



Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind

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Jacob Oliva
Secretary

K. Nicole Walsh
Superintendent

ARDB Superintendent Report March 2026

Update

Over the past month, the campus has continued to make steady progress in several key areas related to facilities, planning, and staffing. Staff members were given the opportunity to tour the new building that is under construction. These tours provided employees with a firsthand look at the progress being made and allowed them to better understand how the new space will support students and staff once completed.

In preparation for upcoming renovations, staff previously housed in the Parnell building have been relocated to offices across campus in locations that best support operational needs. This transition ensures that work can begin on the Parnell renovations while maintaining continuity of services and collaboration among departments.

Planning for the 2026–2027 fiscal year budget is also underway. Departments have been asked to submit detailed budget requests so that needs can be identified early and addressed through a thoughtful planning process. This approach will allow the administration to establish a clear budget framework and minimize unexpected expenditures in the coming year.

In addition, several new positions are expected to be posted in April as part of our efforts to strengthen staffing across campus. In the meantime, current staff members have demonstrated exceptional flexibility and commitment by stepping in to support areas where vacancies currently exist. Their dedication has been instrumental in ensuring that students continue to receive high-quality services and support.

Human Capital Update

1. Resignations/Terminations

- a. Paula Hamblin-Lorenz, Education Paraprofessional
- b. Allen Harris, Residential Care Coordinator
- c. Deanda Holloway, Education Paraprofessional
- d. David Aldana, Skilled Tradesman
- e. Brenda Chappel Teacher II
- f. Joel Carter, Teacher II
- g. Joseph Fussell, Teacher I
- h. Shaq'ke Robinson, Teacher I

2. New Hires/Rehires

- a. Tammy Scharf, Inventory Supervisor/Expert
 - b. Julakha Bizly, Teacher I
 - c. Michael Hickelheim, Cook-Extra Help
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Operations Update

Kurt Swartzlander, Division Fiscal Administrator & Director of Operations

Quick Summary

Our focus for February was planning items for the new school building and Parnell Hall. Continued maintenance and repairs for older buildings.

Major Accomplishments

Security

- Successfully rolled out and tested the Raptor Emergency Alert System with updates learned from the first test of the system in January. These updates improved accessibility across the campus.

Projects in Progress

Finance

- Continued budget planning for next fiscal year.
- Working on annual state audit requests.

Facilities

- Worked extensively with SCM architects to develop a long-term multi-phase plan for full restoration of Parnell.
- Interviewed and selected a new maintenance Technician who is scheduled to begin work at the end of March.
- Setup Fuel Tanks for school vehicles.
- Completed a sanitary sewer system pipe upgrade between buildings.

Challenges or Needs

- Staffing: Posted two positions, one for housekeeping and one Skilled trades position.

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Develop the key program for the new building.
 - Develop in-service training for the new building.
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Education Update – Deaf Department

KaAnn Varner, Principal

Events & Accomplishments

- Classes resumed after a week of missed school due to inclement weather.
- Leopards and Lady Leopards basketball teams, along with the Leopards Cheerleaders, participated in the Great Plains School for the Deaf Tournament hosted by the Kansas School for the Deaf.
- Interim progress reports distributed; ROAR Store.
- Senior Night for Leopard basketball players.
- FLEX Friday for teachers.
- Kids First math support session with Holly Woodruff.
- SLPI training hosted by ARDB. NTID trainers Kim Kurz and Sharon Lott trained five ARDB staff members and five staff members from the Iowa School for the Deaf. This partnership will be beneficial for both schools.
- ACT testing.
- Behavior Therapist has been working hard to make sure Behavior Intervention Plans and student behaviors are addressed

Projects in Progress

- 2026-2027 FY Budget

- ARC development is continuing
- Summer Camp plans underway

Data Highlights

Enrollment

- Lower School: 54 students
- Upper School: 35 students

Attendance

- Lower School: 99.05%
- Upper School: 97.45%

Behavior and Safety Data

Referral Locations

- Classroom: 60%
- Dormitory: 22%
- Bus: 6%

Referrals by Grade

- 7th Grade: 19
- 8th Grade: 9
- 4th Grade: 7

Most Common Behaviors

- Defiance/Insubordination: 15 incidents
- Physical Aggression: 5 incidents
- Disrespect (minor): 5 incidents

Suspensions

- In-School Suspension: 3
- Out-of-School Suspension: 2

Most referrals involve students currently on Behavior Intervention Plans.

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Interview and hire more paras
- Complete 2026-2027 FY Budget Request
- Complete a Deaf Department History and Culture course for SY 2026-2027
- Contact with UAPTC and UALR regarding course offerings for the 2026-2027
- Finalize partnership with Camp Aldersgate
- Complete SLPI Training
- Plan PD for IM Math curriculum before May
- Tutoring guidelines

Cross-Department Collaboration

- Blind department math students joined the Leopard's math class with Tommy Varner for a couple of weeks. While the collaboration was positive, transportation time between departments made the arrangement difficult to sustain.
 - Blind Department Paraprofessionals kindly supported the Leopards while several staff members were out attending the GPSD tournament.
 - A Black History Assembly was held in Woolly Auditorium bringing together both Leopards and Lions!
 - Candy Bar Wrestling Meet – Deaf Department Students joined the Blind Department team. The event was a great success. Special thanks to Coach Brian Tanner.
 - Behavior Plan Training was held for all Paras, RAs and bus chaperones to ensure safety and compliance with behavior intervention plans.
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Education Update – Blind Department

Lori Cole, Principal

Events and Accomplishments

- 100th Day of School celebration.
- Managed school operations during the January snow event.
- Valentine's Day Bingo activities.
- School Spelling Bee: 6th grade student Harper Swank won the school competition and represented the Blind Department at the County Bee.
- Black History Assembly.
- Youth Wrestling Candy Bar Meet participation.
- Teachers attended the AR-AER Conference on February 13.

Key Issues

- Concerns at the secondary level regarding the state of the Division of Services for the Blind and the potential impact on current high school students and recent graduates.

Progress Toward ARDB Priorities

Safety & Security

- Conducted weekly building checks and emergency drills.
- Evidence/Results: Emergency drill logs; Operation Hero logs.

Instructional Excellence

- Completed classroom walk-throughs and coaching cycles.
- Evidence/Results: Walk-through tool documentation.
- Next Steps: Continue PLCs, collect data, and practice test-taking strategies with students using Atlas classroom tool.

Student & Family Support

- Sent letters via ParentSquare and invited parents to Braille Challenge workshops in March.
- Evidence/Results: Letters sent; workshop sign-ups recorded.
- Next Steps: Maintain positive communication with families and encourage participation at conferences.

Facilities & Operations

- Performed building checks and submitted Operation Hero requests; met with Mr. Swartzlander regarding assistive technology funding.
- Evidence/Results: Operation Hero logs.
- Next Steps: Follow up with maintenance.

Projects in Progress

- Braille Challenge – Scheduled for March 4. Parents and professionals are encouraged to attend.
- Summer Programs – Planning with Camp Aldersgate and developing an alternative Jump Start program.
- Assessment Season – Ongoing through spring; juniors finishing testing this week, with ATLAS and NWEA assessments also scheduled.
- 2026–2027 Schedule – Initial planning underway.

Data Highlights

Enrollment

- 51 students (PreK–12)

Compliance

- Working to resolve any issues related to Science of Reading initiative

Safety / Behavior Data

- 1 in-school suspension, 2 detentions

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

Next 30 Days

- Distribute ARC books to students.
- Support students and staff during assessment season.

- Continue classroom walkthroughs to maintain academic excellence.

Next 60 Days

- Collaborate with staff to plan summer programs.
- Develop the 2026–2027 school schedule and budget.
- Support teachers with lesson planning, resources, and pacing.

Cross-Department Collaboration

- Joint efforts with other ARDB departments on:
 - Summer programming
 - 2026–2027 school schedule

Interpreting Services Update

Clayton Higgins

Quick Summary

The interpreting services department has been strongly encouraging the use of staff interpreters over contractors, and we are seeing success. Clayton sent out an all-staff email increasing the timeframe for requesting interpreters to 5 business days for typical requests and 10 for all training/PD/presentations. So far, we have seen a decrease in last-minute requests and are holding firm that unless there is a verifiable emergency occurring, interpreters will not be placed with less than the appropriate amount of time for notice. This has saved funding that can be used for our students, as well as upheld real-world expectations for scheduling and requesting interpreters.

Progress Toward ARDB Priorities

| Priority Area | What We Did This Period | Evidence / Results | What's Next |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Instructional Excellence | SLPI training has occurred, 5 of our staff and 5 of Iowa's staff | We are the first Deaf school in the country to form a partnership for SLPI rating. | Begin rating staff and sending interview to partner school |
| Student & Family Support | Investigated hosting free workshops for interpreters | Contact ARID for CEU processing | Find dates/times to provide these workshops |

Major Accomplishments

- Taught the Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts how to request and provide interpreters for our students. As a result, they will now be holding fully accessible community gatherings with interpreters going forward.
- Successfully integrated Deaf and Blind students into the same classroom for Algebra and Geometry instruction with interpreters.
- Interpreted the coach's meeting in Dermott for 1A basketball and modeled proper interactions with Deaf professionals.
- Held our first successful wrestling meet with mixed students and staff (Deaf and Blind).

Projects in Progress

- Gathering information and interest in providing training for interpreters in the state of Arkansas on best practices
- Investigating a new spoken language interpreter service provider.

Data Highlights

Educational: February – 30 | YTD – 257

Mental Health Sessions: February – 23 | YTD – 133

Medical Assignments: February – 11 | YTD – 156

IEP-Related Meetings: February – 9 | YTD – 91

Staff Meetings: February – 43 | YTD – 189

After-Hours: February – 2 | YTD – 17

Spoken Language: February – 4 | YTD – 44

Other Events: February – 26 | YTD – 202

Total: February – 148 | YTD – 1,089

Challenges or Needs

Overreliance on contract interpreters and thus spending large amounts of money that could be saved and used on our students.

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Investigating the possibility of providing a state-wide training conference to ASL interpreters on best practices.
- Training emergency interpreters (hearing members of staff who are proficient in ASL) to act in emergency/crisis situations on campus.

Cross-Department Collaboration

Interpreting Services and ASL Department for SLPI. The SLPI has officially been turned over to our ASL specialist David Spillers for coordinator and execution.

Development Department Update

Kevin Lentz, Director of Development

Grants and Federal Programs

- Submitted a \$4.8 million grant application to support restoration projects for Parnell Hall.
- Preparing to apply for a School Based Health Center Grant in March.
- In the process of obtaining the Federal UEI for ARDB, ensuring alignment with national financial standards and future federal funding requirements.

Website

- The new ARDB website has officially launched. Development supported content administration and additions to assist with a smooth launch.

Community Engagement

- Administering community ASL classes.
- Represented ARDB with informational booths at:
 - The AER Conference
 - The UCA Teachers Fair
 - And an upcoming booth at the UALR School of Education Fair
- Visit the ARDB Linktree to find our socials: <https://linktr.ee/ardeafblind>

Social Media

- Maintaining an average of three posts per week across platforms.
- Achieved 50,000 views in the past week from more than 9,000 unique viewers.
- Current following: 4,922 Facebook followers | 1,512 Instagram followers
- All metrics show growth over the same period last year.

Events Support

- Led ARDB's Black History Month celebration.
 - Assisting in planning spring staff appreciation events.
 - Helped facilitate 85 campus events over the past month.
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Special Services Update

Teresa Doan, Director of Special Services

(Special Education, Mental Health & Counseling, Related Services, Statewide Services, Residential Life, Health Services, Child Nutrition, Gifted & Talented)

Related Services

The Related Services Department, including Physical Therapy (PT), Occupational Therapy (OT), Speech-Language Pathology (SLP), and Orientation & Mobility (O&M), continues to work collaboratively to support student access to instruction and progress toward IEP goals. Providers meet regularly to coordinate services, align schedules, and collaborate with classroom teachers and specialized staff to ensure that therapeutic supports are integrated into students' educational programs.

During this reporting period, the team conducted a comprehensive review of service minutes and documentation for all providers to ensure compliance with service delivery expectations and accurate recordkeeping. This review process has strengthened internal systems for tracking services and identifying areas where additional support or scheduling adjustments may be needed.

As we enter the fourth quarter, the department is placing a focused emphasis on reducing missed service minutes and ensuring timely completion of service documentation. Particular attention is being given to minimizing missed services related to student absences or school activities and ensuring that service notes are completed consistently. The departmental goal for the fourth quarter is to reduce missed service minutes and incomplete service notes to less than 25% across all providers. This targeted effort reflects our continued commitment to accountability, high-quality services, and ensuring that students receive the full benefit of the related services outlined in their individualized education programs.

The Related Service Coordinator worked very closely with ASPYRE for the billing component of related services.

Year to Date Billing Reimbursement: \$124,492.04

Statewide Services

As part of its General Supervision responsibilities, First Connections, the state's Lead Agency, must review and monitor each provider program's data that was submitted in the Annual Performance Report (APR) on February 2, 2026.

This monitoring includes giving each local early intervention program an annual Determination Rating, as required by IDEA. Annually, states must determine every year how well each early intervention program is performing under Part C.

Based on the total points earned in the Federal Compliance, the ARBD's Early Intervention Program's Annual Determination Rating is "meets the requirements and purposes of IDEA." The department earned a perfect score in all eleven indicators.

This is the first time the department has met expectations; and, with the added bonus of a perfect score!

Medicaid Billing amount for January-February \$6228.00

41 families on IFSP | 21 Consults | 4 Due Process Meetings | 3 Referrals

Food Services

Breakfast meals claimed in February:

- Free - 674
- Reduced - 62
- Paid - 661

Total: 1,397

Lunch meals claimed in February:

- Free - 724
- Reduced - 75
- Paid - 881

Total: 1,680

Days claimed: 17 serving days in February

Participants Approved:

- Free - 56
- Reduced - 8
- Paid - 78

Health Services

Health Visit Summary

- Total Health Office Visits: 188
- Students Sent Home: 5
- Students Returned to Class: 183
- State Mandated Screenings: 11

Emergency & Critical Care

- Emergency Seizure Medication Administrations: 0
- Emergency Epinephrine Administrations: 0
- Emergency Transportation (EMS): 0
- Mental Health Evaluations/Transports: 1

Emergency response outcomes remained stable with no critical medical interventions required. One student required mental health evaluation/transport for crisis-level support.

Mental Health Support

- Students currently inpatient in Mental Health Facilities: 1

In collaboration with the Dean of Students, written Mental Health Guidelines and Emergency Response Protocols are being finalized to strengthen crisis response procedures and role clarity.

Staff training aligned with updated procedures are scheduled for Summer 2026. Staff members that we feel need training sooner will be addressed and scheduled.

Compliance & Student Safety

- HIPAA, FERPA, and IDEA confidentiality standards were reinforced to ensure proper handling of protected health information.
- Individualized Healthcare Plans (IHPs) and emergency medication protocols continue to be reviewed to support students with chronic and complex medical needs.

Student Nurse Clinicals

- UCA nursing students will complete clinical rotations on campus during Spring 2026, expanding pediatric training opportunities and departmental support.
- UAMS School of Nursing has expressed interest in pediatric rotations beginning Spring 2027.

- Discussions continue with the UAMS Dental Hygienist Program regarding potential on-campus pediatric clinical hours for student hygienists.

Program Development

- Development of a School-Based Health Center (SBHC) “Establish” grant proposal continues to support expanded medical, behavioral health, and dental service integration.
- Meetings with Arkansas Children’s Hospital and Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind continue. Our hopes are to establish a School Based Health Center with the help of ADE, UAMS and ACH.
- If the grant is approved, the SBHC will help create stable medical, mental health, and dentistry care for ARDB students and siblings.
- More information will be available following the grant decision.
- Grant deadline: March 31, 2026.

The Health Services Department remains committed to safe, compliant, and student-centered care across both campuses.

Gifted and Talented

The Gifted/Talented program recognized Gifted/Talented Awareness Week on Feb. 23-27. ARDB staff and families received information regarding the history of GT Awareness Week, GT Characteristics, the Identification/Referral Process, ways to Guide Gifted children, and ways to Differentiate learning in the classroom.

Dorms

Residential staff continued providing a safe, supportive, and home-like environment for students. Activities included a Super Bowl watch party, an off-campus swimming outing, Valentine’s Day celebrations with crafts and card exchanges, and a home-cooked Italian dinner prepared collaboratively by students and residential assistants.

SPED

Top accomplishments

- We are working with our Psycho-Educational Examiner to make sure reports give a true representation of our students.
- We held Early Childhood Part C to B training on February 20, 2026, with Melissa McClendon from DESE as presenter. This was in direct response to monitoring in Early Childhood Special Education and findings.

Key issues or trends

- We are waiting for approval from DESE for our Indirect vs. Direct Training that we will be holding for staff as soon as we are given the go ahead. It was submitted before Christmas Break and resubmitted in February with suggested changes.

Projects in Progress

- We are working diligently with our legal team on a Due Process Complaint which led to an Expedited Hearing. As a result of this we will be holding a Facilitated IEP meeting on March 11, 2026.

Data Highlights

- Timelines are being monitored, and we are staying up to date with all meetings and testing timelines. Teachers are working hard to learn all parts of the IEP process.

Priorities for the Next 30–60 Days

- Transition- how we can make it more meaningful to our students.

Cross-Department Collaboration

- We started working with Kevin Lentz and the IT department to get the information for Admission and SPED Policies on our website in a “Parent”, “Student”, “District” friendly format.
- We are meeting with ADCC to collaborate and figure out how we can get a Transition Program in place for students in high school that will be meaningful in their post-secondary life, be that at ADCC or other post-secondary adventures.

