

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

The Board of Trustees for the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind met for their monthly meeting on March 17, 2026, at the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind. The next meeting will be held April 21, 2026.

Dr. McAllister called the meeting to order at 5:00 pm. Roll was called.

Present: Dr. John McAllister, Chair; Jerry Belew, Board Member; Phillip Powell, Board Member; Cary Smith, Board Secretary; Robert Fagan, Board Member; Nicole Walsh, ARDB Superintendent; Interpreters; Members of the community.

Absent: Phillip Miller, Deaf Department Parent Representative

26-DB-74 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.

Mr. Powell seconded the motion. The motion to approve the meeting minutes, financial statements, and personnel items unanimously passed.

Mrs. Smith inquired regarding a new classifier on new hires and promotions with “expert” attached to it and asked whether it was related to the ASL differential. Superintendent Walsh explained that these were Office of Personnel Management (OPM) labels and are instead for total qualifications for the role and that they are a working title of sorts used on campus.

Mrs. Smith asked about ASL and Braille training required for staff and how they achieve differentials. Superintendent Walsh answered that the differentials that were once received were pushed into their base pay when the OPM updated their classifications but that it is no longer a line item on their paystubs. Superintendent Walsh also spoke about working to become a Braille testing site and that we have just completed our Sign Language Proficiency Interview (SLPI) training due to us not having enough people on campus to be a testing site, and that it was just completed in February. Once those interviews are completed, their differentials are sent in. Mrs. Smith asked if they were already able to achieve their differential in the Deaf Department but not yet able to in the Blind Department, and Superintendent Walsh said that they could up to a certain point, but since we do not have the National Board Certification yet, they would have to drive down to Louisiana to take that test but that we are working to get it moved here. Mr. Fagan asked how many in the Blind Department were participating in getting the National Board Certification here and Superintendent Walsh said that she did not know for sure. Dr. McAllister asked if the change in specifications into one, does that mean that anybody could teach here now. Superintendent Walsh clarified that she was speaking about the pay differential that is for certification. Mrs. Smith asked if having a master’s degree in Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI) or Deaf Education (DeafEd) is not the same as passing the SLPI and why it isn’t held to the same standard. Dr. McAllister said that you must be proficient to get out of your program in college, so he is wondering why this specification was taken away and how new people coming in will achieve the pay. Superintendent Walsh explained that she has no control over any type of differentials and that the

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personnel committee decides if they are going to honor that as a bilingual differential but that the certification differential no longer exists. When Mrs. Smith asked if teachers could only make the pay bump every six months with the bilingual differential, Superintendent Walsh said that she doesn't believe so but that she would have to double-check the policy. Mrs. Smith also said that she wasn't sure of anybody in the Blind Department that would be able to take part if Mrs. Cole doesn't have the test yet. Superintendent Walsh elaborated that the test that Mrs. Cole is working on getting held here is at the very end for the differential, which is a 10% increase. Superintendent Walsh explained that in the Deaf Department, there had been an SLPI process in place before, but that they wanted to make the SLPI fair and equal across the board but realized that they didn't have enough people here to do the interviews. She said that they have been working with the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) and the Iowa School for the Deaf, the latter of which will be our partner school and that we will grade one another's interviews. Mrs. Smith asked if there was a stipend for SLPI interviewers and Superintendent Walsh said that there is a stipend for the SLPI Coordinator.

The winner of the school Spelling Bee led the Pledge of Allegiance.

26-DB-75 Motion to Approve Board Positions and Rotation

Mr. Fagan made a motion to move forward with Dr. McAllister as Board Chair until January and to add Mr. Belew as Vice Chair with Mrs. Smith as Secretary. Mr. Powell seconded the motion. The motion to move forward with the board rotation unanimously passed.

Dr. McAllister will rotate off as Board Chair in January of 2027. Board Member Jerry Belew will become the Board Chair until January 2028 with Board Member Cary Smith until 2029, Board Member Phillip Powell until 2030.

Superintendent Report

- The Student Advisory Council (SAC) and staff toured the new building, which provided an opportunity for all participants to observe the progress of construction. Staff and students expressed appreciation that their perspectives were being considered in the development of the new building and conveyed enthusiasm for the future.
- Final documents were submitted for the Parnell renovation. We've applied for the Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council (ANCRC) Grant for \$1.2 million dollars, and we received the full request for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) improvements to Parnell Hall. This will be our central offices in the future with the downstairs still being "kid friendly." Our goal is to renovate it back to its former glory. This looks to cost close to \$12 million, and we have applied for another ANCRC grant for \$4.8 million dollars, so this will have to be done in phases.
- The administration has been finalizing the budget and determining essential needs and existing resources. For next year, the budget will be developed from the ground up so that each department will know in advance which items have been approved, and leadership has expressed strong support for this approach.
- New positions are scheduled to be posted in April. Superintendent Walsh will work with school leadership to determine which positions are most needed. The school is also working with

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several institutions to identify opportunities for students. The goal is to post positions in alignment with customary hiring timelines in order to remain competitive, and several university job fairs have also been attended to reach prospective employees.

- We have a lot of outreach happening on campus right now. RN Supervisor Deana Shields is hosting nursing interns from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS,) Interpreter Coordinator Clayton Higgins has a partnership with the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) and has hosted multiple sets of interns, and our Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) have hosted numerous University of Central Arkansas (UCA) interns.
- Kate Spontak from Master Gardeners of Central Arkansas donated 32 trees to our school. She and her staff helped our students plant them around campus.
- The Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) came to campus to see how we can partner to support deaf and blind students that need services.
- Dr. McAllister asked Superintendent Walsh about the dates for Summer School and requested that she email them to him. Superintendent Walsh also reported that the Division of Services for the Blind (DSB) has been furloughed twice in the last six months while awaiting funding. This was followed by the retirement of DSB Director Cassondra Williams and the appointment of Interim Director Nathan Winter. Superintendent Walsh had a meeting scheduled with them, as well as the Arkansas Department of Commerce, the following day. Superintendent Walsh also explained that there are arrears of services from October, and services were still being authorized into February. She has been assured that Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) is a priority, as well as Jumpstart.
- Mrs. Smith asked how developments at DSB will affect our students with regard to the role DSB plays in transition of services. Superintendent Walsh stated that our students are not meeting with their counselors and have not been paid for their work studies on campus. She also noted that there was sufficient funding in the “rainy day fund” at World Services for the Blind (WSB) for us to maintain our Life Skills class on campus several days a week. Unfortunately, this change also affects former students, as several of them were sent home from WSB due to lack of funding, though some were able to receive scholarships to extend their stay for approximately a month. Mr. Fagan expressed gratitude to the ASB Foundation for providing scholarships that allowed some of the WSB students to continue receiving services. Mrs. Smith asked what the Special Needs Fund is being allotted for and whether it was only for student needs for those still at ARDB, and Superintendent Walsh confirmed that it was only for student needs for students enrolled in our school. She also explained that it is intended to close the gap for clothing needs and other needs of our students.
- Dr. McAllister stated that Educational Services for the Visually Impaired (ESVI) has also had their budget cut and asked if we were able to support any of their students. Superintendent Walsh expressed surprise that the funding for ESVI had been cut. They are currently under the Arkansas Department of Education so ARDB can help if needed. Dr. McAllister said that he would be interested in reestablishing our affiliation with ESVI and Services for the Deaf and Blind.

Mrs. Smith recognized the ARDB Track and Wrestling Teams and stated that the coaches are doing an excellent job.

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Mr. Belew asked what would happen with the football program next year and whether we have enough students. Superintendent Walsh explained that we do not have enough students to participate in it, but that discussions are underway with a private local school to determine whether they would be willing to allow our students to join their football team.

Mr. Fagan asked what dates our students would be going on the Crystal Bridges trip. Superintendent Walsh stated that they are going to Crystal Bridges on March 31st and the tour of the University of Arkansas will be on April 1st.

26-DB-76 Motion to Adjourn

Mr. Fagan made a motion to adjourn. Mr. Powell seconded the motion. The motion to adjourn was unanimously passed.

Dr. John McAllister, Board Chair

Cary Smith, Board Secretary