

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 convened for its monthly meeting on April 21, 2026, at the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind. The next meeting will be held on May 19th, 2026, in the Multipurpose Room in the Blind Department.

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

Absent: None

Mrs. Walsh led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Dr. McAllister called the meeting to order, and roll was taken.

Agenda

26-DB-77 Motion to Approve Minutes, Financial Statements, and Personnel Items

Mrs. Smith stated that she had concerns regarding the minutes and believed that certain matters may have been omitted and that the minutes did not fully reflect the substance of the discussion. Mrs. Walsh concurred, noting that a new individual had prepared the minutes and had not previously done so. Mrs. Smith stated that she preferred to defer approval of the minutes until they are more complete.

Dr. McAllister announced that approval of the minutes, financial statements, and personnel items would be deferred until the May meeting.

Mrs. Walsh announced that two staff members had been newly hired this month.

- Edward Limmer, Maintenance Technician
- Melissa Pierson, Education Paraprofessional

Action Items – None

Discussion Items – Explanation of the Superintendent Evaluation Process

Mrs. Walsh discussed the manner in which the Superintendent Evaluation had been conducted the previous year, noting that the Board had entered executive session but had not had sufficient opportunity to fully consider and discuss the matter. Mrs. Walsh stated that she would like the Board to have the opportunity to evaluate her individually, as well as to have time for discussion. She explained that another board on which she serves conducts evaluations in this manner and that the process has proven effective. Mrs. Walsh proposed distributing a Microsoft Form, previously approved by the

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Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), containing the rubric through which Board members could review the criteria and submit feedback and scores. Mrs. Walsh further explained that her Executive Assistant would compile the responses and make the information available for the Board's discussion in Executive Session at the next meeting. Mrs. Smith inquired whether the forms would need to be submitted in order to be compiled and whether that process would reveal individual scores. Mrs. Walsh responded that submissions would be anonymous but would provide the Board the benefit of having all information compiled for discussion. Mrs. Smith stated that she uses Microsoft Forms frequently and noted that an email address is associated with the platform, and she asked whether the Board could receive a copy to take home. Mrs. Walsh explained that the intent was for the form to be submitted in advance so that the information could be compiled before Executive Session and reviewed collectively by the Board. Mrs. Walsh also confirmed with her Executive Assistant that the form had been configured to remain anonymous when Mrs. Smith followed up regarding anonymity. The Board determined that the forms would be due on May 1st to allow time for compilation and that they would be emailed to the Board the following morning.

Superintendent's Report

- ARDB is partnering with Camp Aldersgate for Summer Camp this year, with dates scheduled for June 14th through June 19th. Last year, separate weeks were required for secondary and elementary students; however, this year all students will participate together. This arrangement will provide a more traditional camp experience through Camp Aldersgate. Students will return to campus daily at 3:30, and they may remain afterward for Daily Living Skills instruction.
- Mrs. Walsh reported that she had spoken with the Division of Services for the Blind (DSB), which has received its funding and is resuming operations. DSB will host a one-week Jumpstart Internship Program at ARDB from June 21st through June 26th, and participants will reside in Prewitt Hall. They will not be going out at night as in previous years. Dr. McAllister stated that participants did not previously go out for dinner every night, but only on graduation night, and that the original version of the program was less of a financial strain. Mrs. Walsh explained that ARDB is supporting the program with breakfast and lunch as requested and that she, Lori Cole, and Teresa Doan have advocated for a stronger emphasis on learning and Daily Living Skills. It is hoped that the program may eventually return to three weeks, although that decision rests with DSB.
- Deaf Department students age 16 and older will have the opportunity to attend STEM Camp at the National Technical Institute of the Deaf Regional STEM Center (NRSC) for three weeks this summer. Students who complete all three weeks of STEM Camp will receive a \$5,000 scholarship to the National Technical Institute of the Deaf. ARDB has been allocated four spots for students, with the possibility of receiving additional spots if interest warrants.
- Mrs. Smith inquired about extending the duration of Summer Camp, and Mrs. Walsh explained that staffing a longer camp is presently difficult because most staff are now 12-month employees. Although this designation will ultimately make Summer Camp staffing somewhat easier, many staff members have accrued substantial compensatory time and, as a result, fewer 12-month staff will be on campus during the break. In prior years, employees could use compensatory time and then work Summer Camp for additional pay, but that is no longer

permitted. Dr. McAllister noted that, in the past, nine-month staff would work during the summer to accrue compensatory time for summer break. Mrs. Walsh agreed and stated that Paraprofessionals and Residential Advisors are now 12-month employees in order to retain their insurance benefits. Mrs. Smith asked whether the two-week Spring Break scheduled for next school year would raise concerns about compensatory time and staff availability for Summer Camp. Mrs. Walsh stated that staff will still take some compensatory time during Spring Break for time off, which will be helpful. ARDB is also exploring the possibility of paying stipends or identifying permanent bus riders, as most compensatory time is earned through Friday and Sunday bus routes. Mrs. Walsh further explained that there have been issues with some individuals not reporting consistently each day. Mrs. Smith asked why that might be occurring, and Mrs. Walsh responded that the issue is not unique to ARDB but is being seen across the country, particularly in state agencies. She added that the five personal days for teachers have significantly improved teacher absences and that the State of Arkansas is working to address Leave Without Pay. Mrs. Walsh also announced that ARDB is exploring intern opportunities with central Arkansas universities and interpreter programs across the country to help bring in additional interns.

- Mrs. Walsh reported on a successful trip to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and extended special appreciation to the ASB Alumni Association for its donation supporting the rock wall experience at Camp War Eagle. Although several students were initially apprehensive, every student participated. She noted that the trip provided a valuable bonding experience.
- Mrs. Walsh reported that she participated in an interview with News 5 in Northwest Arkansas, which provided an opportunity to speak positively about the school in a region where ARDB does not often receive exposure. Two new applicants from that area have already applied. Additional interviews are being planned for next year across the state to discuss the school, its mission, and the positive developments occurring on campus.
- Goalball season concluded with the Students vs. Alumni game, and Mrs. Walsh reported that the event was enjoyed by all participants.
- National Deaf History Month was celebrated with a Deaf Awareness Day event at the Arkansas State Capitol. An Arkansas author compiled “An Arkansas Anthology,” and all proceeds from the publication will benefit the school. The effort was supported by the Arkansas Federation for the Blind.
- ARDB held an “I Care About You A-Latte” appreciation event for support staff in recognition of their work, with coffee and pastries donated by 7Brew.
- Board Workshop will be held on May 19th from 9:00am-11:00am in the ASB Conference Room to discuss Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) scores, Arkansas Teaching and Learning Assessment System (ATLAS) information, budget plans, and a tour of the new building if time allows.
- Mrs. Walsh reported that she spoke at the National Federation for the Blind’s Arkansas Chapter Conference in Conway. She noted that it was a valuable opportunity to connect with community members, including alumni, who expressed interest in building a stronger relationship with the school.
- Mrs. Walsh reported that ARDB received a \$100,000 gift from Mrs. Beverly Treager of Little Rock. ARDB was encouraged to use the funds to support students and may allocate the gift

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toward the new building to help ensure that students' needs are fully met. Mr. Fagan suggested inviting Mrs. Treager to campus, and Mrs. Walsh stated that she would do so or offer to meet with her.

- Budget planning and development of the Master Building Plan for the campus over the next ten years are continuing. Parnell Hall remains a significant project on the list, followed by efforts to place the Helen Keller Administration Building on the National Historic Register so that it may be renovated and restored appropriately.
- The State Fire Marshal visited the campus and provided a list of approximately 200 pages of items requiring attention across the more than 30 buildings on campus in order to protect the health and safety of students. Mrs. Walsh reported that ARDB is making substantial progress in addressing those items.
- ARDB has begun installing physical address numbers on campus buildings. The numbers have changed, which will assist emergency services in identifying locations in the event of an emergency. Mrs. Walsh noted that updated addresses have been needed for some time and are being assigned based on the street names on campus that are part of the Arkansas State Highway System. The Arkansas Department of Transportation (ARDOT) assists in maintaining these streets.
- MAP Testing is largely complete and is reflecting measurable student growth.
- The Deaf Department attended Career Exploration Day at the University of Arkansas-Pulaski Technical College (UAPTC), and the Early Childhood Center (ECC) visited the Little Rock Zoo. Total enrollment in the Deaf Department is 56 in Lower School and 36 in Upper School. Attendance is approximately 99%, which is the highest it has been in some time following the recent period of illness.
- The Blind Department celebrated Read Across America Week, Music In Our Schools Month, and Braille Challenge, and also attended vocational trips and the Education Accelerated through Service and Technology (EAST) Conference. The department has shown notable progress in Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) math testing. Total enrollment is 27 Elementary and 25 Secondary.
- The Interpreting Services Program has begun its internship program and is reaching out to programs across the United States to ensure that ARDB is expanding available opportunities.
- ARDB hopes to hire a third Staff Interpreter. Mrs. Walsh reported that the hiring of the two current staff interpreters has reduced the cost of interpreter services by approximately \$90,000 each, and that adding a third position would allow all campus interpreting needs to be managed in-house.
- Housing arrangements are being coordinated in Huckabee Hall for out-of-state interns. The downstairs apartments are not being used by Arkansas Deaf Career Center (ADCC) students, and occupancy by interns would also provide opportunities for interaction with ARDB students. Mr. Powell asked how the ADCC students liked Huckabee Hall thus far, and Mrs. Walsh stated that they are excited and have been settling in since moving during Spring Break. She further reported that they have done an excellent job preparing the space. There are eight students in ADCC, and their job placements are progressing well. One student drives independently, and a significant degree of independence is developing. An adult supervisor is present in the building daily from 7am to 11pm.

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- ARDB submitted an application for a \$330,000, three-year grant to support a School Based Mental Health Center, which would open in the 2027-2028 school year. The center would allow ARDB to serve staff children as well as students and their siblings up to age 21. It would also permit the Physician's Assistant (PA) to serve as their Primary Care Physician (PCP), thereby enabling Medicaid support. In response to a question regarding whether the center would have in-house staff, Mrs. Walsh explained that the answer is both yes and no. She stated that the School Based Health Center Grant is a three-year grant under which funds are awarded along with a list of required components that must be established. One requirement is that ARDB contract with either the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) or Arkansas Children's Hospital (ACH) to review the space and determine whether renovations are needed. ACH has already inspected the current infirmary and indicated that no major renovations would be required. The current infirmary will remain outside the fence, while an infirmary will also be located inside the new building, allowing continued use of the current infirmary after the move. ARDB would hire a clinic manager and would be responsible for that salary if no additional funding is available after the three-year grant period. Mrs. Walsh noted that the grant is offered through the Arkansas Department of Education.
- Delta Zeta Sorority conducted a book drive for ARDB and donated two boxes of books. ARDB will also work with the organization on a school supply drive at the beginning of the next school year.
- Mrs. Walsh reported that ARDB's social media accounts have had more posts in the past two months than in the prior ten years. The school currently has 4,959 followers on Facebook and 1,525 followers on Instagram, an increase from just over 1,000 followers on Facebook. She noted that social media has become an effective tool for increasing awareness of the school.
- Health Services recorded 217 infirmary visits during the month, with mental health remaining an area of focus. Mrs. Walsh also reported a notable decrease in behavior incidents during the month.
- Food Services underwent its five-year audit and received 100% with no findings, which the auditor stated had not yet been seen in a school this year. This marks the second audit this year in which ARDB achieved that result.
- The Special Education (SpEd) team maintained compliance with all required timelines and conducted a high volume of meetings. ARDB also received notice clearing the school with zero findings regarding a complaint that had been filed several months earlier.
- Aspire, the company contracted for Medicaid billing services, billed \$45,441.76 and received \$43,317.98.

Mr. Powell asked whether Mrs. Walsh could discuss the UAMS Audiology Partnership, but a five-minute recess was called to allow the interpreter a break. Following the recess, Mrs. Walsh explained that, up to this point, ARDB had maintained a contract with A Plus Hearing Service for records reviews involving newborns who had failed their newborn hearing screening. If an Automated Brain Response (ABR) had not been completed, ARDB could perform it, or the records could be reviewed and the child referred to the Statewide Services Department. Mrs. Walsh stated that, because Arkansas Children's Hospital (ACH) now provides strong follow-up for failed newborn screenings, it was no longer necessary to continue the

contract with A Plus. She further explained that ARDB has a strong relationship with the UAMS Audiology Department, whose doctoral students are able to gain experience through records reviews. Mary Martha Henry serves as ARDB's Audiologist and has established a strong relationship with the professor there, which helps ensure that records requests and referrals are completed. Mrs. Walsh noted that this partnership provides a valuable opportunity for future audiologists to gain understanding of children who are deaf and to receive ABR experience. The professor has expressed enthusiasm about the partnership and has also brought students to observe ARDB's early childhood classes. Mrs. Walsh stated that the partnership is a meaningful opportunity to help develop the next generation of audiologists.

26-DB-78 Motion to Adjourn

Mr. Powell moved to adjourn. Mr. Belew seconded the motion. The motion to adjourn passed unanimously.

Dr. John McAllister, Board Chair

Cary Smith, Board Secretary