

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 July 21, 2026, at the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind. The next meeting will take place on August 18th, 2026, at Woolly Auditorium in the Blind Department.

Present: Dr. John McAllister, Chair; Cary Smith, Board Secretary; Robert Fagan, Board Member; Philip Powell, Board Member; Phillip Miller, Deaf Department Parent Representative; Nicole Walsh, ARDB Superintendent; Brianne Franks, Arkansas Department of Education Attorney and Parliamentarian; Interpreters; Members of the community.

Absent: Jerry Belew, Board Member

The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Superintendent Walsh.

Dr. McAllister called the meeting to order at 5:03pm.

There were five public comments read, the first from Tricia Tighe. Ms. Tighe said:

“Hello Board, I’d like to share with you first of all that I love our school staff. They are awesome. But the point that I’d like to get at is that our internet policy is unclear. We need to clarify some of those things because there are some errors here and I would like the Board to consider revising that.”

Beth Helms, ARDB’s Related Services Coordinator, said:

“Over a year ago, Act 796 was passed into law, so there is no longer a debate on whether or not someone supported it or if we should have a merger, it’s already happened. We’re one agency and one mission, and so it’s just kind of confusing on why this Board is still behaving as if there are still two schools and two competing sides when there aren’t. Act 796 created one unified institution under the Superintendent and created this Board of Trustees, and they even included an emergency clause because they intended this transition to happen and not remain a perpetual debate. We attend these Board meetings regularly and what we have observed over the past year is concerning. Instead of seeing the Board consistently focused on governance and long-term vision and student outcomes, we’ve repeatedly watched time and energy devoted to questioning settled decisions, revisiting authority, and engaging in conflicts that do not strengthen this agency. Meanwhile, our teachers are teaching, our students are learning, our families are watching, and a brand-new campus is preparing to open, and those are the priorities deserving of this Board’s attention. Therefore, as its constituents and stakeholders, we will be taking our concerns directly to the Office of the Governor and we will be requesting a review of whether this Board is fulfilling the purpose of which it was appointed and whether the actions are advancing or hindering the successful implementation of one Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind. It’s not about personalities or politics, it is about governance, leadership, and above all, it’s about the children that this agency exists to serve. Legislation has been passed, law has been written, the merger is complete. The future of ARDB depends on all of us acting like one agency and it’s time that the Board does the same.

Clayton Higgins, Interpreter Coordinator, said:

“Good evening, Board. First, I have a comment from JuJu, Judy Brint-Murphy. She wasn’t able to get signed up in time, so she wanted me to mention that there is no clear handbook information on Performance Improvement Plans (PIPs.) And furthermore, my comments are that the actions of this Board have sewn division amongst the staff and community of ARDB. Where we should see a united front working to improve the lives of our students, we see in-fighting and a power struggle amongst our Board members. This is not the kind of example that our students, community, and staff should be exposed to, nor is it promoting of our mission. I am disheartened by the actions specifically of Cary Smith and feel left with no other choice but to write to the office of the Governor.”

Cora Majan, Interpreter, said:

“As a stakeholder and member of the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind community, I’m deeply disappointed by the Board’s recent actions and feel compelled to express my concerns to the Governor. I’m here today to stand in support of this community and as a courtesy to inform you that I will be sharing my concerns with Governor Sanders.”

Deana Shields, Health Services Supervisor, said:

“Mine is pretty short and sweet. I just wanted to remind everybody that we are one school and we as adults are kind of leading the kids. How we treat this merger is how the kids are going to and I just feel like we need to keep in mind that we’re all working towards one goal and one mission.”

Agenda

26-DB-82 Motion to Approve March Minutes, Financial Statements, and Personnel Items

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

Discussion Items – Powers and Duties of the Board and Powers and Duties of the Superintendent

Brianne Franks, Arkansas Department of Education Attorney, read the Powers and Duties of the Board and the Powers and Duties of the Superintendent aloud. The Board engaged in a discussion with legal counsel from the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) regarding the Board’s statutory authority, FOIA requirements, and executive session protocols. Key points addressed include:

- **Board Classification and Authority:** Legal counsel clarified that the Board functions as an honorary board (pursuant to A.C.A. § 25-17-208) under the Department of Education, rather than a standard advisory panel or independent local school board. Counsel also confirmed under A.C.A. § 25-17-205 that the Board composition remains established as five voting members alongside two non-voting advisory parent representatives (one representing the School for the Blind and one representing the School for the Deaf).

- Legal Guidance & Attorney General Opinions: Counsel reviewed the weight of Attorney General (AG) opinions, noting that while they are non-binding on courts, they serve as persuasive authority and official guidance for state entities.
- Executive Session & FOIA Guidelines: Under FOIA law and AG Opinion 2002-100, executive sessions are strictly limited to specific personnel actions, including the employment, appointment, promotion, demotion, discipline, or resignation of a public officer or employee. Counsel advised that routine performance evaluations—when not tied to a specific employment action such as promotion, demotion, or dismissal—must be conducted in open session. Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Franks, Mr. Miller, and Dr. McAllister discussed the operational challenges of conducting evaluations within these parameters, as well as the process of submitting personnel recommendations to the Secretary of Education.
- Board Policies and Continuing Education: The Board discussed reviewing and updating existing Board policies. ADE staff suggested scheduling a dedicated Board workshop to review governance policies and continuing education requirements in an open public forum.
- Gubernatorial Appointments & Vacancies: Board members expressed ongoing concerns regarding a long-standing vacancy on the Board. Staff confirmed that candidates are regularly submitted to the Governor's Office for consideration.
- The Board continued its discussion regarding the procedural and ethical considerations surrounding superintendent evaluations and FOIA limits on executive sessions:
- Executive Session Motion Mechanics: Legal counsel clarified the motion procedure for entering executive session, emphasizing that a voting member must make a motion to enter closed session specifically citing allowable statutory grounds (such as considering demotion, promotion, or employment action) before discussion occurs.
- Privacy Concerns Regarding Public Evaluations: Board members expressed strong ethical concerns regarding conducting job performance evaluations in open sessions, advocating for the protection of employee privacy and noting that public evaluations hinder candid feedback. Multiple board members indicated a preference to forgo conducting the Board's evaluation of the Superintendent entirely rather than hold it in a public forum.
- Superintendent Assessment: The Superintendent acknowledged the Board's privacy considerations and expressed appreciation for their concern but reiterated that a public forum is okay.
- Action Items & Next Steps:
- Legal counsel agreed to consult with the Secretary of Education and Chief of Staff to seek clarity on ADE's official recommendation for how the Board should handle superintendent performance evaluations moving forward.
- The Board tentatively agreed to schedule a dedicated Board Workshop in October to review governance policies and refine the evaluation protocol once guidance is received from the Department.

Health Services Report

Registered Nurse Supervisor Deana Shields explained that this year is her second year over the Health Services Department and that it has been a very busy year. She listed the following statistics for chronic health conditions that students are facing:

- 35 students with multiple chronic health conditions
- 27 students with asthma
- 15 students with depression
- 10 students with seizures
- 10 students with anxiety
- 9 students with life-threatening allergies (anaphylaxis)
- 9 students with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- 2 students who receive mental health check-ins twice per day
- 196 tube feedings
- 12 students receiving assistance with activities of daily living (ADLs) due to disability
- Big boosts in mental health issues between both campuses, have become closer with local mental health facilities

Mr. Miller asked Nurse Shields if she thought that the growing number of mental health issues in teenagers across the country could be related to social media and video games, and Nurse Shields responded that while those things can affect them, but that she sees it more in relation to their home lives and environments along with learning how to cope with those things in a healthy way.

Service Contracts

Mrs. Smith asked Superintendent Walsh if she could describe how the service contracts are to read and what the process of finalizing them entails. Mrs. Walsh explained that most of them were established before she arrived here at ARDB. She also told of how some of them are vague and that we thankfully have Mr. Swartzlander here to review all of them and make sense of them and ensure that they are in our best interest.

Mrs. Walsh went on to explain that after we get the bids for projects and contracts, we submit them to the procurement representative at the Department of Education, after which they work with the Division of Finance and Administration (DFA) to get the contracts put together and sent to ARDB for review. Once the bid goes through procurement, they will determine which one is the best fit within our budget and then we are able to proceed. These contracts are typically established for seven years with the ability to be updated annually as needed. Most of our current contracts are in years five and seven, respectively.

Interpreter Concerns

Dr. McAllister explained that there was a situation that occurred where an interpreter had stayed in an Executive Session who was not supposed to be there. At that point, the Board felt like there were some issues with that situation. The Board came to an understanding with Communications Plus+ Interpreter Service regarding the standards and integrity of the interpreters and they no longer have an issue with the interpreters.

Superintendent's Report

- Board Workshops in October, February, and May
- Master Events Calendar
- March Move In for the new building during the second week of Spring Break
- Board Member of the Month, starting with Board Chair Dr. John McAllister
- Jena McDonnell was recognized for being among the Top 10 for Early and On-Time eFinance Cycles 1-9 submissions
- Class of 2026 post-secondary plans including UALR, UAPTC, and UCA
- ATLAS incentive program for those who show significant growth and great behavior
- Four students received a shopping spree with the Superintendent as a reward for their top growth in ATLAS testing
- End of the Year Staff Awards recognizing Jena McDonnell, Eddie Tuzon, LaHollis Hill, Rita Jordan, and Beth Helms.
- Honored Beth Ballard and Todd Litchford as retirees
- Staff of the Year awarded to Ronnie Strong
- Teacher of the Year awarded to Kris Miller
- ASL and Braille classes are going well
- In-person registration days have been very helpful
- Welcomed architects, designers, and project partners for an on-site wall graphics meeting
- Instructional Leadership Team and Leadership Administration met for a three-day retreat to dig into policies and procedures, hoping for consistency
- Staff attendance is a priority, a lot of leave without pay situations last school year
- Dr. Gretchen Cobb has left ARDB to take the role of Assistant Principal at Joe T. Robinson Middle School, will be posting her position soon
- We have been approved to hire for an Occupational Therapy position on campus
- Officially finished with all shipping containers on campus
- Finance team working hard on new software called S4/HANA
- GeoTag devices were installed in all school automobiles as required by the State of Arkansas
- Development brought in \$3,468 in fundraising revenue, with more expected from ghost tours
- Earned \$2,500 from the 7Brew "Caffeine for a Cause" event
- Awarded \$2.7 million from the Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council (ANCRC) grant for updates and renovations to Parnell Hall for a fire suppression system

- Medicaid reimbursements continue to offset the cost of eligible related services with \$362,270.35 in claims submitted during FY2025-2026
- Pedestrian bridge was hit by a dump truck that had not closed its dump bed correctly, hitting not only the bridge but many tree limbs along the road, prompting both the City of Little Rock and the Arkansas Department of Transportation (ARDOT) to inspect it as they were unsure who the responsibility of the repairs or demolition would fall on. The City of Little Rock ultimately made the decision to demolish the bridge as it would be very difficult to bring it to Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance. The bridge also poses a safety issue with allowing people access to campus that may not need to be here.

Mr. Fagan asked if they would be able to discuss what we will do with the current buildings on campus and what can be done with them after the move and also if they are allowed to do that in a work session. Mrs. Walsh confirmed that they could do that and that she would love to provide recommendations for things that are geared toward the benefit of our students. Mrs. Walsh also explained that any leases that they may choose to bring onto campus to utilize space would have to be approved by the Division of Building Administration (DBA) and that we can make recommendations but that we can also say no if we do not want certain people or agencies in these spaces.

26-DB-81 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

Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind | Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
Prepared by: Blair Anderson
Approval Date: