

OFFICIAL MINUTES BOARD OF TRUSTEES MEETING ARKANSAS SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF AND BLIND

The Board of Trustees for the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind held its regular monthly meeting on February 3, 2026, in the Tornado Shelter.

Chair Dr. John McAllister called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m.

A student from the Blind Department sang the National Anthem.

The next meeting will take place on March 17th, 2026.

Present: Dr. John McAllister, Chair, Jerry Belew, Cary Smith, Philip Powell, Rob Fagan, Phillip Miller, Parent Rep, K. Nicole Walsh, Superintendent, Interpreters, Members of the Community

26-DB-67 Motion to Approve Meeting Minutes, Financial Statements, and Personnel Items

Mr. Fagan made a motion to approve the meeting minutes, financial statements, and personnel items. Mrs. Smith seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Action Items

26-DB-68 Motion to Approve Board Stipend

Mrs. Walsh explained that the stipend is the general stipend approved annually as reimbursement for mileage and time spent in meetings. Mr. Fagan made a motion to approve the stipend. Mrs. Smith seconded the motion. The motion carried.

26-DB-69 Motion to Approve Superintendent Residency Letter

Mrs. Walsh said this is the same as last year. She mentioned that last year, the board removed the grocery stipend and the cleaning stipend as those things are not necessary. Mrs. Walsh stated that it is now just utilities and a residence.

Mrs. Smith asked if this is also paid for the resident in the superintendent's residence on the blind side of campus and Mrs. Walsh confirmed that it is also covered as utilities and a residence paid for as it is part of the expectation of his job here. He is called out in the middle of the night for all sorts of emergencies.

Mr. Fagan asked if everything was okay with the house and Mrs. Walsh answered that it is. They have plans to replace some of the carpet downstairs as it is "well-loved" and they plan to replace it with laminate flooring to make it a more long-lasting option.

Mr. Powell made a motion to approve the Superintendent Residency Letter. Mr. Fagan seconded the motion. The motion carried.

26-DB-70 Motion to Approve the ARDB Admissions Manual

Mrs. Walsh said that before she arrived, the admissions and enrollment process was largely informal. We handled cases individually, and decisions were often left to the discretion of a principal or the superintendent, without a clearly defined or documented procedure. That lack of structure created inconsistency and made it difficult to ensure transparency and accountability. Since our merger, we've significantly strengthened and formalized that process. We now accept referrals from a variety of sources, including parents, school districts, educational placement teams, and even medical professionals. Once a referral is received, we work collaboratively with the student's home district to obtain an existing IEP, or to help develop one if it doesn't yet exist.

A critical component we have built into this process is the formal evaluation of the Least Restrictive Environment, or LRE. While this was something we considered in practice before, it was never clearly documented. Now, we've made it a central, structured part of our decision-making.

We have also developed a framework to clearly outline what we provide compared to what a student's home district can offer. In some cases, our services are significantly different and fill gaps that districts cannot address. In others, districts may already have comparable resources, such as specialized staff or programs. This process allows us to carefully evaluate those differences and determine whether placement with us is truly appropriate. Ultimately, what we've done is to take what had been good practice and put it into a clear, consistent, and legally defensible system. It ensures that every decision is thoughtful, well-documented, and centered on serving students in the most appropriate environment.

Mr. Powell asked if representatives from the student's home district come on tours and such with the prospective student and Mrs. Walsh explained that representatives from a student's home district are welcome to attend tours and participate in meetings—we don't just allow it, we strongly encourage it. One of the key shifts we've made in our approach is moving away from what was previously a more hands-off model. In the past, once a district placed a student with us, their involvement often diminished. We no longer view that as an effective or appropriate partnership. Our philosophy is that student success depends on ongoing, active collaboration. Many of the students we serve transition in and out of placements over the course of their educational careers, so it is essential that we maintain strong continuity of services. That continuity can only be achieved when we are working in

true partnership—not only with families, but also with the resident school districts. To support this, we actively invite district representatives to attend IEP meetings, participate in tours, and engage in any aspect of the process they find valuable. While their involvement is not mandated, it is consistently beneficial and contributes to better outcomes for students.

Mrs. Smith asked if students were required to have a current IEP with testing at their public school, and Mrs. Walsh answered that we also recognize that some districts may lack the specialized resources necessary to fully support certain student needs. In those cases, we are committed to serving as a resource—whether that means providing direct services, hosting students for specialized support such as Low Vision Clinic, or offering additional expertise.

At the same time, we emphasize the importance of districts coming to us with a current and well-developed IEP. Because our setting and services are highly specialized, placement decisions must be grounded in clearly identified student needs and goals. Without a current IEP, it becomes difficult to determine appropriate placement or justify the services being provided. Ultimately, while some placements may be temporary and others longer-term—such as in cases where a student relocates—our priority is ensuring that every decision is intentional, well-documented, and aligned with the student’s educational plan. That is why we place such strong emphasis on collaboration, documentation, and shared responsibility throughout the process. Mrs. Smith expressed concern with how long the IEP process can take, and Mrs. Walsh explained that without a current one, we can’t place them.

Mr. Belew asked Mrs. Walsh if we would ever turn a student away due to funding, to which she replied absolutely not. While we do decline some admissions, those decisions are typically based on a determination that our program is not the most appropriate placement for the student at that time. Importantly, our approach is not simply to deny admission and disengage. Instead, we are committed to supporting school districts by offering guidance, resources, and interim solutions to help meet the students’ needs until a more appropriate placement can be established. All admissions decisions are made through a structured admissions committee process, which considers factors such as the student’s age and the specific services required. In some cases, we work collaboratively with districts and other providers to create hybrid or alternative service models, or to connect them with external resources and specialists. Even when a student is not ready for placement with us, we remain engaged as a partner. This may include consulting with the district, coordinating with educational cooperatives, facilitating access to related services, or providing training and support to local staff. Our goal is to ensure districts are equipped to serve students

effectively, regardless of whether they are placed with us. Ultimately, our focus is on identifying what each student and district needs and helping them access the appropriate support. Maintaining strong, collaborative partnerships is central to that mission.

Mr. Fagan made a motion to approve the new admissions policy. Mr. Powell seconded the motion. The motion carried.

26-DB-71 Motion to Approve ARDB Act 565

Mrs. Walsh went into detail on how Act 565 affects the ARDB campus. She explained that it was enacted by the legislature and not the Arkansas Department of Education and it specifically lays out teacher protection and student removal. These things look different at ARDB versus at a public school. In a public school, a child may have X number of instances of verbal or physical abuse that was established by the district before moving them to a different class if there are multiple teachers at a grade level. This is much more difficult to do at a smaller district. For us, Act 565 states that we will follow the IEP process. IDEA lays it out and we follow it to the letter. If we truly feel that the student cannot be successful in our environment, then we will refer them back to their home district.

Mrs. Smith asked if students are allowed to return after they have been removed. Mrs. Walsh stated that they are welcome to reapply.

Mr. Powell asked if the home district could decide not to let them come back and Mrs. Walsh explained that they then have their own set of rules but essentially, because the child is an IEP student they are required to take responsibility for them. That can look like an alternative education placement, an individual classroom setting, or virtual learning. We do not get an opinion on what they decide but we can support.

Mr. Powell then questioned at what point do we involve outside authorities. Mrs. Walsh said that any time there is a student who is doing things of a sexual nature or are extremely violent, we immediately make a hotline call and then we notify the authorities when appropriate.

Mr. Powell made a motion to adopt the Policy on Act 565. Mr. Fagan seconded the motion and the motion carried.

26-DB-72 Motion to Adopt the 2026-2027 ARDB Academic Calendar

Mrs. Walsh presented the proposed academic calendar, noting that staff strongly expressed a preference not to return in July. As a result, the school year will begin in the first week of August. Due to the addition of an extended spring break to accommodate moving needs, long weekends were reduced for the upcoming year, as maintaining them would have required extending the school year into late June.

The calendar includes five personal days for teachers, as approved in policy last year, and otherwise follows a traditional structure. The extended spring break replaces the previously implemented fall break, which could not be retained within scheduling constraints. Spring break will consist of one week for students, followed by a staff work week designated for move-in.

Mrs. Smith asked how many calendar days are required per year, with Mrs. Walsh stating that they required 178 instructional days, with a preference from the state for 180 days from the Secretary of Education. Staff contracts include 195 days to allow for the five personal days. Summer school will remain an option, with additional planning underway for potential student programming.

Mrs. Walsh emphasized that providing five personal days is a valuable benefit that supports staff well-being, particularly given the complexity of student needs. No major concerns were raised regarding the proposed calendar.

Mr. Fagan made a motion to approve the 2026-2027 ARDB Academic Calendar. Mr. Powell seconded the motion and the motion carried.

Discussion Items

Updates on Construction from Nabholz and SCM Architects

Paul Jones and Chris Davis from Nabholz were present to give updates on construction. Mrs. Walsh thanked Mr. Jones, Project Manager, for cooking steaks and praised him for always taking her calls when she has a question or concern. Mr. Fagan said that seeing the site answered his questions and it seems like they may be ahead of schedule. Mr. Paul confirmed that it seems like everything is on schedule. Mr. Jones said that from the time awarded, he wouldn't let anything stand in their way. It was all hands-on deck and a tall task made easier due to a common goal. Mrs. Walsh mentioned the dorms being next and asked Mr. Jones about the process so far. Mr. Jones said that they started demolition of old buildings while the design team was still working on the final design. He said that not knowing the final design for the design team to think outside of the box. Mr. Davis, the site superintendent, was praised by Mrs. Walsh saying that they had some weird things occur due to the construction project. We have had galvanized pipes blow out, springing of leaks during the install process of high-pressure lines, and a fire line being exposed and blowing water. Mrs. Walsh said they have never hesitated to jump in to help, even though it is not their job, just to help take care of us. Nabholz also donated and constructed a secondary guard shack on our campus. We are very grateful for them.

Mrs. Walsh then introduced Brad Place of SCM Architects. Mr. Place said that they have been on cruise control during construction. Working with Paul and his team doing constructions of metals (the nitty-gritty on materials, etc.) and all has been going great. They've been working hard to make sure that subcontractors have everything that they need. Mr. Place stated that they also started working on Parnell Hall in November. It started with renovations and it's going to be linked to a grant that they received for elevator improvement in the building. Mrs. Smith asked what have you learned working with our very unique populations? Mr. Place responded that he has been asked this question a lot, that the nuances of getting around and how it's done differently and also how it has done the same. The deaf side has a very visual importance on things like lights for alarms that you wouldn't normally think about. He called it the "project of a lifetime."

Board Training Hours and Rotation

Mrs. Walsh announced that all the members of the board have satisfied their required hours. She also spoke about board rotation. Currently Dr. McAllister will rotate out in January of 2027, Mr. Belew in January of 2028, Mrs. Smith for in January of 2029, and Mr. Powell in January of 2030.

Mrs. Walsh also stated that we are looking for a Board Secretary. Mr. Powell asked if it needed a formal vote and Mrs. Walsh confirmed. She said that it does require that and preferably all at once. She also informed the board that they can vote on it at the next meeting. Mrs. Smith also stressed the importance of having a Blind Department Parent Representative on the board and Mrs. Walsh encouraged her and everyone else to make phone calls and write emails asking for that to happen.

Superintendent's Report

Mrs. Walsh announced that we had a couple of resignations. Chad Morack was a care coordinator. A hiring freeze form has been filled out and sent to those that need to sign to get it posted again and we are still in the process right now. We do have a new hire, Mr. David Aldana and next month you will see that he is on the resignation list. Unfortunately, he did not stay for even a month. He was here for two weeks, and his previous job offered him three dollars more an hour and we just couldn't compete. We are unfortunately seeing a lot of that, especially in our maintenance and facilities teams. We did hire Mr. David Spillers as a Teacher II for ASL. He is at the Deaf Department, and we are very glad that he's here, he comes from Washington DC. He is an Arkansas School for the Deaf Alumni. He's been at Gallaudet University for several years and he is back to teaching. We are very glad to have him and Miss Kishna Perkins in our kitchen.

Mrs. Walsh explained that we held a Raptor Drill and that while it did not work as well as we expected it to, it was still great because now we know what we need to address. This is the system that we will use in our new building. It has great potential, but it does have holes that need to be fixed, and we were able to address them with our Raptor representative to get those fixed.

Our Gang Operated Air Brake (GOAB) system has been installed. It is a three-phase system for our electrical system. We have 33 buildings so this is going to be very helpful for throwing one switch for all the buildings. In the past, we have had to do each building individually.

We have updated the lighting outside of Shibley and Adcock on the Deaf Department side and we are working on updating more on the Blind Department side as well.

Mrs. Walsh reported that the Central Arkansas Master Naturalists donated 32 trees that our students planted across campus in a Tree Project. These are all native trees to Arkansas, and we appreciate the Master Naturalists so much.

Huckabee Hall has a new concrete floor after the downstairs required asbestos abatement that is finished now.

Mrs. Walsh announced that we are looking into next year's budget and reinvesting cash funds. We have had large trust monies and large cash funds donated that were put into an investment account and not reinvested or monitored. Mrs. Walsh is hoping to bring a new endowment policy to the board in the next few months stating that we will withdraw interest every year with half going to the school and the other half being reinvested so that the endowment grows annually and then it allows for more funds for students. Right now, we have over \$1 million in cash donations and we want to make sure that the money is being used for the longevity of our school

The Blind Department had their Science Fair, Spelling Bee, and Christmas program last month.

PeeWee Wrestling Club has kicked off and we have both deaf and blind students who are participating.

Mrs. Walsh explained that enrollment is currently at 51 students in our Blind Department and 91 students in our Deaf Department

Attendance was low due to illness.

Staffing remains a priority need. We have several needs in each department.

Mrs. Walsh stated that Medicaid billing is finally up and running due to us having our updated Medicaid numbers after the merger and we should be reimbursed for over \$100,000 very soon.

Mrs. Walsh discussed the photos in the back of her report.

26-DB-73 Motion to Adjourn

Mr. Fagan made a motion to adjourn. Mrs. Smith seconded the motion and the motion carried.

Dr. John MacAllister, Chair

Cary Smith, Secretary