THE ARKANSAS SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

Students speak out

The Southern Region Leadership Conference brought to Hot Springs almost 500 school board members and administrators from Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. A highlight was a panel discussion featuring six Arkansas students, including Mallory Thompson from Bryant, left, and Annslee Young from Sheridan. Students shared what they love about their schools and offered suggestions for how schools could be improved. Several had this suggestion: Listen to us.



ASBA News and notes

Reed, Walker are newest ASBA regional directors

ASBA's newest regional directors are Todd Reed from Valley View School District, who is Region 3 director, and Elizabeth Walker from the Horatio School District in Region 12.



Reed

Reed has served on the Valley View School District Board since 2017 and currently serves as secretary. The board oversees roughly 2,900 students, 345

employees, and a \$43 million budget. As board president in 2021-22, he led the district through a superintendent search, a board vacancy appointment, policy updates, and a move to a zoned district.

He brings more than three decades of enterprise technology and architecture experience across utilities, higher education, healthcare, agriculture, and commerce.

He works at City Water and Light of Jonesboro and has a master of business administration and two undergraduate degrees from Arkansas State Univer-

sity's College of Business and College of Engineering.

Outside of work, Reed teaches scuba diving through J & T Dive Shop and volunteers with Valley View schools and the Jonesboro Community Health and Education Foundation.

He and his wife have been married 23 years. Their son is a senior at Valley View High School.



Walker

Walker is president of the Horatio School Board and has been a board member for 14 years.

Alongside her husband, Brian, she owns and operates Lucky

13 Farm, a diversified farming operation in southwest Arkansas encompassing roughly 2,500 acres of cattle, poultry, hay, timber, and livestock production.

Founded in 2003, Lucky 13 Farm was named after the couple's humble beginnings with 150 acres and 13 head of cattle. The family has been recognized as the Sevier County and West Central District Farm Family of the Year.

In addition to her school board service, Walker founded and coaches the Horatio Youth Shooting Sports Team. She is an area director for Farm Credit of Western Arkansas, vice president of the Sevier County Farm Bureau Federa-

tion, and vice chair of the Arkansas Rural Development Commission. She also serves on the University of Arkansas Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences Advisory Board; the Arkansas Cattlemen's Association Executive Committee; the Arkansas Farm Bureau Environmental Issues Committee; the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission Arkansas Black Bass Management Advisory Committee; and the Sevier County Economic Development Board of Directors.

Walker earned a bachelor of science in chemical engineering degree from the University of Arkansas. She began her professional career as a senior process engineer at the Domtar Paper Mill in Ashdown. In 2008, she returned to the farm full time, bringing with her an engineer's perspective on strategic planning, problem solving, risk management, and continuous improvement. She is also a licensed Federal Aviation Administration remote pilot.

She and her husband have two children who are continuing the family's commitment to agriculture and natural resources. Reese is an agricultural business major at the University of Arkansas and plans to become an agricultural attorney. Rhett is pursuing a forestry degree at Louisiana Tech University and plans to build a career in forestry while continuing the family's farming operation. The Walker family attends King Ryder Church of Christ.

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*THE JOURNAL OF THE
ARKANSAS SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION*



14 Students Mallory Thompson from Bryant, left, and Annslee Young from Sheridan participated in a panel discussion at the Southern Region Leadership Conference in Hot Springs. The conference brought together school board members from Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi.

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News and Features

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Dan Jordan, who served as ASBA's advocacy director from 2018 until 2024 following a 37-year career in public education, died July 24 after a nine-month battle with pancreatic cancer. He was 68 years old.

14 Cover / Students take the stage

This year's Southern Region Leadership Conference in Hot Springs gave young people a chance to share their thoughts on what they love about their schools, and how public schools can be improved. One takeaway: Adults should listen to them.

22 Cover / Most board votes are unanimous

Most school board votes are unanimous, but when votes are split, it's most commonly over personnel and financial issues. Boards in lower-scoring school districts tend to disagree more often than boards in higher-scoring ones. But disagreement in itself is not a bad thing, as long as boards do so in the right way.

24 Cover / Siloam's switch without a hitch

Leaders "over communicated" why Siloam Springs needed to move to a neighborhood schools model. Listening to patrons' concerns helped the transition go smoothly.

26 Cover / School boards will save rural regions

Keynote speaker Rex Nelson told the Southern Region Leadership Conference that school boards will convince their communities to make public schools the best they can be.

30 Popes' painter tutors art teachers

Victoria Sides teaches art every day to Wynne School District students in grades 7-9. It's not every day, however, that she is mentored at school by a maestro who's been commissioned to paint the portraits of four popes and a president.

32 Executive session with Jason Jones

39 Five are Teacher of the Year semifinalists

None of the five 2027 Arkansas Teacher of the Year state semifinalists and 10 other finalists were imposters, according to Stephanie Williams, the 2026 Teacher of the Year.



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Letter from the President ...

Together, we are making a difference

by **Doris Parham**

There are moments that remind us why we do this work.

It may be watching a kindergartner proudly read a book for the very first time. It may be celebrating a graduating senior who is the first in their family to attend college. Or perhaps it's sitting in the audience at a school play, or at a Friday night football game and seeing an entire community come together to cheer for its students. Those moments remind us that public education is about so much more than buildings, budgets, and board meetings. It is about people. It is about opportunity. Most importantly, it is about our children.

Serving as president of the Arkansas School Boards Association has given me the privilege of meeting school board members from every corner of our state and from Mississippi and Louisiana. Whether they represent a large district or a small rural community, they all have something in common: They serve because they believe in their schools and the students who walk through those doors every morning.

School board service is not always easy. The decisions are often difficult, the challenges are real, and the expectations continue to grow. Yet, across Arkansas, board members continue to give their time, energy, and leadership because they understand that every decision they make has the potential to change a child's future.

That commitment inspires me every day. I have served our local board for more than 30 years, and the many hours of training I have received through the ASBA has helped me tremendously.

The Arkansas School Boards Association exists because we believe our local boards deserve a trusted partner. Our role is not to lead from the sidelines but to stand alongside school board members as they navigate the opportunities and challenges facing public education. Whether through governance

training, legal guidance, advocacy at the Capitol, leadership development, or opportunities to connect with colleagues across the state, ASBA is committed to helping local boards succeed. When boards are equipped with the right tools and knowledge, students benefit.

One of the things I appreciate most about ASBA is the relationships it builds and the confidence it gives us. Our conferences and leadership events are more than professional development. They are opportunities for board members to learn from one another, share ideas, celebrate successes, and discover that they are not alone in the work they do. Some of the best solutions come from conversations between board members who simply want to help one another serve their communities better.

That spirit of collaboration has always been one of Arkansas' greatest strengths.

Public education continues to evolve. With our literacy scores improving, we are preparing students for careers that did not exist a generation ago while addressing challenges that require innovation, resilience, and thoughtful leadership. Through it all, one thing remains constant: our responsibility to ensure every child has access to a high-quality public education. That responsibility belongs to all of us.

As board members, we are entrusted by our communities to make decisions that reflect both today's needs and tomorrow's possibilities. We must always remember that behind every policy, every budget discussion, and every strategic plan is a student with dreams waiting to be realized.

At ASBA, we remain committed to helping boards lead with integrity, govern with purpose, and keep students at the center of every decision.

I firmly believe that Arkansas public schools are filled with extraordinary

Please see PARHAM on page 7

Report Card

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Parham

Continued from page 6

people – dedicated teachers who inspire learning, administrators who lead with vision, support staff who keep our schools running, parents who encourage their children every step of the way, and board members who willingly accept the responsibility of public service. Together, we are making a difference. Not because of any one organization or individual, but because we share a common mission.

As president of the Arkansas School Boards Association, I am proud of what we have accomplished together, but I am even more excited about what lies ahead. Every challenge presents an opportunity to grow, every success deserves to be celebrated, and every child deserves our very best.

I'd like to thank our leadership team at ASBA: Executive Director Shannon Moore, Deputy Executive Director Tammie Reitenger, and Policy Director and Staff Attorney Lucas Harder, for your dedication and your unwavering belief in public education. It is an honor to serve alongside each of you as we build stronger schools, stronger communities, and brighter futures for every student across our great state.

Together, we are making a difference – and together, the best is yet to come.



ASBA's fall regional meetings occurring throughout October

ASBA's annual fall regional meetings will take place at 14 locations throughout the state during the month of October. Each year, one district in each region is selected to host the regional meeting.

The meetings will be held from 5:30 until 8:30 p.m. School board members can earn three hours of boardsmanship training credit for attending.

Each meeting will include a networking meal, regional director elections where applicable, legislative updates, the annual ASBA member survey, and timely information for board members and district administrators. Recipients of the Certificate of Boardsmanship and the Outstanding Board Award will also be recognized.

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Dates and locations will be announced soon.

For more information about the regional meetings, contact Deputy Executive Director / Board Development Director Tammie Reitenger at treitenger@arsba.org.

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ASBA seeking Board of Excellence Award applications

The ASBA is accepting applications for the 2026 Board of Excellence in Leadership Award until Oct. 19.

The annual award recognizes Arkansas school boards that exemplify exceptional leadership, dedication to student achievement, and a commitment to excellence in governance.

The winners will be announced and recognized during the ASBA Annual Conference on Friday, December 11.

Two awards can be bestowed each year: one for a school district with student enrollment below 1,500, and another for a school district with student enrollment above 1,500.

Access the award application and criteria at bit.ly/asbaboe26.

ASBA seeking nominations for Dr. Dan Award

Nominations for the ASBA's Dr. Daniel L. Pilkinton Award are due by Oct. 15.



December 9-11
73rd Annual ASBA Conference
Little Rock Marriott and
Statehouse Convention Center

December 21
Deadline to submit district's millage
language to the county clerk

January 29, 2027
ASBA School Law Conference
Embassy Suites Little Rock

The Dr. Dan Award annually honors individuals who have made significant contributions to Arkansas education. Established in 1993, this prestigious award honors Pilkinton's legacy as a lifelong advocate for Arkansas public education and as ASBA's first executive secretary. It is awarded in a surprise announcement at the Annual Conference.

Individuals qualify if they have made a singular act of exceptional service or have made contributions over a number of years. Nominations are valid up

to three years. ASBA-member school boards, individual board members, and superintendents of ASBA-member districts may nominate.

Submit nominations at bit.ly/drddan26.

ASBA seeking applications for top student speakers

Arkansas 11th and 12th graders are invited to participate in the 2026 ASBA Student Essay & Speaking Contest. Applications are due by 4 p.m. Oct. 23.

Winners will present their ideas live at the 2026 ASBA Annual Conference on Dec. 10-11 at the Little Rock Marriott and Statehouse Convention Center.

The Topic is "One Year From Graduation ..." The prompt challenges speakers to imagine themselves one year after high school and consider the person they hope to become as they navigate greater independence, new responsibilities, and an uncertain future. Drawing on their own experiences, perspectives, and aspirations, speakers will explore what they believe will matter most in this next chapter of their lives and why.

Participants will submit a 4-5-minute video and 600-750-word essay. The winner will receive \$1,000. Other prizes are \$750 for 2nd place, \$500 for 3rd place, and \$250 for honorable mention.

Each ASBA member district is allowed one submission and may choose its method for selecting its applicant.

Contest rules and the online application can be accessed at bit.ly/sscontest26 or at ASBA's website, www.arsba.org.

For more information, contact ASBA Deputy Executive Director / Board Development Director Tammie Reitenger at 501.492.4822 or at treitenger@arsba.org.

ASBA looking for presenters at Annual Conference

The Arkansas School Boards Association is accepting proposals from now until Nov. 6 for presentations for its



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73rd Annual Conference, which will be Dec. 9-11.

The association is seeking engaging sessions that inform, inspire, and equip Arkansas school board members to fuel success in their districts. The conference's theme is, "Where Leadership Finds Its Rhythm – Setting the Tone for Stronger Schools."

Final selection of presentations will be made, and applicants notified, by Nov. 20. Presentations should target board members as the primary audience; enhance board members' knowledge, skills, and abilities with an emphasis on improving student outcomes; preferably include a school board member; and demonstrate innovative ideas and solutions.

Presentations should address one of the following topics:

- Board members' legal and ethical responsibilities
- School laws and regulations
- Board member roles and responsibilities
- Board/superintendent relationships
- Board ethics
- Student achievement
- Community relations
- School operations
- Interpreting and applying school finance concepts
- Student discipline and safety
- Effective governance practices
- Effective leadership and accountability

• Learning and leadership

Prospective presenters must submit a form that is available at the following link: bit.ly/acrfp26. For answers to questions, contact Tammie Reitenger at treitenger@arsba.org or at 501.492.4822.

School districts must hold millage elections in March

Although there will be no school board elections in 2027, Arkansas school districts must still conduct their annual school millage elections on Tuesday, March 2, 2027.

Acts 503 and 405 of 2025 moved school board elections to even-numbered years and established the first Tuesday after the first Monday in March as the annual school election date. As a result, no school board positions will appear on the ballot in 2027.

However, Article 14, Section 3(c) (1) of the Arkansas Constitution requires each school district to submit its proposed property tax rate to voters annually. This requirement applies even when the district proposes no change to its existing millage rate.

Act 399 of 2025 provides a streamlined process for odd-numbered years when a district's millage rate is unchanged, and there are no other ballot issues to be considered. Under the act, a

district's Board of Education may adopt a resolution designating a qualified elector to cast a ballot for the district's unchanged millage rate. The resolution must be provided to the county clerk at least 72 days prior to the election.

Key district deadlines

Monday, Dec. 21, 2026, is the deadline to submit the district's millage language to the county clerk. This is also the deadline to provide the board resolution required to use the single elector process under Act 399. The statutory deadline – 72 days before the election – falls on Sunday, Dec. 20, and moves to the next business day.

Friday, Jan. 1, 2027, is the deadline to publish the district's proposed budget of expenditures and corresponding tax rate in some newspaper published or having a bona fide circulation in the county where the district is administratively domiciled. Article 14, Section 3 of the Arkansas Constitution requires this information to be made public at least 60 days before the annual school election. Because January 1 is a holiday, districts should complete publication before that date.

Boards should schedule approval of the proposed budget, millage rate, and Act 399 resolution early enough to meet the December 21 filing deadline. Districts should also coordinate with their county clerk regarding local submission procedures.



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Supremes OK trans athlete bans

The U.S. Supreme Court made two major transgender rulings this year – one allowing Idaho and West Virginia to bar transgender females from participating in girls' sports, and one stating that California cannot conceal a student's gender transition from their parents.

This upcoming term, the Court will decide whether employees of federally funded educational institutions can sue claiming sex discrimination under Title IX.

Let's start with the transgender sports decision. On June 30, 2026, the Supreme Court ruled 6-3 that states can bar transgender athletes from women's and girls' sports teams in two cases: *Little v. Hecox* and *West Virginia v. B.P.J.*

The justices ruled unanimously that laws enacted by Idaho and West Virginia do not violate federal civil rights laws, but they disagreed about whether the West Virginia law violates the Constitution.

As reported by SCOTUSblog, the cases involved a transgender Boise State University student and a transgender high school athlete from West Virginia. The two each had filed suit arguing that their state's law violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment and Title IX. Enacted in 1972, Title IX prohibits sex-based discrimination in education activities that receive federal funds.

In his 29-page opinion, Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote that “[c]onsistent with Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause, we hold that the States may maintain women's and girls' sports for biological females. They may determine eligibility for women's and girls' sports based on biological sex. The Constitution and Title IX do not require an overhaul of women's and girls' sports throughout America.”

The case was initiated following Idaho enacting the Fairness in Women's Sports Act in March 2020. It categorically bars transgender women and girls from participating on female athletic teams in public schools and colleges.



by **Jay Bequette**
Bequette, Billingsley & Kees, PA

The law defines sex based on reproductive biology and genetics rather than gender identity and allows any individual to challenge a student athlete's sex, triggering a medical verification process that could include analysis of reproductive anatomy, testosterone levels, or genetic makeup. A transgender woman, Lindsay Hecox, sued because she wanted to try out for the women's track and cross-country teams at Boise State University in Idaho. She did not make the teams.

In August 2020, the federal district court issued a preliminary injunction blocking enforcement of the law, finding it likely unconstitutional because it discriminated based on sex and transgender status without sufficient justification. In 2023, the Ninth Circuit affirmed the injunction as applied to the transgender woman but remanded to clarify the scope of relief for other athletes.

The West Virginia Legislature likewise passed the Save Women's Sports Act in 2022. That case involved a high school student using puberty blockers and female hormones, as reported by SCOTUSblog.

Parental rights and confidentiality

In another case, *Mirabelli v. Bonta*, the Supreme Court on March 2, 2026, sided with parents and teachers challenging California's policies requiring schools to conceal students' gender transitions from their parents.

The court issued a per curiam decision, meaning no single author is listed, saying that the policies violate parents'

rights under the Constitution's Free Exercise and Due Process Clauses, holding that schools likely cannot enforce rules that keep a student's gender transition efforts confidential from parents or mandate pronoun usage against parental objections.

The Court emphasized that parents – not the state – are the primary protectors of their children's welfare and have the authority to make decisions regarding their upbringing and education. The ruling restored the class-wide permanent injunction, ensuring that schools cannot enforce policies that prevent parental notification or override parental direction regarding names and pronouns.

Next up: Employees suing schools

This upcoming term, the Supreme Court will determine if employees can use Title IX as a vehicle for workplace claims of sex discrimination.

The case, *Crowther v. Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia*, centers around two individuals who allege that they were treated unfairly due to their gender in the workplace.

The decision will resolve a split between circuit courts regarding whether individual employees of federally funded educational institutions have a private right of action to sue under Title IX for sex discrimination in employment, or if they are restricted to Title VII, which is part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Three circuit courts – the Fifth, Seventh, and Eleventh Circuits – have held that school employees may not bring Title IX claims for employment discrimination. The Fifth and Seventh Circuits have reasoned that Title VII's comprehensive enforcement scheme precludes a parallel implied remedy; the Eleventh Circuit held more broadly that Title IX does not create such a right of action at all.

The petitioners in the case identify eight circuits that have affirmatively recognized a Title IX private right of action for employment discrimination – the First, Second, Third, Fourth, Sixth, Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Circuits.



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Jordan an educator, advocate

ASBA'S recently retired advocacy director invested 37 years as a school administrator, teacher and coach.

Dan Jordan, who was ASBA's advocacy director from 2018 until 2024 following a 37-year career in public education, died July 24 after a nine-month battle with pancreatic cancer. He was 68.

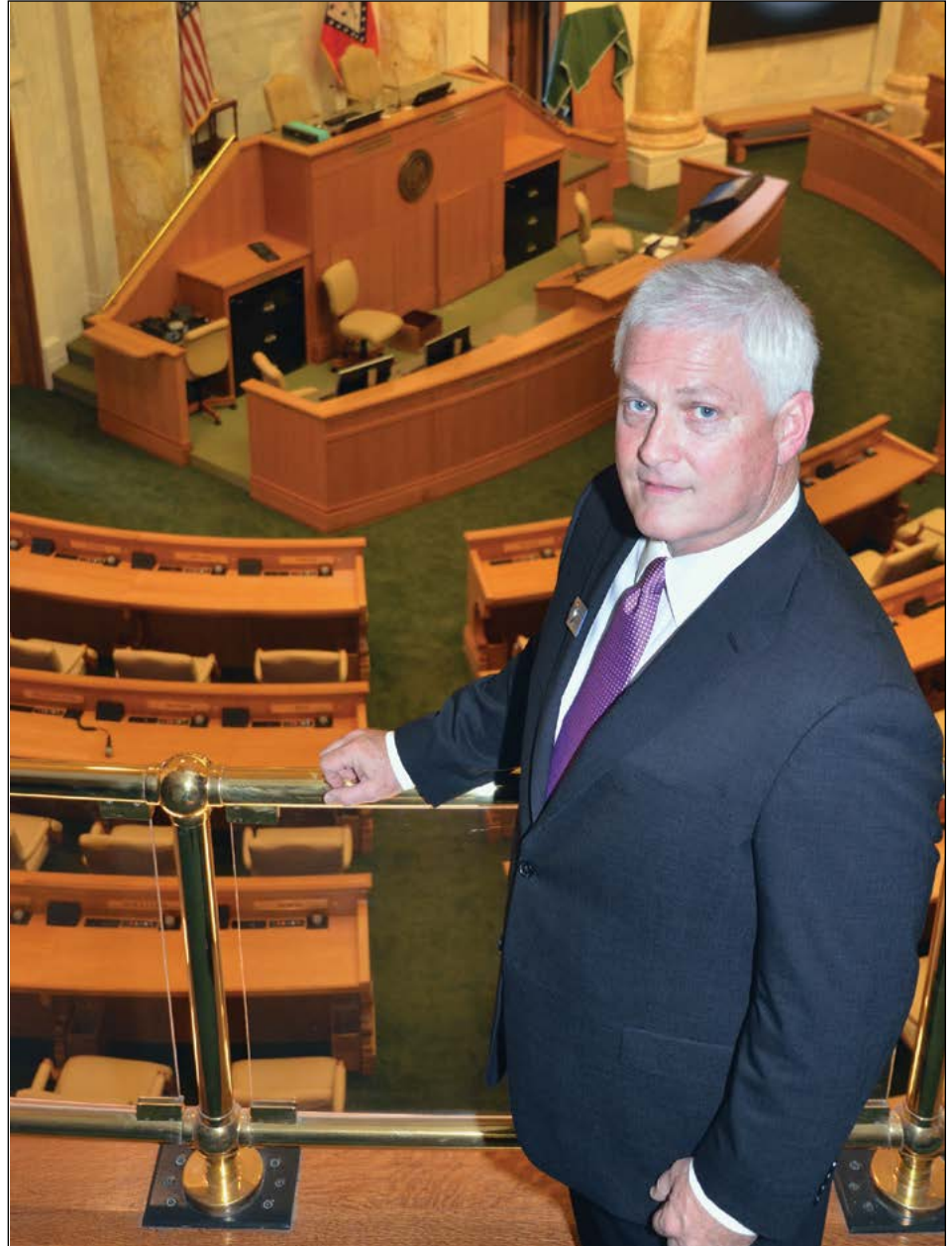
Born September 4, 1957, in Malvern, Jordan had been a coach, teacher and school administrator. His last day at ASBA was June 28, 2024.

"I feel truly blessed to have known such an incredible man," ASBA Executive Director Shannon Moore said. "He was kind, compassionate, and deeply devoted to education, touching countless lives through his wisdom, generosity, and genuine care for others. He also had a wonderful sense of humor and a way with witty sayings that could always bring a smile. His legacy will live on in the many students, educators, and friends he inspired. I will always be grateful to have known him, and he will be deeply missed."

ASBA Deputy Executive Director Tammie Reitenger said Jordan was a story teller who shared lessons from his years in education and joyfully talked about his grandchildren, Wyatt and Palmer.

"There are some people whose presence makes everyone around them better, and Dan Jordan was one of those people," she said. "Dan was a mentor, a trusted friend, and someone I admired deeply. He was steadfast in his faith, his values, and his commitment to serving others. You could always count on him. He was never late, always prepared, and someone whose word meant something."

Jordan came to ASBA after Dr. Tony Prothro, then ASBA's executive director, approached him in January 2018. Jordan at the time was the Elkins School District superintendent in northwest Arkansas. The two had worked together in the Benton School District, where Prothro was superintendent and Jordan was an assistant superintendent.



COMMITTED. Dan Jordan was passionately devoted to education whether he was working as a school administrator or as ASBA's advocacy director.

Jordan had been a lifelong educator, not a lobbyist, but he decided to accept the position.

In an interview with Report Card in his home after his retirement, Jordan said his attitude about taking the job was, "If I'm going to be a lobbyist, and if I can't advocate for kids, then I've wasted 37 years of my life."

The conversation occurred after Jordan had told Prothro at a conference that he planned eventually to return to central Arkansas. He and wife Kathy had recently welcomed their first grand-

child, Wyatt Jordan, into the family, and Kathy was spending as much time with him as she was spending at their home in Fayetteville.

"I had five building projects going when Tony talked to me about this opportunity that I wanted to really see finished," Jordan said in 2024. "But the opportunity to come and work for ASBA and also be down here with my grandson was just an opportunity that I think maybe God had His hand in."

All legislation ASBA supports is based on three pillars: Is it good for

kids? Does it create an educational ethic? Is everyone held accountable?

In that context, Jordan learned to be flexible and forgiving as he dealt with the legislative process.

“You can’t get upset about any of that because the people that may have not voted right today, you may need their support tomorrow on something totally different,” he said in 2024. “So it’s relationships is really what it is, and I was able to build some good relationships. We’ve got some friends over in the Capitol, and you have to work with those folks all the time. All I know to do is always be honest, always look eye to eye and do what you do, and if it works out, fine, and if it doesn’t, fine.”

Prothro said Jordan spoke plainly and “believed in honesty, fairness, accountability, and respect.” Legislators appreciated his forthrightness.

“Dan had little patience for needless complication,” he wrote in response to questions from Report Card. “He could cut through confusion with a clear eye and a practical mind. He understood people, systems, and the difference between what looks good on paper and what works in real life. When others spun in circles of theory or politics, Dan asked the straightforward questions: Does this help kids learn? Does this support teachers? Is this fair? Can we actually do it well? His common sense was not cynicism; it was wisdom earned through experience and tem-



DAN JORDAN is pictured with his motorcycle after retiring in 2024.

pered by care. It made him an anchor in stormy seasons and a steady guide when the path forward was unclear.”

It started in Malvern

Jordan’s path to an educational career started in Malvern, where he played tight end and defensive end for the Leopards. He earned his bachelor’s degree in education at Henderson State University. He then earned his master’s degree while working as a graduate assistant coach for the Reddies for a year.

The lifelong sports fan coached and taught classes at Benton High School but found the work required too much time from home and wouldn’t provide enough for his family, so he earned his administrative certification while attending graduate school at night. He then served as assistant principal at Lakeside High School before returning to Benton, first as a high school principal and then

as director of personnel and student services. He spent his last five years in education as the Elkins School District superintendent.

Jordan retired in good health with plans to enjoy his golden years in Benton. His children lived nearby, and his grandchildren, Wyatt and Palmer, often came to his house to swim in his pool. They called him “Papaw.” His in-laws were his next-door neighbors. The old coach was still a passionate sports fan. He also planned to take road trips on his 2017 Harley Davidson Road King motorcycle. Before he started working at ASBA, he and a buddy had spent a week riding in the Smoky Mountains. But Prothro said Jordan also missed working in education and had taken a consulting job in late 2025.

Prothro said Jordan was determined to beat cancer. His thoughts at the end were focused on his family, and he regretted that he would not be able to support his loved ones or see his grandchildren grow into adulthood.

The night he died, he looked at Prothro and whispered, “Did all the buses make it in safely with the kids?”

Prothro replied, “They all made it in safely, Dan. It was a heck of a snow, but everyone is accounted for.”

Recalling the memory, Prothro wrote, “He smiled and said ‘I had faith in our people to get them here safely.’ That was Dan Jordan, always thinking of others more than himself.”

A wide-angle photograph of a modern school cafeteria. The room features large windows on the left, providing natural light. The ceiling is high with exposed ductwork and several large, circular, recessed light fixtures. The floor is a light-colored, polished material. Numerous round tables are arranged throughout the room, each surrounded by purple chairs. In the background, there are large wall graphics with the words "LEARN" and "GROW".

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Students take the stage

This year's Southern Region Leadership Conference in Hot Springs gave young people a chance to share their thoughts on what they love about their schools, and how public schools can be improved. One take-away: Adults should listen to them.

How can school leaders improve schools in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi? Listening to students.

That was one of the takeaways from a panel discussion featuring six young people during the closing session of the Southern Region Leadership Conference in Hot Springs July 19-21. Farmington School Board President and ASBA Vice President Travis Warren moderated the discussion.



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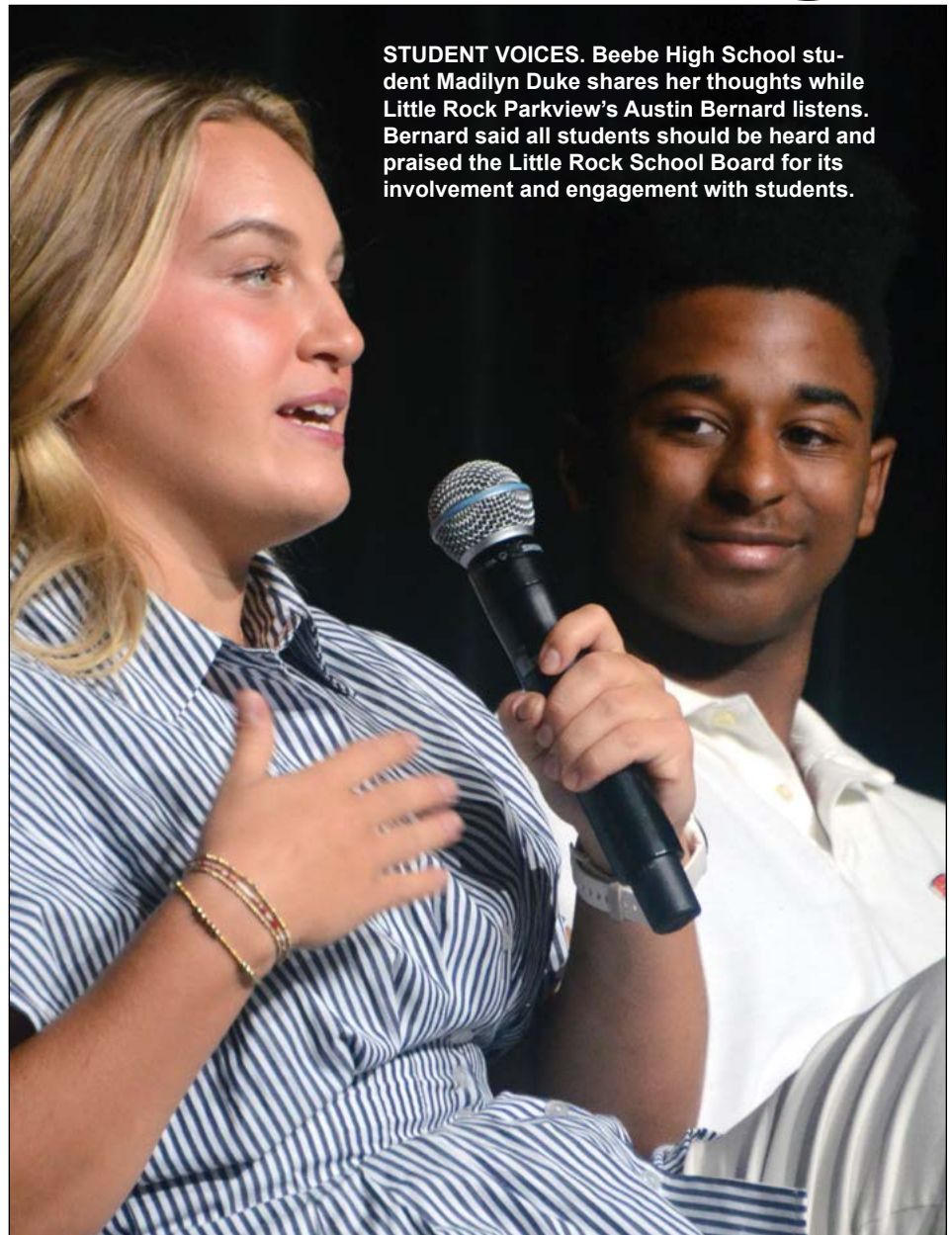
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STUDENT VOICES. Beebe High School student Madilyn Duke shares her thoughts while Little Rock Parkview's Austin Bernard listens. Bernard said all students should be heard and praised the Little Rock School Board for its involvement and engagement with students.

The annual regional conference brought together school board members and administrators from the three states under the theme "Meeting the Moment: Strategic Leadership for Today's Schools." The three states rotate hosting the conference. Next year's will be in Biloxi, Mississippi.

Students offered a variety of suggestions for improving education, with several mentioning the importance of communication and listening to their concerns. Micah Autrey with the South Conway County School District said legislators should consider students'

viewpoints when they discuss implementing changes such as those related to concurrent credit. Bryant High School student Mallory Thompson said students are more engaged and confident when they are heard. Austin Bernard from Little Rock Parkview said his school's student advisory board meets with board members and the superintendent, but all students should be heard.

"Be accessible," he said. "If I can see you, that's OK, but if I can't talk to you, that really means nothing. I feel like that's a great thing our board does, our principal does. They come out to the

schools; they come out; they talk to us students. They ask students what they want to see changed. And they let us know we can talk to them about anything, and that's a great thing, and that's why I love our school district and our board."

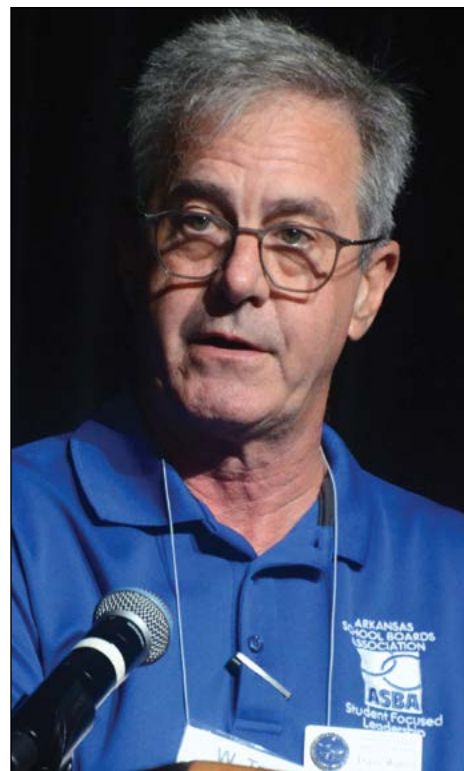
Likewise, Sheridan High School student Annslee Young said school board members should come to classroom and casual settings rather than just the lunchroom. Board members can be intimidating, so they need to be personal and involved with students who aren't visible as student leaders. Students need the reassurance that they are cared about as individuals, not just as an overall student body, she said. Lake Hamilton High senior Cooper Jones said board members should remember how academically challenging school can be these days.

Other suggestions for improving education included one from Young that schools should provide college guidance beyond academic preparation for

challenges such as writing essays and applying for scholarships. Beebe High School student Madilyn Duke said her school's college preparation counselor reduces stress for students. Lake Hamilton's Jones said he often hears his parents, both principals, discuss unfunded mandates. Retaining teachers should be another priority. He said his district had to fill many positions this year. His homeroom advisor left in the middle of the year and was replaced by a long-term substitute. Bryant's Thompson suggested schools host more community service projects so students can reach their required 75 hours.

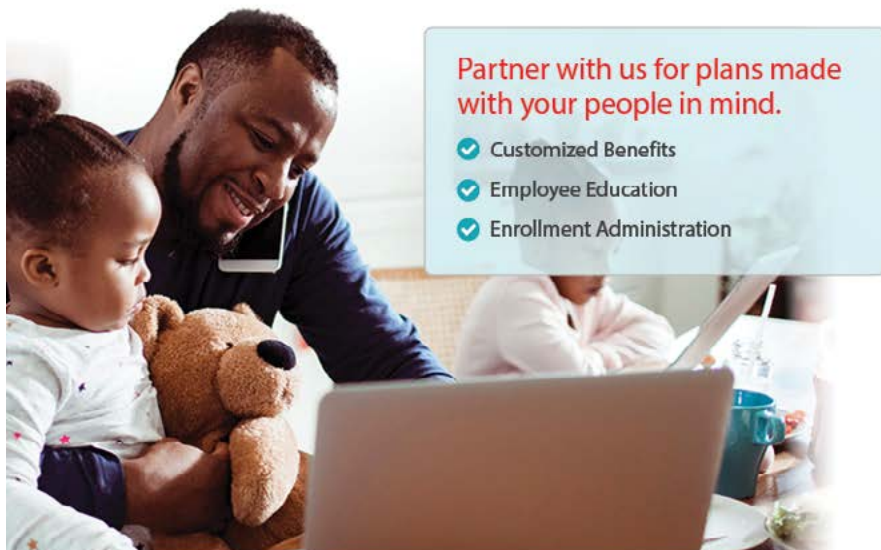
The students agreed that their involvement in their school districts played a big role in shaping them into their current selves. A middle school thespian festival helped Bernard realize he wanted to be an actor. Autrey said the South Conway County School District's band program helped him come out of

Continues on next page



FARMINGTON PRESIDENT Travis Warren moderated the student panel discussion.

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CONFERENCE EXHIBITORS. Exhibitors at the Southern Region Leadership Conference had the chance to visit with school board members and school leaders throughout the three-state region. Top left, Josh Siebert and Jamie Gottlieb with modus studio visit with Spencer Davies with SOPA. Top right, Trent Cox, left, Derek Livingston, center, and Maritza Rosas with 21st Century Janitorial Service man a booth. Middle left, Scott Miley with American Fidelity talks with an attendee. Middle right, Baldwin & Shell's Dustin Mize, left, and Cody Adams, right, visit with conference attendees. Bottom left, Tracy Streeter with Clark Contractors speaks to a conference attendee. Bottom right, TIPS' Stacey McPherson visits with Ralph Brandt from Jefferson Parish in Louisiana.

his shell, while upperclassmen helped him make friends. Young said being Sheridan High's Student Council president and cheerleading co-captain helped her see how she can help other people.

Jones recalled signing up for many different clubs at Lake Hamilton during his sophomore year "and just having a ton of fun doing so many different things I thought I wouldn't really even

like." FBLA became his favorite activity.

"I think that one thing that one of our principals said that really inspired me was, if you feel like you're not involved,

then you're not trying hard enough because we have so many things that you can come and do," he said.

Students said their schools' supportive cultures were a key to their success. Bernard praised the presence of Black educators, especially male ones, at Little Rock Parkview. Young said Sheridan High, home of the Yellowjackets, holds "Swarm Pep Rallies" where they are reminded to do their best.

"It's actually really encouraging that they care so much about student success," she said.

The students have a variety of hopes and dreams. Autrey plans to be a music educator. Young and Jones both want to become certified registered nurse anesthetists. Thompson plans to attend Spelman College in Atlanta and become an obstetrician. Duke plans to serve her country by attending the U.S. Military Academy at West Point after graduating from Beebe before eventually working at an American embassy.

Students described the career preparation opportunities their schools offer. Thompson said Bryant students can prepare for careers ranging from medicine to HVAC. Jones said Lake Hamilton has a draft day where businesses explain what they do, and students can sign up to shadow them. Autrey said South Conway County has a good concurrent program with the University of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton. Students can prepare for careers ranging from nursing to auto mechanics.

Asked what other districts might want to copy about their school, Thompson mentioned Bryant's mental health counselors, while Young praised Sheridan's personally involved staff members. Principals know students by name and what classes they are taking. Jones said no one gets left behind at Lake Hamilton. Bernard said there aren't many discipline issues at Little Rock Parkview because students have personal relationships with teachers.

"It's great because it always feels like I have somebody that believes in me," he said. "Even on days where I don't believe in myself, there's always somebody who's going to be there to push me, regardless of who it is. It could be my principal. It could be my teacher. It could be my friend, just anybody."

Asked what the future of education depends on, Bernard cited the school's quality of life. He said he is happy waking up each morning to go to school because he's in a community that loves him and listens to him. Thompson said teachers must not have negative energy, because students will feed off that. Young said it's important that a teacher care about the job for which they are hired.

Redus: Lead with clarity, unity

Later that morning, Dr. Rochelle Redus, president of the North Little Rock School Board, encouraged boards

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to work together during her keynote address on “Leading Through Hard Decisions with Clarity and Unity.”

Most board members have sat through board meetings where emotions were high, Redus said. Board members are often asked to make hard decisions with limited resources while facing public pressure and internal differences. Redus said boards don’t struggle because they care too little, but because they care deeply, although differently.

Redus gave four keys to consider to make boards more effective. One is “Clarity before consensus.” Board members too often feel pressure to respond quickly or form opinions before fully understanding the issue. Instead, they should slow down, seek understanding, and gather the full context before reacting. Asking the superintendent a simple question early can prevent confusion later and is a sign of informed decision making, not weakness or opposition.

“Respect the process” is the second key. Board members are only one voice of five or seven. No one has independent authority outside of the board. When community members have a concern, board members should try to help them understand the proper chain of command in the district’s organizational structure.

The third key is “Disagree without division.” Disagreement is healthy and can lead to stronger discussions and better decisions. Everyone comes to the table with different experiences, perspectives and priorities. Problems occur when disagreement turns personal or creates division that continues after the vote has been taken. Board members must respect each other even when they strongly disagree. Once the board has spoken by majority, the responsibility shifts from defending positions to moving the district forward together.

The final key is “Stay student centered.” Every decision, whether financial, operational, or seemingly procedural, affects the students’ experience and ability to learn.

Leadership can be especially challenging when the board changes, as happened with the North Little Rock School Board this last election cycle. Five of its seven members were on the



DR. ROCHELLE REDUS, North Little Rock School Board president, closed the conference in an address titled “Leading Through Hard Decisions with Clarity and Unity,” top photo. Bottom photo, Bearden’s Denny Rozenberg offered a superintendent’s perspective.



ballot, and only two were reelected. A veteran board member then resigned. By the time it was over, only Redus and two other original board members remained, one of whom was only in his second year. The leadership transition occurred in the middle of decisions and discussions on which previous board members had already spent months working.

“Trust takes time to build,” Redus said. “Communication takes time to develop, and understanding how to function as a team – it takes time as well.”

Redus said board leadership can be especially difficult during critical periods of decision making. Maintaining continuity during change, preserving knowledge, and supporting the new leadership can all be a challenge, but they are important. Boards must remember that not every decision they make will feel good, that the process matters, and that the tone matters as well.

Communication protocols assist boards in keeping the process clear. These include weekly school board member reports, monthly one-on-one communication meetings, annual retreats and others.

Her superintendent sends out daily texts alerting board members to happenings in the district – sometimes numbering nine to 10 a day.

Redus encouraged members to ask clarifying questions whenever addressing an issue, to listen fully, to respect governance rules, and to support majority decisions – even if they don’t agree with them.

“It’s not about winning the vote,” she said. “It’s about leading the outcome.”

She ended by encouraging members to lead with clarity, lead with respect, and lead together. Leadership isn’t tested in the easy moments. It’s revealed in difficult ones. It’s not about having all the answers, but living with clarity, respect and unity.

“Every agenda, every discussion is another opportunity to shape the future of a child you may never meet. ... Ask the hard questions, respect the process, support one another, and never lose sight of why you accepted this incredible responsibility in the first place,” she said. “Because our students deserve boards that don’t just meet in the moment. They deserve boards that lead it.”

Attendees also were given a superintendent’s perspective by Bearden School



ASBA GENERAL COUNSEL Jay Bequette discussed controversial First Amendment issues such as the posting of the Ten Commandments during a concurrent session.

District's Denny Rozenberg. The 40-year Bearden veteran is also a veteran of the National Guard and U.S. Army Reserves and deployed to Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Kosovo. He received a call informing him he was going to Kosovo while he was conducting a school board meeting.

Rozenberg encouraged attendees to think strategically based on a five-legged stool: academics, finance, facilities, extracurricular programs, and safety and security. He urged them to lead with "vision, courage and resilience." He said they should practice servant leadership like Jesus, who washed his disciples' feet.

But servant leadership doesn't mean the superintendent does the hard jobs that people don't want to do.

"You've got to teach them and mentor them how to be the hero of their own story and able to do those hard jobs themselves," he said. "Because sooner or later, you're not going to be around."

Tough First Amendment issues

Attendees also could choose between numerous concurrent sessions. In one, school attorney and ASBA General Counsel Jay Bequette with Bequette, Billingsley and Kees discussed First Amendment issues related to education.

One of those issues is the display of the Ten Commandments. In 2025, the Legislature enacted Act 573, requiring the displays in all public school classrooms if private citizens donate them. Texas, Louisiana and Alabama had already passed similar laws. Shortly after Arkansas passed its law, parents filed suit against several northwest Arkansas school districts. Attorney General Tim Griffin is arguing that the statute serves a legitimate secular and educational purpose. Bequette is involved because a couple of school districts his firm represents were added to the case.

U.S. District Court Chief Judge Timothy Brooks has issued a permanent

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injunction prohibiting the display. He based this on a 1980 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that the Ten Commandments couldn't be posted in schools. The case is on appeal to the 8th Circuit Court, a fairly conservative one. With other states also enacting Ten Commandments laws, it seems likely the U.S. Supreme Court will rule on the issue during this term.

The ruling only directly applies to the school districts that are parties to the case. All other districts in Arkansas must decide between complying with the law or obeying the court order. The American Civil Liberties Union, which brought the original suit, sent letters to other districts threatening to sue but has not yet done so. Bequette said his firm advises school districts to comply with the 10 Commandments law, but given the threat of litigation by the ACLU, it also advises that this is ultimately a decision for the school board to make.

Bequette covered other First Amendment issues his firm often addresses. Can a student decline to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance or memorize the Pledge as a class assignment? Can a band member refuse to participate in playing the national anthem? Can a student lead prayer at graduation? Can a teacher lead an afterschool Bible study? Can "O Holy Night" be sung at a school musical performance? The answer to all of those questions is yes.

Early birds discuss scenarios

Two ASBA staff members hosted an early bird session July 19 titled, "Meeting the Moment: Governance in Action." Lucas Harder, ASBA policy director and staff attorney, and Tammie Reitenger, ASBA deputy executive director and board development director, led participants in discussing a series of fictional scenarios.

In one scenario, a newly elected board member, unbeknownst to the superintendent, visited a campus in response to parental complaints about a middle school principal. While there, he spoke to staff and asked the principal for copies of recent discipline reports and later suggested changes to the master schedule. He then posted on social media that he was investigating concerns



EARLY BIRD SESSION. Southern Region Leadership Conference attendees participated in table discussions about school board scenarios and then reported their insights to the group. Pictured in the top photo are Russellville School Board members Donna Hindsman and Don Jacimore. Above, ASBA Policy Director and Staff Attorney Lucas Harder and Deputy Executive Director Tammie Reitenger facilitated the discussion.

and wrote that "changes are already being discussed." His actions divided the board at the next meeting, with one member praising him and others saying he may have crossed the line separating governance and administration.

After discussing the scenario, one table decided that boards should have "preventative maintenance" and be trained on their roles and responsibilities.

ties. Board members should know the chain of command and be prepared to tell parents to speak first to the teacher and then the principal and superintendent. The table also discussed how to handle "renegade board members," deciding that they may have to be isolated and that other board members may have to accept that there often will be a dissenting voice in the room. The table's

spokesperson suggested the board president and board legal counsel discuss the matter with the board member. In response, Harder said that would be a public meeting under Arkansas' Freedom of Information Act, which could be a problem, but the superintendent could talk to the board member, or the board as a whole could meet in executive session for the purpose of disciplining a public official. Another table said the member had clearly overstepped his bounds. Board members exist to make policies, and the member should have followed the proper chain. That table also said the board member should not have posted on social media.

Harder said Arkansas school board members should not investigate personnel complaints because that employee, if terminated, can easily sue the district over due process concerns if the board member didn't recuse.

"We also like to point out that when it comes to social media use, the internet

never forgets," Harder said. "So regardless of whether or not you take it down later or whatever, the internet remembers, and it can and will be used against you when it comes to a legal thing."

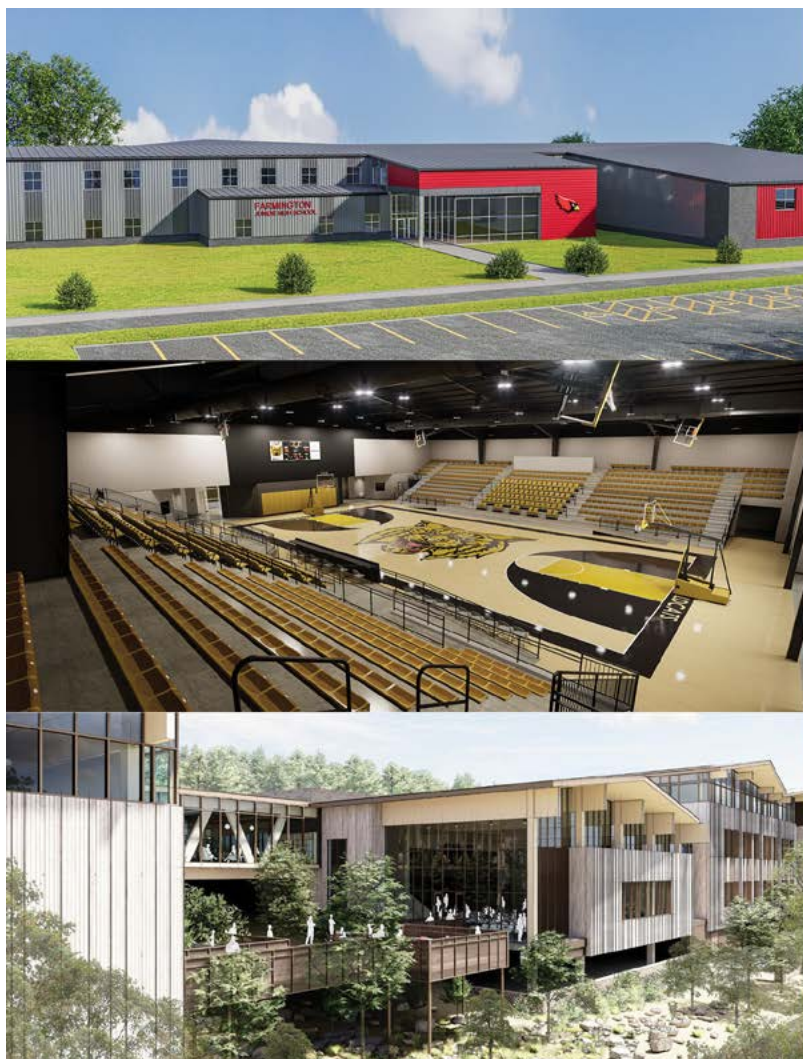
Another fictional scenario involved a board discussing a personnel issue during executive session. The next day, rumors began circulating in the community. Details about the meeting, including comments made by board members, appeared on social media. The employee's attorney asked who was responsible for discussing what happened.

One table decided that the district's attorney can get involved in addressing the leak of confidential information. The spokesperson's Louisiana parish has passed a censure policy saying that a board with a two-thirds majority can publicly reprimand a member if the others believe that member has placed the whole board at risk. If it happens a second time, the board president can remove the member from serving on

committees or chairing a committee. She said the parish has never enacted the policy. Harder noted that in Arkansas, violating executive session confidentiality can be prosecuted as a felony.

In another fictional scenario, board members during a meeting were texting about family matters and even agenda items. One even asked if another was going to vote yes, with that board member responding with a thumbs-up emoji. A citizen noticed the exchange and questioned what was occurring, while the local newspaper submitted a request seeking information exchanged during the meeting.

The table spokesperson said the texting was rude and unprofessional and would reduce public confidence. She said the board should develop a policy against the use of the devices. Harder said that in Arkansas, the text messages regarding how they would vote must be provided if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.



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Most board votes are unanimous

A UCA researcher found split votes are rare, and even rarer in A- and B-rated districts. His fellow professor said disagreements can be healthy when handled the right way.

Most school board votes are unanimous, but when votes are split, it's most commonly over personnel and financial issues. Boards in lower-scoring school districts tend to disagree more often than boards in higher-scoring ones. But disagreement in itself is not a bad thing, as long as boards do it in the right way.

Those were some of the key points of a Southern Region Leadership Conference concurrent session, "Disagreement within the Board: What Data Reveals and How Board Members Can Lead Through It."

The session was led by two University of Central Arkansas educators, Assistant Professor Dr. Matthew White and K-12 Leadership Preparation Professor Dr. Rick Gales.

White found that disagreement is rare after combing through 27,535 votes from 233 Arkansas school districts from July 2024 through June 2025. In fact, there were only 231 divided votes, or .8% of the total. Failed motions were even rarer. There were only 24 of those, which was .09% of the votes. Twenty-three of those were split and one was unanimous.



White

White found that as school district letter grades increased, divided votes decreased, suggesting that board conflict is more prevalent in lower-performing

districts. For the seven F-rated school districts, 4.65% of the votes were split. That number fell to 2.57% of D-rated schools, .87% of C-rated schools, .49% of B-rated schools, and .48% of A-rated schools.



NO SURPRISES. Dr. Rick Gales, a UCA professor and former superintendent, said it's OK to disagree, but board members should not wait until the school board meeting to present major concerns to the superintendent.

"Now, this could be a chicken and egg issue, right?" he said. "The district is struggling to meet these goals that they've set, and therefore they have more conflict, or they have conflict, which led to the school rating. Which one came first would be a whole separate study. But we did find basically that as achievement went up, divided votes went down."

White then divided the votes into five general categories. Thirty-four percent of the divided votes pertained to human capital and organizational structure issues such as salary schedules and personnel. Another 24.4% of the divided votes pertained to fiscal management and resource allocation. Executive and board power dynamics resulted in 18.9% of the divided votes. Those involved leadership issues such as hiring a superintendent, board organization, and entering into executive session. Student-facing issues such as expulsions, transfers and student handbooks resulted in 14.6% of the divided votes. Policy and regulatory issues, including

rule adoptions and approving the minutes, were responsible for 8.3% of the divided votes.

What districts disagreed about was related to school district achievement. A-rated districts had seven divided votes related to human capital and organizational structure and one divided vote in three categories: executive and board power dynamics, student-facing issues, and policy and regulatory issues. Human capital and organizational structure was also the most common source of divided votes among B-rated districts (39.6%) and C-rated districts (34.9%). Among B-rated districts, fiscal management and resource allocation (24.5%) was second, followed by executive and board power dynamics (18.9%). Among C-rated districts, executive and board power dynamics was second at 23.3%, while fiscal management and resource allocation was third at 16.3%.

Meanwhile, fiscal management and resource allocation represented 33.3% of divided votes among both D-rated and F-rated schools. Second in both groups was human capital and organizational structure, which accounted for 25.6% of divided votes among D-rated districts and 29.6% among F-rated districts. Third among D-rated districts was policies and regulatory issues, which accounted for 21.8% of divided votes. Among F-rated districts, executive and power dynamics was third with 18.5%.

White noted, "The pattern is more that higher achieving schools have more issues with the human capital/organizational structure, whereas your lower achieving schools, it was more fiscal and resource stuff. ... And it wasn't that clear of a pattern, right? Because the context is unique to every district, and the situations and what's going on."

White said there wasn't a pattern about failed motions. The most interesting aspect was how few there were – 24 out of 27,535 votes.

His fellow UCA professor, Dr. Rick Gales, a former superintendent and high school principal, emphasized that disagreements aren't necessarily bad. Healthy debates test underlying

Where boards most often disagree

Issues like salary schedules and personnel lead the list.

Human capital and organizational structure	34%
Fiscal management and resource allocation	24.4%
Executive and board power dynamics	18.9%
Student-facing issues	14.6%
Policy and regulatory issues	8.3%

assumptions, bring concerns to the surface, and prevent groupthink.

Gales said board members should vote their consciences but be aware what message a divided vote sends. Parents and voters could lose confidence in their district leadership. The local press will focus on the one area of disagreement. Staff members might hesitate to implement a policy if they wonder if the board will change its mind.

Communicate before the meeting

Gales described three pre-meeting communications protocols that serve as

good strategic leadership practices. One is the “no surprise rule.” Open communication from the superintendent to board members ahead of time prevents friction. Board members should present major concerns to the superintendent before the meeting. Waiting until the meeting makes a superintendent look unprepared and doesn’t reflect favorably on the district. The “72-hour rule” is a formal cutoff where board members must submit questions three days in advance to give staff time to research the answer. Finally, there’s the “universal access rule,” where all questions

and answers are distributed to all board members.

The agenda’s structure can affect unity, Gales said. Many meetings in Arkansas start with student recognition. It reminds the board and the superintendent why they are there. One good way to structure meetings is to separate discussion from action. For controversial topics, it’s a good idea to have a discussion reading to consider the issue without voting on it.

One Mississippi attendee asked what can be done about a fellow board member who obviously doesn’t believe in public schools and tries to stir up controversy. Gales said voters have elected that member, and there may just have to be a lot of 4-1 votes. The public over time will ignore that member, and eventually it will be time for a re-election. As a school administrator, he tried to let the board president handle board conflicts. He encouraged attendees to recruit good candidates for office.



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Siloam's switch without a hitch

Leaders “over communicated” why Siloam Springs needed to move to a neighborhood schools model. Explaining the reasoning helped the transition go smoothly.

Only one set of parents complained at a school board meeting after Siloam Springs decided to reorganize using a neighborhood schools model. The overall community acceptance came because school leaders “over communicated” why and how the district was making the change.

Superintendent Shane Patrick and all five school board members shared their insights during a concurrent session at the Southern Region Leadership Conference.

The district this year is transitioning to a zoned neighborhood school model with three K-5 buildings, two grades 6-8 buildings, and the high school. Previously, all students in a particular grade attended the same school in buildings composed of two grades until high school.

Siloam Springs was one of only five districts in the state organized that way.

The reorganization means students will make two transitions during their educational careers rather than five. Patrick said afterwards that research has shown that the greater stability promotes academic achievement, better student behavior, and more parental involvement. Students and staff have more time to develop relationships. Board member Chris Whorton said he has a daughter who is a Type 1 diabetic. Under the old configuration, she would have had a different school nurse every two years.

Jason Carter, the board's newest member, said he supports the change. He recalled in years past transporting his four children to four schools or swapping children with other parents. Bus drop-offs created traffic problems, there weren't enough drivers, and some students were on the bus for two hours.

“As a parent, I love this,” he said. “You think about your kid being in a building for five years. They're going



to see their kindergarten teacher for five years. They're going to see their first grade teacher for four. They're going to build a rapport with that principal, that assistant principal. They're going to have some accountability to those staff members.”

He said the change was long overdue. “Some of us will cling to the past, and we'll say, well, that's how we've always done it,” he said. “That doesn't make it right. It just means you've done it the wrong way for a long time.”

Patrick said the district reduced salary costs by more than \$2 million through attrition using the neighborhood schools model. The biggest savings were in middle school, where many extra ex-

NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS. Siloam Springs students will transition to new schools twice during their educational careers rather than five times as a result of its move to a neighborhood schools model. The change will give students and staff more stability and continuity. Top, board member Chris Whorton said his daughter with Type 2 diabetes won't be switching school nurses every two years. With him is fellow board member Mary Ann Spears. Left photo, board member Jason Carter said students now will be in the same building with their kindergarten teacher for five years.

penses such as health and career orientation begin. The district will eliminate six bus routes after creating zones near the neighborhood schools where parents will be responsible for their students' transportation.

Further savings occurred because the district purchased and remodeled a closed 36,000-square-foot corporate office with a 156,000-square-foot warehouse to use for a new elementary school. The district had purchased land for a new school that would have cost an estimated \$45 million. Instead, it purchased the office and warehouse for \$35 a square foot and renovated it for \$18 million.

Board member Aric Bergthold said Patrick started talking about the need to change years ago when he was an

assistant superintendent. The board considered all the reasons it might be a bad idea. There were valid objections, but the gains outweighed them.

The change upended longstanding traditions and community expectations, but only one set of parents came to a school board meeting with an issue, said board member Heath Nance. They were divorced, and the bus only went to the mother's house.

'You can't communicate enough'

Whorton was surprised at the lack of negative community feedback. Part of the reason there wasn't is because school district leaders and the school board "over communicated."

"I just think I want to sum it up by saying, if I've learned anything, it's you can't communicate enough, and it's OK to be real and authentic with people," he said. "Just own it."

The district had 13 public meetings. Patrick and his team attended parent-

teacher conferences at the schools and would sit in the cafeteria for two hours having one-on-one conversations with community members. The school conducted online surveys. School leaders hosted a meeting at the central office from 7:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. on a Friday morning. It was standing room only. They went to every school to have conversations with the staff.

Patrick said the board's support, understanding and communication reduced community confusion.

"The reason we didn't have a lot of questions is because our board bought into this, and they learned about it, and then when somebody did ask them, they were able to explain," he said. "Or they would call me and say, 'Hey, I need an answer to this.' They were involved."

Patrick said school leaders sat in a room with a whiteboard with teachers' pictures and placed them in their new assignments. Then they communicated why and how the district was making

the change. The reconfiguration meant some teachers might be leaving a building where they had worked for 20 years. But teachers bought in.

Patrick said the same principles that made Siloam Springs' reorganization successful would apply to other major changes a school district wants to undertake.

"You may not ... need to change your grade configuration," he said. "But if you take the 'why' you need to make a major change, and then you communicate how you're going to do it, and think through it, there's no change you can't make if it's what's best for kids. Don't wait."

He said that in today's environment, public schools must be willing to change.

"We are in a day and age of education when you cannot continue to do what you've always done as a school district," he said. "Not if you're going to survive and do what's right for kids."



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School boards will save rural regions

Keynote speaker Rex Nelson told the Southern Region Leadership Conference that school boards will convince their communities to make public schools the best they can be.

Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi have a shared history of natural and manmade disasters but have begun to rise above their shared struggles. Public schools must be strengthened so rural areas aren't left behind.

Those were some of the main points of keynote speaker Rex Nelson's speech to the Southern Region Leadership Conference titled, "From State of Disaster to State of Excellence."

Nelson was qualified to discuss the region's shared history. The senior editor and columnist at the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette was Gov. Mike Huckabee's communications director and then was appointed by President George W. Bush to the Delta Regional Authority, a government agency providing grants to parts of eight states including Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana.

Nelson's father, Red Nelson, developed his marksmanship skills during the Great Depression because shooting game was the only way to have meat. He later became the all-sports coach at Newport before joining an Arkadelphia sporting goods store started by his brother. He traveled the state selling athletic gear to high schools and colleges from the trunk of his car, while his wife was a fifth grade teacher.

Nelson said "school people" were his parents' best friends.

"School people were the good guys," he said. "They were the ones who did not care about some national political agenda, did not care about X, Y. They were on the ground. What did they care about? To get the children of that community the best possible education they could get them and to ensure those kids had a bright future."

Nelson has spoken at economic development events from Alabama to western Kentucky to southern Illinois. He would try to arrive a couple of hours

"FROM STATE OF DISASTER TO STATE OF EXCELLENCE."

Keynote speaker Rex Nelson traced the history of the three-state region back to the 1803 Louisiana Purchase and the 1811-12 earthquake. The region through the years has suffered from a string of natural and manmade disasters but has thrived in certain places in recent years. However, rural areas face challenges and must support their local public schools.

early and drive around the town to see if the weeds were cut or whether businesses displayed signs supporting the local high school sports teams. Some communities in those places were seeking the big factory that would be "that one silver bullet that would turn around everything." If that were the case, they were focused on the wrong thing.

"The one thing you can do is make your local public school district as good as it can possibly be," he said. "That is how you save your community. And all of us can point to examples of when a school district dies, the community surrounding that school district will itself die, if we allow that to happen."

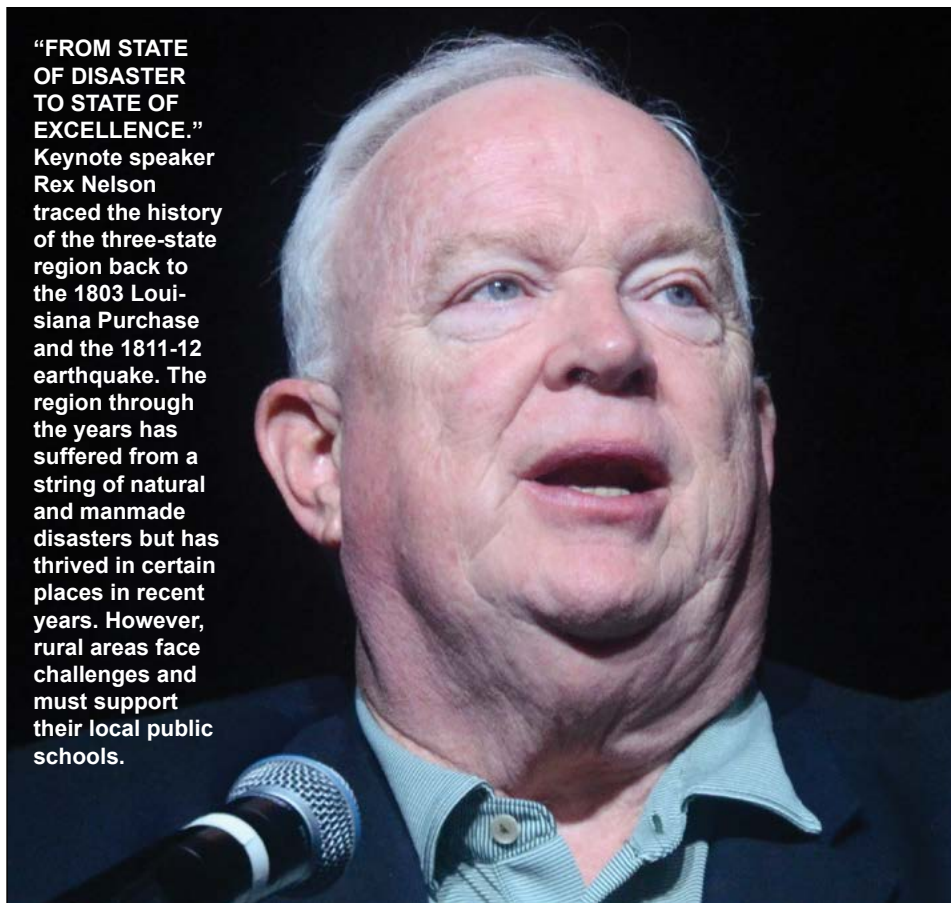
Nelson began his history lesson in 1811-12, when the region was rocked by the most powerful earthquakes ever known in North America that were centered on the New Madrid fault line. Those earthquakes came only eight years after the 1803 Louisiana Purchase expanded the nation's land mass including present-day Arkansas and Louisiana. The country's westward expansion

was still in its early stages, so Arkansas' eastern border would have been composed of "impenetrable hardwood swamps, canebrakes, cougars, bears, water moccasins, mosquitoes the size of crop dusters," Nelson said. "I mean, it would have been really awful country. And these earthquakes made it worse. They dropped thousands of acres." In addition, tens of thousands of acres of trees fell over.

The region was "kind of a wild frontier area" with a lot of violence and corruption even into the 1900s, Nelson said.

"If you got here in these wild areas of our states, you ... really had to want to be here, and if you really wanted to be here, the fact is, you may have been running from something," he said.

Nelson noted that Arkansas became a state in 1836 as a slave state along with its non-slave sister state Michigan. Michigan's legislature quickly invested in the University of Michigan. Arkansas didn't even create a state university until the 1870s. Instead, it created the corrupt Arkansas State Bank and Arkansas



Real Estate Bank. Both went bankrupt, and Arkansas became the country's first state to do the same.

Then came the next manmade disaster – seceding from the Union in 1861. While seven Deep South states quickly seceded, four with mountainous areas waited: Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina and Virginia, which included present-day West Virginia. Arkansas voted to remain in the Union in its first secession convention but then seceded after the Civil War began. Union sentiment in the mountains couldn't overcome the cotton planters in Southeast Arkansas. As a result, Arkansas along with Mississippi and Louisiana would suffer from both the war and the fact that they were on the losing side. Afterwards, all three states were so hungry for capital that they practically gave away much public domain land to northern-owned railroads and timber companies.

"And thus commenced a period of our history in this region known as the

"Big Cut," which lasted from about the 1880s through the 1920s," Nelson said.

Nelson said huge timber camps across the three states cleared virgin forests that they did not attempt to regenerate. The states did not benefit much from the stripping of their natural resources.

The Great Flood

Then came the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927, the most expensive natural disaster in American history until Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005. The waters, already high all winter, rose as it rained for weeks, and the clearing of the land by timber companies and farmers had left nowhere for it to pause after it escaped its banks. The flooding occurred from Cairo, Illinois, to the Gulf of Mexico, a distance of roughly 1,000 miles, and sometimes spread outward nearly 100 miles.

It was only the beginning of the hardships. The three states that year lost

their cotton crops. The Great Depression began two years later. Then in 1930-31 there was a drought. Residents, including Nelson's great-grandfather, left for California. There was another flood in 1937. The hardships led to the ascension of Huey Long, Louisiana's populist politician.

Then came World War 2 followed by the mechanization of agriculture. Farming became more efficient, but sharecroppers and tenant farmers lost work. Many fled for the upper Midwest for steel and automobile factory jobs. Arkansas lost half of its population from 1940 to 1960 – a faster rate than any other state. It had seven seats in the U.S. House of Representatives before the 1940 census and four after the 1960 census.

"I've often heard it said that the migration was so great, that the best Southern cooking in America can be found on the south side of Chicago," he said.

Continues on page 29



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Then came another manmade disaster – the region’s attempt to hang on to the segregation era. Arkansas’ governors at the time typically served two two-year terms. In 1954, voters elected Orval Faubus, a populist like Long who paved highways and made schoolbooks free. During his first full year in office, the Legislature created the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission to recruit industry, and Faubus appointed northern transplant Winthrop Rockefeller to lead it. Faubus decided to run for a third term in the 1958 election but decided he couldn’t win against segregationist Jim Johnson unless he blocked a plan by the Little Rock School District to allow Black students to integrate the schools. Up to that point, most Southern schools had ignored the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court ruling requiring schools to integrate, although Charleston and Hoxie in Arkansas had integrated. Faubus called out the National Guard to prevent the

students from attending Little Rock Central High School. President Dwight Eisenhower responded by federalizing the Guard and then deploying the 101st Airborne. A Southern city was under federal occupation for the first time since Reconstruction after the Civil War. Night after night, the network news shows, a new creation, broadcast Arkansas’ troubles.

Faubus served six terms but didn’t run for re-election in 1966, and that’s when things started changing. That year, Arkansas elected Rockefeller as governor. He appointed Black Arkansans to high-level positions. After he won in 1968, the Democratic Party began turning its back on its segregationist past. Dale Bumpers, David Pryor and Bill Clinton rose to power. Voters were electing pragmatic moderates who wanted to escape segregation. The same things were happening in Mississippi and Louisiana. All three states had strong congressional delegations who brought

dollars home. Successful entrepreneurs including Walmart founder Sam Walton arose. Northwest Arkansas is now one of the country’s 10 fastest growing metropolitan areas.

“So we began to turn things around,” Nelson said. “And we can point now to these very bright spots in each of our three states that are shining stars in the economic development world.”

School board members’ key role

Nevertheless, too many policymakers in state capitols aren’t focused on neglected rural residents. But school board members are.

“I don’t want to see rural Louisiana, rural Mississippi, or rural Arkansas die,” he said. “Who’s going to save it? The school board’s going to save it. You’re going to do what I talked about earlier. You’re going to convince people that if you can only do one thing, it’s to make that school district as good as it could possibly be.”



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Popes' painter tutors art teachers

Aspirnaut program brings Maestro Igor Babailov to Wynne to connect art, science

Victoria Sides teaches art every day to Wynne School District students in grades 7-9. It's not every day, however, that she is mentored at school by a maestro who's been commissioned to paint the portraits of four popes and a president.

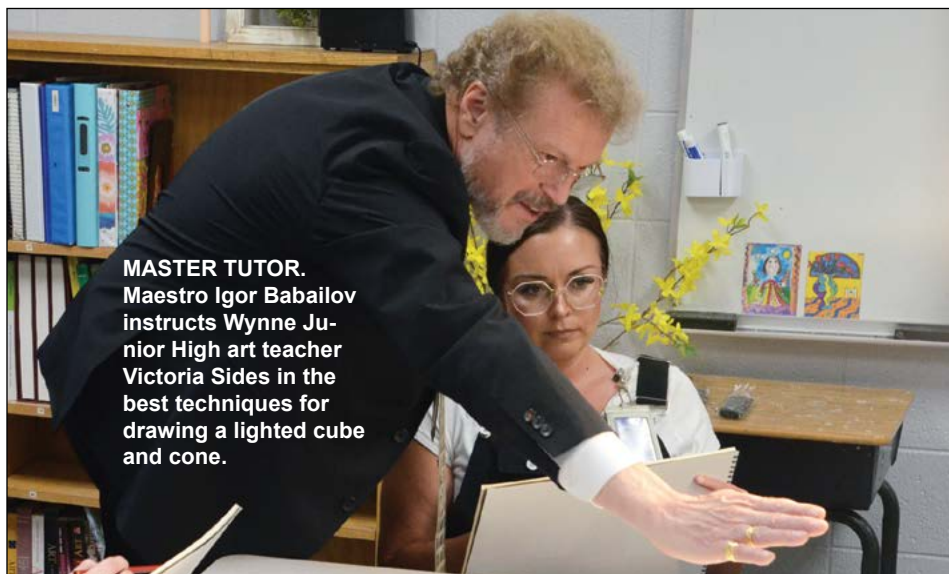
"It would be like the greatest basketball player that you've ever known sitting there trying to teach you how to throw a free throw," she said of having Igor Babailov looking over her shoulder. "And you feel like, 'Oh my gosh, I'm messing up. And I should know how to do this. I'm an art teacher.'"

Babailov tutored roughly a dozen art teachers June 15-17 at Wynne Junior High. Teachers came from Barton, Palestine-Wheatley, Harrisburg, Osceola, Gosnell and Newport to learn his techniques and philosophies.

He has been commissioned by the Vatican to paint the portraits of Pope John Paul, Pope Benedict, Pope Francis and the current pope, Pope Leo. The latter portrait was in progress at the time of the seminar. He's also painted portraits of President George W. Bush, first lady Hillary Clinton, and Supreme Court Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas.

Babailov was there as part of the Aspirnaut program, the creation of Vanderbilt University's Dr. Billy Hudson, a scientist and graduate of Grapevine High School, and his wife, Dr. Julie Hudson, a pediatric cardiac anesthesiologist, scientist and university administrator. The two overcame challenging childhoods and wanted to help young people rise above their own struggles.

Aspirnaut is a K-20 program meant to increase the STEM workforce. One of its earlier projects was installing internet on Sheridan School District buses so students could attend classes during long bus rides. In 2009, the Aspirnaut program began offering paid summer research internships at Vanderbilt University Medical Center for high school



MASTER TUTOR. Maestro Igor Babailov instructs Wynne Junior High art teacher Victoria Sides in the best techniques for drawing a lighted cube and cone.

and undergraduate students. The goal is to provide a research experience to students from rural areas.

The partnership between Wynne and the Aspirnaut program began in the summer of 2022 when Wynne student Colton Miller participated in the program. The university sets up the framework, and then educators in Wynne guide the research. It's all done at a lab on the school's temporary campus constructed after a tornado destroyed much of Wynne High School in 2023.

Junior Dan Atupan and senior Chelsea Khim-Ok are among the students conducting experiments under the leadership of teacher Adam Goins. They are testing how various glucose levels added to water affect the buildup of Collagen IV on the shrimps' maxillary glands, which have a similar purpose as the human kidney. By exposing the shrimp to what are essentially diabetic conditions, the student researchers are helping Vanderbilt scientists study the effects of glucose on humans. Students harvest the shrimp at different intervals, study their maxillary glands under a microscope, and then send them to Vanderbilt for scientists to study what's happening genetically.

The program is giving the students a hands-on scientific research experience as they prepare to further their education. Atupan wants to be an engineer and is on track to graduate Wynne High with an associate's degree. Khim-Ok studied

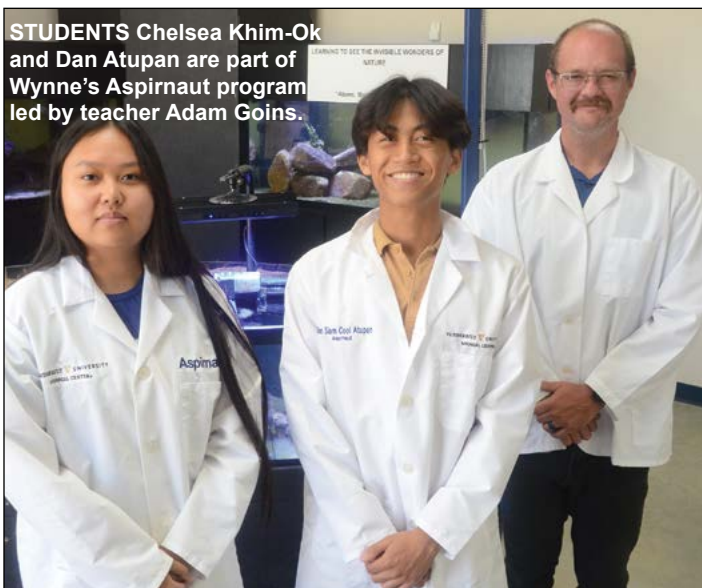
catfish during an Aspirnaut summer internship at Vanderbilt. She plans to apply at Penn State to study biomedical engineering. Eventually she hopes to design prosthetics or other medical devices. She appreciates the effect her work as a student can have now.

"I feel like it's pretty cool that I'm able to contribute to something that could be greater, like, an eventual treatment that is better than what we already have for diabetes," she said.

Scientists were artists

Why would a science-based endeavor like Aspirnaut bring an artist to Wynne to instruct art teachers? The Hudsons and Babailov believe there's a connection between art and science. Babailov noted in an interview that the great engineers, architects and doctors – thinkers like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci – had artistic sides. Before photography was created, drawing and art were the only ways to illustrate science's unseen realities. Further, Babailov said drawing develops the brain because it involves thinking deeply about a subject. He compared it to the difference between reading a book and Googling a fact and then forgetting it.

"When you just look at things, you just look at them," he said. "When you start drawing them, you start analyzing and start thinking, and it's like it files there. So that observation of life, it stays with you, and you don't even realize



STUDENTS Chelsea Khim-Ok and Dan Atupan are part of Wynne's Aspinaut program led by teacher Adam Goins.

nection between art and science, that they're not really two separate things, or two sides of the coin. They are integrally related to each other. Artists have typically been very engaged in science and creative inventions, and scientists have to find ways to communicate their science visually."

Art teachers, science teachers to coordinate

School leaders have asked the art teachers to coordinate with science teachers twice a year, said Holly Melton, the district's Gifted and Talented coordinator who helped bring the program to Wynne.

Sides, the art teacher, said she tries to incorporate other curricula, like science and literature, into her classroom. This year, she did a conservation piece with her students after meeting with the science teachers and learning they were teaching a large unit on ecosystems.

Babailov offered the art teachers lessons in how to improve their own drawing skills. He instructed them to copy models of a cube and a pyramid that were lit from the side, which cast a shadow. He said that everything in nature is composed of shapes and forms, and that drawings have one source of light, just as the sun is the source of light in nature. The closer the object is to the light, the sharper the edges will be. The light is the key to creating a three-dimensional appearance.

Sides said she can draw a cube easily, but having to recreate a specific one from a specific angle was difficult.

He also taught the teachers to hold the pencil correctly when sketching – not typical handwriting style, which results in too much pressure, but instead by holding a shortened pencil with the bottom in the palm of the hand and the fingers circling the tip. The technique makes it easier to make very light marks with more control using the side of the pencil lead.

He encouraged the teachers to imagine the object was already on the paper before they drew it.

"I would say 60% of your time, you should be looking at the object and drawing the 40%," he said. "Not the other way around."

that, but you apply that observation and that skill of seeing things into everything, whatever you do in life, whatever occupation you have."

Julie Hudson said scientists must find ways to represent what they do. Much of their work involves the invisible world, which they must make approachable to the public and even other scientists. That occurs through visual arts. Babailov has previously presented seminars for the summer program, but this is the first time he had worked with teachers – the idea being to impact a broader group of students.

"They're teaching them how to visualize or create mental images, and that's a really important skill in research," she said. "Because if I need to design an experiment to answer a really important question, I've got to be able to conceptualize it somehow in my head."

She said the intimate nature of the workshop with a world-renowned maestro was intentional.

"Part of it is, it's a professional skills development," she said. "At the same time, the premise of this is this deep con-



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EXECUTIVE SESSION

with Jason Jones

By Steve Brawner, **Editor**
and Mattie Brawner, **Contributing writer**

Jason Jones didn't even own a computer when he started working as an information technology professional at FedEx Freight in Harrison 27 years ago, and he didn't really know what a school board member could and could not do when he was elected to the Yellville-Summit School Board in 2014.

The Yellville-Summit graduate learned fast in both situations. The IT job soon became a career. As for the school board position, soon after he was elected the state placed the district on fiscal distress, and the board was hiring a superintendent. The district did a reduction in force and cut expenses including the drama program (which came back), and eventually stabilized its finances. The superintendent it hired, Wes Henderson, is still there.

Jones, 50, now an ASBA regional director, has raised seven children, two of them adopted out of foster care, and now has "a whole pile of grandkids."

Report Card sat down with him to discuss his school board experiences, the impact and direction of artificial intelligence, and what students should learn about IT and AI.

How'd you get interested in IT? Did you grow up with computers?

"No, actually, I didn't even own a computer when they hired me in IT. It's kind of a weird story. I was actually right out of high school, I worked at Ranger Boats for almost four years and realized I didn't want to do that the rest of my life. I got on with this telecommunications group out of Texas and started traveling around the country



installing digital multiplex systems and phone switches for MCI WorldCom, BellSouth, AT&T, so on and so forth. There was a job opening in Harrison, so I drove from Houston, Texas, where I was at the time, to Harrison, Arkansas to interview. They said, 'Well, we don't even have an opening in our telecom department right now, but we need somebody over here in PC support to help with this project we're doing.'

"I was like, 'I don't know anything about computers. I don't even own one.' They're like, 'That's fine. We just kind of need a warm body.' They put me in

there, and I just learned it, and I never left, never transferred back out. I just stayed in IT from that point forward and made a career out of it."

We're all watching AI to see what will happen. What's your perspective on that?

"That's a good question. I think AI has the potential to be very good. I also think it has the potential to be very dangerous. Because the thing about AI is in its current state, AI cannot say 'I don't know.' If you ask AI a question, it's going to give you an answer. I've found

personally, and using it personally, not at work, but using it in my personal life, that AI also tends to want to tell you what it thinks you want to hear. ...

"AI only knows as much as it has learned from human beings and what it can find on the web, and as everybody knows, not everything you read on the internet is true. So now, for what it is great for is things like if you've got a giant spreadsheet, and you need to pull data X, Y, Z out, you can tell it, 'Hey, I need all the data from this line, this column that starts with these characters, and I need you to put that in a sheet over here.' It's great for stuff like that. I think where you get into trouble is if you're trying to use it to replace human thought. That's where it gets kind of sketchy."

Are we going to get there?

"I don't know. That's a good question. I mean, I would have never thought we'd be where we are right now 10 years ago even. So what it'll do in the future is, the sky's the limit, as long as it's properly implemented."

How does being an IT professional affect your mindset as a school board member?

"It teaches me how to think a little more analytically and prioritize what may be important right now. And what may be important also, but not for another year or two."

What's important right now?

"Important right now, obviously, just like everybody else, you've got your test scores. ... We got an overall grade this year of a 'B.' We got an 'A' in the high school, 'B' in the elementary and 'C' in the middle school. So that's going in the right direction, so that's kind of good."

"Right now, our focus is always going to be academics, especially early intervention. We focus on that a lot. But then you've also got the other stuff, again, like the building projects. We just hired [a new elementary principal]. Our longtime elementary principal retired this year. Everybody loved him, and he was great. He came to Yellville when I was in the ninth grade here, so it's been a minute because I graduated in '94. He's been here a long, long time and was very beloved, and the person we hired to replace him is a young guy. He's 29. I met him; he's great. He's got a great attitude. He seems to really love what he does. So, right now, we're looking to support."

Sometimes I think, "We need to learn as much IT as we can, whoever we are." And other times I think, "You can't keep up and it's going to change tomorrow, unless you are a full-time professional." How does this affect your view on what students should learn?

"Honestly, I've got a whole pile of grandkids, and they're all very savvy

with their parents' phones and tablets and so on and so forth. I think kids now have such a huge advantage over folks like you and me. I've been in IT for a long time, but for the average person that's my age, 50 years old, they may know how to use their phone or turn on their computer or get on the internet. But if you ask them to do a lot of things, they may or may not know how to do that. I think kids now probably have a much firmer grasp on technology than for sure kids did 10, 15 years ago. ...

"I think as far as teaching kids about IT or technology is just making them aware that, hey, you can do this. There's a huge demand for people to write code to develop programs. There's a huge demand right now for people that understand how to use AI and streamline processes within different companies and different industries. I think just making kids aware from a certain age that this is the direction that business is going; it wouldn't hurt for you to take these classes and learn how to do this stuff, and early. Because it's a good career. It's pretty stable for the most part."

What made you decide to run for school board?

"Like a lot of people, I was upset about something, and I thought, 'Well, I'll get on the board and make a difference.' And then when I got on the board,

Continues on next page

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I realized that's not what school boards really do. School boards don't worry about the things that I was worried about at the time. They have the whole school, not just this piece of it or just this piece of it. It was really an eye-opening experience for me. It wasn't what I thought it would be at all, but I quickly learned to appreciate it and found a lot of satisfaction in it.

"I was elected in October. In our January board meeting, we began a superintendent search, and the state had put us on fiscal distress. It was when I was brand new. I was still learning how to do everything. I hadn't even been to the New Board Member Institute yet – the education they do in [Hot Springs]. And here I am. It's like, 'OK, well, we've got to hire a superintendent. How do we do that? And we're also on fiscal distress. What does that mean?' And so it was trial by fire, and it was a really tough first few years.

"But the benefit of that, the silver lining, so to speak, was you learn that stuff really quickly, how things operate. We had to get approval from the state to write a check for this amount, because we're on fiscal distress, so we really had to watch. The other thing is, we had to watch every single penny and really kind of look at everything under a microscope. Do we need that? Can we kind of do something else in the meantime, until we can do that properly, so to speak? It was a very difficult time, but it was also a great learning experience."

Did you know that the district was in fiscal distress when you ran?

"No."

Did you know it was in trouble?

"No. That was a surprise to everybody that was on the board."

How'd it get in fiscal distress?

"Mismanagement by the previous superintendent."

Generally, what was going on?

"We had declining enrollment, and he was still hiring. That was the big thing. When we went on fiscal distress, one of the first things we had to do was RIF (reduction in force) eight positions



immediately. And it was unpleasant because this is a very tight-knit community."

Did you know the people that you RIF'd personally?

"Yeah, some of them."

That was hard, wasn't it?

"It was. It was really hard. Because they're still in the community."

Did you face them in church or grocery stores sometimes?

"Both sometimes, yeah, and they didn't really want to talk about it. Some did, others didn't, and I get it. That's a tough position to be in because you don't have a choice. You gotta do what you gotta do because it's either that or the door's closed. But especially being brand new at that time, it's like, 'I don't even know what to say. I don't even know how to explain yet why we did what we did or why we had to do what we had to do.'

"That's why I said it was such a learning experience because you have to be able to answer these questions to the community. 'Why did you have to do this? Why couldn't you cherry pick this, that, or the other?' 'Well, you can't. It's against the law.' I had to go find answers to these questions that we were getting asked. It forced me to really dig in to what board members can and can't do, and learn that very, very quickly."

"I think as far as teaching kids about IT or technology is just making them aware that, hey, you can do this. There's a huge demand for people to write code to develop programs. There's a huge demand right now for people that understand how to use AI and streamline processes within different companies and different industries."

How long was the road back from that fiscal distress?

"I can't remember the exact timeline. I want to say it was close to two years, though."

Was the RIF the main thing? Or did you do other things, too?

"We had to cut programs. Right off the top, I think we cut drama. We had even considered banning football at one point. We were trying to avoid that. But it was pretty dire straits. It really was. I think a lot of people in the community and even people that were here at the time probably don't realize exactly how bad it was, but it was bad. I think we finished the year that year with less than \$30,000. And, it was rough. ...

"We had one of our other board members who was up for election that particular year when we cut that program. That was one of the few contested races we've had because someone was upset that we had cut the drama program and ran against that person in the election. That's how upset people were about even just the drama program."

Did the incumbent still win?

"Oh, yeah. She still won, and she's still with us. But when that kind of thing happens, people start getting very interested in what's happening in the district."

So over time, were you able to reinstitute some of this stuff?

"Yes. The drama program came back a few years later."

Did your IT background help you coldly use a spreadsheet and decide what [to cut]?

“No, fortunately, we didn’t have to make that decision. That was at the time – of course, this was way before the LEARNNS Act or anything else – it was last one in, first one out. And so the decision was already made, just simply based on that standard. Last person hired was the first person out, and so it was strictly seniority based.”

Then you hired the superintendent. That was kind of a trial by fire too, wasn’t it?

“It was. Because we did it ourselves. We didn’t hire an outside agency. It was a lot of long nights. I can’t remember exactly how many applications we got, but it was 100-plus, even for a small district. We would have special meetings just to go through resumes, and start parsing through them and decide which ones were out, which ones made that particular cut. There were nights we were here at 10, 11 o’clock from 5 or 5:30, 10 or 11 o’clock at night just going through resumes.”

You had more than 100 applications?

“I believe that’s correct. I’d have to ask to make sure that’s correct, but we had a lot.”

How did you decide what to do?

“Well, you’d be surprised at how many people got weeded out with a simple Google search in their name. A

lot. The first thing we did was a Google search, and you’d find out they had something that may disqualify them from where they were currently at or where they’d been at previously or had some legal troubles maybe two months before all that had happened. And then we started looking at social media. ...

“Then we just sat around the table, and we literally graded resumes ... And then we started doing interviews.”

So, what’s cool about Yellville right now – the school district?

“The coolest thing about the Yellville-Summit School District is the sense of community it has. We hire a lot of people that were students here, come back here and want to teach. ... I mean, everybody that’s on our school board is a former student at Yellville.”

I bet it’s a high quality of life here, right?

“Oh, yeah, absolutely. It’s an out-doors person’s paradise.”

You said you’re married. What’s your wife’s name?

“My wife’s name is Suzanne, and she’s a registered nurse. She works in Mountain Home, and she’s been a nurse, well, for 27 years also. I met her right after I started working at FedEx.”

And kids?

“Seven kids.”

Seven kids!

“Seven kids. Mine, hers and ours, and theirs. My wife and I were both previously married. I had two kids from my first marriage, and she had two kids from her first. They all lived with us. We had one together, our daughter, Cassie. When the first three moved out, we adopted two sisters out of foster care when they were 15 and 16, and that’s how we ended up with seven.”

How’d that go?

“It’s challenging. We really felt led to do it. They went to school with my youngest daughter, Cassie, the one that my wife and I had together. They were friends, and she’s the one that actually brought it up to us. ... And it just kind of all happened in a way that it seemed like the right thing to do and the right time to do it. ...

“When you adopt kids out of the foster care system – there’s a reason they’re in the system. And especially at that age, they’re already grown. They’ve already been through their formative years, their early years, and so what you’re getting is what you got, and you just have to work with it. But they were great girls. They’re both still living in the area. They’re both doing well. They each have a child of their own now, and it was a very rewarding experience. Difficult at times, but rewarding.”

Note: Executive Session is edited for length, style and clarity.

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Let us put our experience to work for you.



Nabholz fast-tracks South Side Bee Branch football field

When South Side Bee Branch School District needed a new football field ready for the 2026 season, the timeline left no room for delay. Working alongside the district and Architecture Plus, Nabholz transformed a 20-acre site into a game-ready athletic field through a fast-track construction approach. Phase 1 included a coordinated schedule to install a new synthetic turf field and sports lighting while simultaneously constructing the press box and bleachers.

With an accelerated schedule and no existing field in place, the project team recommended synthetic turf over natural grass. The solution provided a fully game-ready surface for the fall season while reducing long-term maintenance requirements and supporting the district's investment for years to come. By late June, the field was complete with finished end zones, a custom midfield logo, and a fully playable surface. The project demonstrates how early collaboration, thoughtful planning, and creative scheduling can help school districts achieve ambitious goals without compromising quality.

To learn more, visit nabholz.com.

Cromwell's LRSD Lacey K-8 Academy supports growth

The Little Rock School District's acclaimed Dr. Marian G. Lacey K-8 Academy, designed by Cromwell Architects Engineers, supports 1,500 students while fostering growth, character, and neighborhood pride.

Purpose-built for both academic and community use, the campus maintains a secure division between classroom



wings and shared venues such as the gym, cafetorium, and media center. Adaptable, multi-use spaces evolve with shifting educational approaches. Features like daylighting, enhanced ventilation, and energy-efficient systems create a vibrant, healthy environment. The result is a school that elevates student achievement and serves as a vital anchor for the surrounding community.

For more information about Cromwell, visit www.cromwell.com.



WER Architects designs Brookland Intermediate School

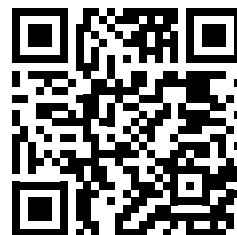
WER Architects worked closely with Brookland School District leadership to design its new 83,000-square-foot, two-story intermediate school.

The school, which opened this year with a 750-student capacity, was designed to enrich each student's learning experience. The design consists of classrooms, administrative spaces, a full serving line kitchen, dining, support spaces, and a media center that overlooks the playground and student commons. Special education classrooms, multiple resource areas, and offices for counselors and itinerant personnel are distributed throughout the facility.

The gym, designed for third and fourth grades, also functions as an ICC-500-rated storm shelter. It houses four operable basketball goals, a volleyball court, and retractable bleacher-style seating for 120 spectators.

For more information about WER Architects, go to werarch.com.

C.R. Crawford installs underground water detention system



C.R. Crawford Construction has installed a new underground water detention system as part of a track complex renovation

at Fayetteville's Ramay Junior High School.

The system solves a challenge facing growing school districts: managing stormwater without sacrificing campus space. Located beneath the end zone, it replaces the existing detention pond while capturing and controlling runoff from the synthetic turf field. By relocating stormwater infrastructure underground, the project preserves space for student activities, improves site functionality, and supports the district's investment in a competition-ready athletic facility. Use the QR code to watch a video about the project.

To learn more, contact Leigh Ann Showalter at lshowalter@crcrawford.com, or visit crcrawford.com.



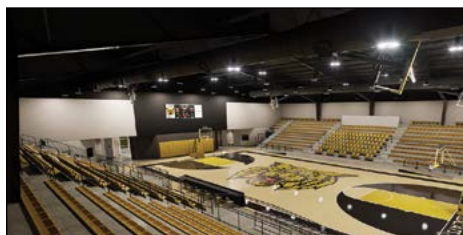
East Harding modernizes PB football stadium

East Harding Construction completed the \$77.3 million new Pine Bluff High School campus, which included \$3.4 million to renovate the football stadium.

The stadium features a new artificial turf field, new electrical service, a 16-foot-by-20-foot scoreboard, a 32-foot-by-40-foot videoboard, LED stadium lights, a new sound system, new fencing and completely refurbished stadium bleachers, restrooms and con-

cessions buildings, and press boxes with new roofing, operable windows, doors, paint, lighting and data. The result is a completely modernized stadium where fans will cheer the Zebras to victory.

To learn more about East Harding Construction, call 501.661.1646, or go to eastharding.com.



Clark Contractors breaks ground on new Cleveland County gym

Clark Contractors has broken ground on a new 130,000-square-foot gymnasium for the Cleveland County School District in Rison.

Designed by Lewis Architects Engineers, the facility will provide seating for approximately 1,500 spectators. It will serve as a central hub for athletics, school events, and community gatherings, enhancing both the student-athlete experience and the overall functionality of the campus.

For more information about Clark Contractors, go to clarkcontractors.net.

American Fidelity can aid schools with 403(b) plans for ex-employees

American Fidelity can help schools with their 403(b) plans. The plans allow employers to make contributions on behalf of former employees for up to five years after employment has terminated.

Contributions must be non-elective to be deemed an employer contribution, meaning the employee has no choice.

Contributions may also be made to retiree health reimbursement arrangement (HRA) accounts, where the distributions for eligible medical expenses would also be non-taxable.

If a retiree is using an HRA, distributions may only be used for Section

213-eligible medical expenses, including premiums for medical insurance.

For more information, call Lisa Boone at 501.590.5499. For more information about American Fidelity, go to americanfidelity.com.

McPherson & Jacobson helps find administrators

McPherson & Jacobson assists districts with superintendent, central office, principal, and other leadership searches.

For additional information, contact Dr. Kieth Williams at k_williams@macnjake.com or the main office at mail@macnjake.com or at 888.375.4814. To learn more, go to www.macnjake.com.

White Hall, SFE see breakfast eaters up 20% in 2025-26



White Hall is seeing strong results with SFE, the district's food service partner. During the 2025-

26 school year, breakfast participation increased approximately 20% over the previous year, demonstrating growing student engagement with the district's nutrition program.

The success extended beyond breakfast, with strong participation across the district while maintaining a focus on meal quality, operational performance and the student dining experience.

Looking ahead, White Hall and SFE are building on that momentum through continued menu innovation and student-focused programming, including Roving Chef experiences and expanded Farmer's Market activities.

The partnership reflects a shared commitment to creating a school nutrition program that students want to participate in – combining quality meals, innovative experiences and thoughtful

program management to support White Hall students and the district's goals.

For more information about SFE, go to sfelc.com.

Stephens provides finance training

ASBA has deemed Stephens' financial advisors as certified trainers who can provide up to four hours of school finance training annually toward ASBA's Boardmanship Awards Program. Normally held in the evening or a weekend, this free training workshop addresses topics such as state and local funding revenue sources and debt financing of capital projects. Stephens believes this type of workshop can be particularly useful for boards considering how to finance future capital projects.

To learn more about Stephens, contact Michael McBryde of Stephens Public Finance at 501.377.2641, or go to stephenspublicfinance.com.

TIPS helps schools prepare for new year

With the beginning of a new school year, TIPS Purchasing Cooperative can help school districts with any purchases needed to start the semester off right. Schools that become a TIPS member can save time and money in their procurement process.

For any TIPS inquiries, contact Stacey McPherson at 870.565.6178 or at stacey.mcpherson@tips-usa.com. For more information about TIPS, go to www.tips-usa.com.

Southern Tire Mart serves Bergman

Southern Tire Mart helps the Bergman School District manage its tire dismounting/mounting program.

The program eliminates the need to take buses off campus to replace tires. Fleet mechanics can concentrate on core maintenance. The program reduces the need for added shop equipment.

For more information, go to stmtires.com or call 877.786.4681.

Continues on next page



Baldwin & Shell cuts Brinkley High School ribbon

Baldwin & Shell is proud to celebrate the ribbon cutting of the new Brinkley High School, a 58,000-square-foot facility designed to inspire the next generation of learners. Opening for the 2026–27 school year, the school features seven classrooms, a library, basketball gymnasium, two science centers, music and art rooms, and dedicated career development spaces – creating a modern environment where students can learn, grow, and thrive.

To learn more about Baldwin & Shell, go to www.baldwinshell.com.



Architecture Plus completes addition at Nemo Vista

Architecture Plus recently completed a new addition at Nemo Vista Schools in Center Ridge.

The project transformed an underutilized courtyard into a main school entry connecting the middle school and high school. The addition provides a secure, controlled campus entrance and includes a new administration suite and five classrooms, two of which are FEMA-rated safe rooms with impact-resistant windows providing protection and natural daylight.

A five-foot elevation change between the existing buildings was resolved with interior stairs and a covered, ADA-

accessible exterior ramp. The existing middle school and high school brick exteriors were painted to create a cohesive campus appearance that complements the new addition.

To learn more about Architecture Plus, contact Craig Boone at craig@archplusinc.net or go to archplusinc.net.



WDD completes transformation of Little Rock Mills

The Little Rock Mills Lady Comets completed their season on a new softball field designed by WDD Architects. It features an artificial turf infield, chair-back seating for 120 spectators, dugouts, lighting, and a PA system.

The design marks the culmination of a 10-year transformation of the 65-acre campus. The plan included constructing a new high school; new football, soccer, and track facilities; a new baseball field; renovating and repurposing the former high school into Mills Middle School; removing two outdated buildings; and connecting the campus to a new regional sewer system.

WDD developed the master plan and identified the academic improvements needed for the Mills campus in 2000 as part of the districtwide master plan and facility assessment.

For more information about WDD Architects, go to wddarchitects.com.

21JCS gets thanks for janitorial work from Drew Central

Drew Central School District Elementary Principal Nancy Chapman praised 21st Century Janitorial Services in a recent letter of appreciation she emailed to the company.



“Our schools have not been cleaned this thoroughly in a very long time, and the difference is noticeable every single day,” she

wrote. “The CJS crew has been such a pleasure to work with, professional, dependable, and dedicated. It is truly uplifting to walk into our buildings and see and smell the clean environment you have created. ... From classrooms to common areas, your attention to detail has made a tremendous impact on our students, staff, and the entire Pirate Nation community.”

Started by Marlon Haynes in 2001, 21CJS Janitorial Services is a full-service commercial cleaning provider and minority-owned business based in Little Rock. It cleans commercial, state and school spaces daily.

For more information, email Derek Livingston at dlivingston@21cjs.com, or go to 21cjs.com.



P.I. Roofing protects Arkansas schools from the top down

For 25 years, Joel Johnson and P.I. Roofing have helped Arkansas organizations protect their facilities through proactive roofing solutions. The company works with school districts, municipalities, businesses, and homeowners to extend roof life, reduce costly repairs, and improve long-term building performance. Johnson is a founding member of the Arkansas Roofing Association and remains committed to helping facility leaders make informed decisions that safeguard people, property, and budgets.

For more information, call or text Joel's cell at 501.351.1720, or go to www.piroofing.com.

Five are Teacher of the Year semifinalists

None of the five 2027 Arkansas Teacher of the Year state semifinalists and 10 other finalists were imposters, according to Stephanie Williams, the 2026 Teacher of the Year.

At a recognition ceremony at the Governor's Mansion Aug. 6, the Benton Mountain View Elementary School music teacher told the 15 to ignore the "little voice called 'imposter syndrome'" that was whispering in their ear.

"I was sitting right over there last year feeling a little bit like I did not belong," she said. "As names were called and bios were read, I was in absolute awe of everyone's accomplishments, but hear me when I say this: There is space for you in this room. You earned this, and this is your moment."

Williams said educators are often told to remember "why" they do things, but what carries them through teaching's highs and lows is the "who" they serve.

"My subject is what I teach, but the students are who I love," she said.

The 2027 Arkansas Teacher of the Year will be announced this fall. The winner will leave the classroom during the 2027-28 school year and promote the profession while serving as a nonvoting member of the Arkansas State Board of Education. They also will apply to become the National Teacher of the Year.

The semi-finalists each received a \$1,000 prize from the Walton Family Foundation in addition to the \$1,000 prize they received for being finalists.

They are:

- **Mickey DuVall**, an 8th grade Pre-AP Algebra I teacher from Russellville Junior High School;
- **Erin Green**, an 8th and 9th grade physical science and biology teacher from Benton Junior High School;
- **Melissa Purifoy**, a 6th grade math, science, and PLTW Medical Detectives teacher from William O. Darby Middle School with Fort Smith Public Schools;
- **Lindsay Rankin**, a K-5 special education teacher from Bernice Young Elementary School in the Springdale School District;
- **Kayti Wilson**, a kindergarten teacher in the Jonesboro Kindergarten Center.



TEACHER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS. Pictured with Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, front, and Secretary of Education Jacob Oliva are, second row from left, Lindsay Rankin, Springdale; Jocelyn Balagot, Hope; Sharla Fultz, Clarksville; and Amy Gramlich, Bryant. Third row, Kayti Wilson, Jonesboro; Ashley Walton, Cabot; Melissa Purifoy, Fort Smith; and Erin Green, Benton. Fourth row, Ashley Washam, Pulaski County; Holli Hightower, Lake Hamilton; and Regina Howard, Little Rock. Back row, Monica McLelland, Texarkana; Tracie Ashley, Prairie Grove; Brick Cullum, Conway; and Mickey DuVall, Russellville. DuVall, Green, Purifoy, Rankin and Wilson were named the five state semifinalists.

The other 10 finalists each received a \$1,000 cash prize provided by the Walton Family Foundation. They are:

- **Tracie Ashley**, an 8th grade social studies teacher from Prairie Grove Junior High School;
- **Jocelyn Balagot**, an 8th grade Algebra I Yerger Middle School teacher with Hope Public Schools;
- **Brick Cullum**, a grades 10-12 social studies (AP World History, AP Comparative Government) teacher at Conway High School;
- **Sharla Fultz**, a grades 2-3 and 7-12 Gifted & Talented teacher from Clarksville Elementary School;
- **Amy Gramlich**, a grades 8-9 English for speakers of other languages teacher at Bryant Junior High School;
- **Holli Hightower**, a grades 4-5 dyslexia and reading intervention teacher at Lake Hamilton Intermediate School;
- **Regina Howard**, a grades 10-12 computer science teacher at the Metropolitan Career Technical Center in the Little Rock School District;
- **Monica McLelland**, a grades 10-12 English and career and technical education pre-educator teacher at Arkansas High School in the Texarkana School District;
- **Ashley Walton**, a 1st grade teacher at Northside Elementary with Cabot Public Schools;
- **Ashley Washam**, a grades 6-8 special education teacher with Maumelle Middle School with the Pulaski County Special School District

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