

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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Hutchinson Talks Guns and Safety in Schools (KARK, Channel 4)

Former U.S. Representative and NRA consultant Asa Hutchinson was in Northwest Arkansas, discussing safety in schools.

He held a meeting in Rogers, and spoke with school superintendents and police about the National Rifle Association's latest recommendation of armed officers in schools nationwide. Hutchinson believes every district in the Natural State is searching for ways to better protect their students, so he is hoping to present some solutions.

He is leading the new National School Shield Program, which is a model security plan for schools that rely on armed volunteers.

"I have grandchildren that are going to schools and I'll tell you that if I had a choice of a child going to a school that had protection and a resource officer versus one that did not, in today's environment I would certainly want them to have the school with the added protection."

Hutchinson believes the debate will be whether state laws need to change to allow trained, armed volunteers on campus. He is also providing opinions on how to step up security through technology, architecture, funding, and pilot programs to address the mental health of students.

Commentary: School Choice Bills Involve Rights, Race (Editorial by Steve Brawner, Fort Smith)

Should parents in Arkansas be able to choose what schools their children attend without restriction? If so, would that result in racial resegregation in parts of the state, with mostly white schools in one part of the county and schools with mostly minority students in another part? If so, what should the state do to discourage that from happening?

Legislators are asking those questions because Arkansas' previous school choice law was declared unconstitutional in a district court last year. Under that law, a parent could send their child to a district other than the one where the family resides. However, the transfer was not allowed if the new school district had a higher percentage of that student's race than the student's resident district.

That brought on a lawsuit from parents who wanted to transfer their students from the Malvern School District to neighboring Magnet Cove.

In that case, the district judge ruled that the state couldn't base its school-choice law on race, so the entire law was thrown out. The case is under appeal, and if it is not resolved by this summer, then there will be no choice option next school year. That means legislators need to do something while they are in session these next two months.

Let's be clear: There's no indication whatsoever that race was a motivating factor in those Malvern parents' lawsuit. They wanted to give their children the best education possible. Who can blame them for that?

However, Hot Spring County is the kind of situation the old school choice law tried to address by limiting transfers. The school district in the county's only city, Malvern, has a majority white population but a large number of African-American students. Meanwhile, the county has four rural districts where most of the students are white. Two of them, including Magnet Cove, are only a few miles from the Malvern campus.

The school choice debate involves two competing values. Should parents have the right to send their children to the school that's the best fit for them and where they can get the best education possible? Most Arkansans probably would say yes. Does the state want to do anything that, over time, would result in racially segregated schools? Looking back at Arkansas history, most people probably would say no.

So the next question is, are we past the days of white flight? State Sen. Johnny Key, R-Mountain Home, says we're close enough. He's introduced a school choice bill that basically would allow parents to choose their children's school, period. He says that most parents today would not drive their children to a neighboring district just so they can sit comfortably next to kids who look like them. Moreover, schools can offer differentiating programs — like El Dorado's free college tuition for students — that would attract families regardless of their ethnicity.

Two other legislators also have introduced school choice bills. One by Sen. Joyce Elliott, D-Little Rock, would allow parents to choose their children's school but let schools opt out of the school choice program if they believe it would result in racial resegregation. Rep. Kim Hammer, R-Benton, has introduced two bills: one that would allow currently transferred students to stay in their new schools, and one that would list about a dozen reasons a family could request a school transfer in the future.

While bills involving guns and abortion have been sailing through the Legislature, these school choice bills haven't even been discussed in committee yet.

That's not surprising. This is a tough one for a lot of reasons. It involves human nature, Arkansas history and the desire by a lot of people — parents, educators and legislators — to do the right thing even though it's not clear what that is.

Riverview schools select Gammill as superintendent (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

SEARCY — Delena Gammill has been selected by the Riverview School Board as the district's next superintendent.

Gammill, who currently works for the Fayetteville-based Arkansas Leadership Academy, recently served as superintendent of the Ozark Mountain School District in St. Joseph. Gammill's long history of district leadership also includes stints as assistant superintendent for the Clinton School District and on the Arkansas Activities Association's board of directors. Gammill will start with the Riverview district on July 1.

"Based on my visits, one of my big challenges will be to oversee the upcoming curriculum transition, ... making sure the curriculum is implemented smoothly," Gammill said.

Riverview School Board president Buton Scott said Gammill was chosen from among 24 applicants and was hired at the same salary of outgoing superintendent Howard Morris, \$114,665.

“Dr. Gammill was very up to date and knows what she’s doing,” Scott said. “With her schooling and the schools she’s been over, we expect her to do very well. She is very energetic.”

Scott said Gammill’s hiring was a unanimous decision by the board.

Morris said that among Gammill’s biggest challenges in taking over the district will be “trying to make sure that everything is ready and in place for school to start in early August, such as staff is hired, all buildings are ready and most likely finishing up a building project.”

There is also a possibility, Morris said, that Gammill will oversee a new building project in the fall, if money is allocated to the project by the state.

Morris and Gammill have already spoken by phone and will soon begin in-person meetings to ease the transition.

“I know our staff will continue to focus on the students and what is best for them and their achievement,” Morris said. “I know Dr. Gammill will be highly focused on student achievement and success, so this should make a great year in 2013-14 for Riverview.”

Russellville Citizen of the Year ‘a great guy’ (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

There are two myths about Don Keaster that it’s time to clear up: He’s not an Eskimo, and he doesn’t have a steel plate in his head.

It is true that he was named 2012 Citizen of the Year in January by the Russellville Area Chamber of Commerce.

“They told me Jeremy (his son) was going to get the award — he works with the chamber a lot. I fell for the deal that it was for him,” Keaster said.

When the winner’s accomplishments were read, “I realized it was for me, and I was caught,” he said, laughing. “It just blew me away.”

Keaster, who retired after a 38-year career in the Russellville School District, did grow up in Alaska.

“At the age of 5, my dad moved us — five boys and a girl — from Montana to Alaska,” he said.

He graduated from high school in Alaska, where he met his wife, Lucretia, whose father was the high school principal.

Keaster enrolled in Missouri Western Junior College in St. Joseph, Mo., to play basketball, then transferred to Arkansas Polytechnic College, now Arkansas Tech University, in Russellville.

He said it was at Missouri Western that he got his first coaching experience working with a team at the Boys and Girls Club in St. Joseph.

He had to sit out a year at

Arkansas Tech, and the next year, he didn’t make the basketball team.

Former Arkansas Tech coach Deward “Dop” Dopson “kind of took me under his wing,” Keaster said.

Dopson made Keaster the manager the first year, and the second year, Dopson put him in charge of intramurals.

Dopson, 83, who lives in Lilburn, Ga., near Atlanta, said of Keaster, “I remember him very well.”

He called Keaster a “hard worker, and particularly in the offseason” in the weight room. “He probably had the strongest legs of any players we had — he could do more repetitions of pushing up a certain amount of weight. He was very eager and willing to learn, and that’s why he’s where he is,” Dopson said.

“I’m just proud of his success, and he’s a good family man, too.”

Keaster had to take a bit of an indirect route to teaching.

“My grade point wasn’t high enough to get into student teaching,” Keaster said. “I had a 2.0, and I think you had to have a 2.5.”

He changed his major from health and physical education to sociology and graduated from Tech in 1971.

Although he wanted to coach, Keaster first joined the Army National Guard in Danville, then worked at Morton’s Frozen Foods in Russellville (now ConAgra) before being hired by the school district.

He got an emergency certification to teach and started in 1972 at Russellville Middle School coaching football, basketball and track.

“I felt like that was what I was supposed to do,” he said. “I think it was just the connection with the kids and my upbringing — I wasn’t a real nice, nice kid,” he said.

“We were country boys. My dad homesteaded — we had 160 acres, and we cleared it and planted crops and raised cows and horses.

“We were kind of roughnecks growing up, and I kind of fit in with a lot of the kids that didn’t have good home lives, and I could relate to them a little more than normal,” he said.

Keaster was known for helping needy students.

“There’s a lot of opportunities you have when you’re teaching. Of course, I worked in the cafeteria — I got to see all the kids,” he said.

“They’d come through and be a dime, 15, 20 cents short. We put together a little fund ... a packet so when they were short, we kind of helped them out. You could see kids who needed clothing, and we’d go to the counselor.”

He said when he bought shoes for the basketball team, some sporting goods stores ran specials, buy 10 pairs of shoes, get one free, and other stores sold shoes to him at cost.

“Some I got out of my pocket. I had people who helped. There were a lot of people who helped; all you had to do was ask,” he said.

Keaster, who later was certified to teach, went from the middle school to other coaching positions in the district.

In addition to boys basketball, he coached football, girls basketball, track and tennis.

He retired in 2010 as junior high head basketball coach.

"I felt like I was a teacher and kind of a developer," he said. "My philosophy is to take all the tall kids I could find and work with them and develop their skill. Some of it worked; some of it didn't. A lot of tall kids feel clumsy and awkward, and I could always pump them up and make them feel good about that."

Keaster recalled one particular

student who played basketball at Arkansas Tech after graduating from Russellville High School.

"He wouldn't have been in basketball if I hadn't pulled him out of PE class and put him in my offseason class," Keaster said.

The 23-year-old former student, Garrett Glover of Russellville, agreed.

"He's the reason I started playing basketball," Glover said.

"I played as a kid, just Boys and Girls Club, but I had kind of given up sports. He (Keaster) said he always saw me palm a basketball and knew he needed me on his team," Glover said.

"He walked me straight to the counselor and had my schedule changed. I'm glad he did. I ended up playing three years of college."

"He's a great guy," Glover said, adding that he has "no doubt" that Keaster changed other students' lives.

Keaster said coaches are

often judged on the wrong kind of success.

"Early coaches are always judged by how many games you win, and I think that's something — it's a myth. Coaches should be judged on how many kids they helped and developed," he said.

Keaster said he encouraged students to make good grades.

"I'd tell kids if they'd get their grades up, I'd put them on the basketball team," he said. "The important part was to get them to high school and get their grades up and give them a reason to go to high school."

Keaster, now 65, said he had fun coaching.

"If you went through the Russellville school system, you knew me. I was different," he said.

"I was crazy — a lot of enthusiasm. I'd give head butts to kids with helmets on — you can't do things like that anymore.

"It was all in fun," he said.

Other students would ask him if it hurt.

“For years, they thought I had a steel plate in my head,” he said.

He doesn’t.

A faculty member also liked to tell students that Keaster was an Eskimo.

His father died in the late ’70s at age 59 of lung cancer and emphysema, but Keaster’s 86-year-old mother still lives in Alaska.

He goes back to visit her during Alaskan summers, when temperatures are generally in the 40s and 50s.

Keaster and his wife have three grown children, Chad Keaster, 41, of Morrilton; Jeremy Keaster, 35, of Russellville; and Christina Williams, 25, of Fort Smith. Keaster said he and his wife adopted Christina in 1987 from India. “She was a great fit for us; we wouldn’t trade her for anything,” Keaster said.

He said his sons played sports at Arkansas Tech — Chad, basketball, and Jeremy, football.

Keaster is spending his retirement repairing lawnmowers, taking care of several horses he owns and volunteering. He drives a bus for groups at his church, First Baptist, in Russellville.

“I have a hard time saying no,” he said.

Arkansas Legislature: Westerman, Beebe At Odds Over Spending Growth Cap (Southwest Times Record, Fort Smith)

LITTLE ROCK — The sponsor of a bill to set a cap on year-to-year growth in state spending says he is working to address objections to the bill that critics have raised, but the governor and the state Department of Finance and Administration director say tweaking the bill will not stop what they consider bad legislation better.

House Bill 1041 by Rep. Bruce Westerman, R-Hot Springs, would require that total general-revenue expenditures increase from one fiscal year to the next by no more than 3 percent or the average percentage of increase in the gross domestic product over the preceding three fiscal years, whichever is smaller.

In the event of an emergency, the bill would allow the governor to ask lawmakers to approve an expenditure exceeding the cap.

One of the objections that finance officials have raised about the bill is that it does not make clear whether the cap would apply to gross general revenues or net general revenues. Westerman, the House majority leader, said last week he will amend the measure to clarify that the cap would apply to net general revenues, or the revenues available after the state pays out tax refunds and other obligations.

The amendment also will clarify that net general revenues transferred to the General Improvement Fund are not included in the cap and will clarify some of the language regarding emergencies, he said.

Westerman said the argument that his bill is unclear on what revenues the cap would apply to is a valid argument, but he was less impressed with other complaints he has heard about the bill.

"The rest of it I think is mainly just political rhetoric," he said.

Beebe said Friday he had not seen the amendment, but he said the bill has many other problems besides vagueness.

"I don't like that bill because we've had for 70-something years what most people around the country consider the most conservative and best and most responsible budgetary system in the country," he said. "It's been reflected throughout the course of those 70-some-odd years. The system is not broken."

He also said the Legislature already has the ability to control spending.

"They can already limit whatever gets spent or cut government any way they want to cut it through the regular budget. That's their responsibility and they do that," he said.

DF&A Director Richard Weiss said Westerman's amendment would not change his opposition to the bill.

"It's not palatable, really, either way," he said.

The bill would not take effect until July 1, 2014, but Weiss said that if it were in effect now some programs would have to receive less than they received last year. He said K-12 education must be funded at a court-mandated level of adequacy, and Medicaid has a shortfall that Beebe has proposed using one-time money to help plug, so other programs would take a disproportionately large hit.

"Instead of giving all the colleges and universities (an increase of) \$8 million, for example ... looking at it on just this year's basis, you would have to cut into not only the growth that the governor gave them but cut into the base level," he said.

Weiss also said the bill would require the DF&A director to decide what does not get funded if the Legislature approves spending that exceeds the cap, which he said may be unconstitutional because it is the responsibility of the legislative branch, not the executive branch, to set funding levels.

Beebe said he understands the motivation for filing the bill.

"They're mad at Washington, and you know, Washington might need something like that. Arkansas doesn't. If this bill becomes law, they're messing up the best budget system in the country," the governor said.

Westerman said his bill would not require funding any program below base level. He said Arkansas' general-revenue budget has decreased before, "and as far as I know nobody got turned out of prison and people didn't lose their jobs."

Westerman said the bill is not unconstitutional because the DF&A director already makes decisions about spending, using the priorities the Legislature sets through the revenue stabilization process as a guide. He said the director could use the same priorities in deciding how to keep the state within the cap, if necessary.

He denied that the bill is about anger at Washington, saying that "fiscal responsibility is what's behind it."

Westerman said he planned to amend his bill in the House on Monday and likely would present it for a vote on Wednesday. He said he was confident it would pass in the House, where 45 of the 100 members have signed on as co-sponsors.

He said the Beebe administration has been “putting a lot of pressure on folks on the bill,” but no supporters have told him they are withdrawing their support and no co-sponsors have asked to have their names taken off the bill.

House Speaker Davy Carter, R-Cabot, said he supports limiting the growth of government, but he acknowledged that “people that are ... familiar with the budget process do have some concerns.”

“It’s an awfully difficult thing to do, to try to contemplate all of the things that may or may not happen sometime in the future and how that affects the bill and the intent of the bill. I’m thinking through all of that,” he said.

Rep. Duncan Baird, R-Lowell, co-chairman of the Joint Budget Committee, said he is undecided on the bill. The committee’s other co-chairman, Sen. Larry Teague, D-Nashville, said he is against it.

“We pay our bills, we’re not in debt. The budgeting process works very well,” Teague said. “I understand what Bruce is trying to do, but I just don’t think it’s necessary.”

Many of the 37 proposed changes to constitution incomplete (Pine Bluff Commercial)

LITTLE ROCK — On paper, Rep. Matthew Shepherd has proposed five amendments to the Arkansas Constitution.

In reality, the Republican from El Dorado has specific details about one of the proposals, while the other four House Joint Resolutions are generic “shell” bills that Shepherd acknowledged he filed just to keep his options open.

“Obviously the filing ... is driven by the deadline,” Shepherd said.

Many of the 37 proposed constitutional amendments filed by last week’s Wednesday deadline were shell bills, with substantive details to be added later. Some will receive strong consideration, others may not get a mention.

Among them are proposals to drop elections for state Supreme Court justices and name members of the state’s highest court by appointment, and to elect members of the powerful and autonomous state Highway Commission and Game and Fish Commission. Members of each panel are currently appointed.

Others call for changes to tort reform and term limits, as well as dedicating tax revenue from the sale of automobile-related items to the state Highway and Transportation Department for road improvements.

The Senate Committee on State Agencies and Governmental Affairs and its House counterpart will review each of the proposals filed in the House and Senate, then will meet jointly to decide on recommendations to the respective chambers.

Sen. Eddie Joe Williams, R-Cabot, chairman of the Senate committee, and Rep. Andrea Lea, R-Russellville, chairman of the House panel, both said last week they would like to begin hearings on the proposals early next month.

The Legislature can refer up to three proposed constitutional amendments to voters in the 2014 general election. Lawmakers also can refer a fourth proposed amendment related to salaries to the ballot. No salary amendment was proposed this session.

Eighteen were filed in the Senate and 19 in the House.

One of Shepherd's proposals, HJR 1005, would amend the state constitution to make the nine seats on the state Supreme Court appointed, rather than elected, positions.

"It provides, essentially, for the merit selection system for Supreme Court justices," Shepherd said, adding he "thought it was something we needed to put forth with the idea being that we needed to look at ways to hopefully insulate our court system from the increasing costs of judicial campaigns in which judges can't talk about the issues but as we've seen over time these campaigns are becoming more and more expensive. I think it is also worth discussing in terms of preserving the independence of the judiciary."

His four other proposals — HJR 1011, 1012, 1013 and 1014 — are shell bills, two of which could deal with judicial elections, if needed, and two could address tort reform, if needed.

"Two of them have two different names ... we're trying to give us some flexibility," he said.

Two other lawmakers filed specific tort reform measures intended to address the state Supreme Court ruling last year that struck a provision of the 2003 tort reform law that specified who could be considered an expert in medical malpractice cases.

SJR 2 by Sen. Jeremy Hutchinson, R-Little Rock, would require that expert witnesses in a medical malpractice lawsuit be trained in the same or similar discipline as the person on trial or have similar education and experience, and that attorneys file a "certificate of good faith" stating that they have a medical expert ready to testify that medical malpractice occurred.

SJR 6 by Williams would return to the Legislature the authority to set the rules of pleading, practice and procedure for all courts in the state.

"It takes things back over into the (Legislature) which is where it presided for the last 115, 120 years" until Amendment 80 was passed in 2000, he said.

Rep. Duncan Baird, R-Lowell, co-chairman of the Joint Budget Committee, has proposed adding a rainy day fund to the state constitution. Baird said there are a number of ways a state can contribute to such a fund, including with general revenue or adding a percentage of the annual end-of-the-year surplus.

Brandon Sharp, the state budget administrator, said there is already a rainy day fund in the state statutes, but no money has been contributed to it. Also, the governor has a rainy day component as part of his discretionary fund. At the beginning of the current fiscal year, that fund had about \$20.5 million and about \$9.3 million has been released. The proposed 2013-2014 budget includes adding \$10 million to the governor's rainy day fund.

Rep. Jim Dotson, R-Bentonville, filed three proposals he admits he has no specific plans for yet.

"There's not really a specific thought behind any of the ones that I filed right now," Dotson said, adding he and other lawmakers decided to file proposals with broad topics so they could possibly be available later this session.

The three he has filed are:

— HJR 1016, titled the Arkansas Public Prayer Amendment. Dotson said the shell bill was filed in case someone wants to pursue legislation similar to the prayer amendment that Missouri voters approved last year. That amendment stressed the rights of citizens to express their religious beliefs and the rights of children to pray and acknowledge God in schools. It also stated that children could be exempt from classroom activities that violate their religious beliefs.

— HJR 1017, which says it concerns extraordinary sessions of the General Assembly.

— HJR 1018, which says it concerns the application of Arkansas Law and United States law.

“They’re just some general ideas,” he said. “They’re basically a place holder for a category.”

Rep. Dan Douglas, R-Bentonville, filed HJR 1008, which would transfer sales tax revenue on new and used vehicles, tires, batteries and automobile parts and services from the general fund to a New Highway Trust Fund.

Other proposed constitutional amendments filed include:

—HJR 1002 by Rep. Denny Altes, R-Fort Smith, a term-limits proposal which would allow state legislators to serve up to a total of 14 years. Currently, House members are limited to six years and senators eight years.

— HJR 1003 by Lea which would amend the constitution to provide for election of members to the Arkansas Highway Commission and appointment of the state highway director by the governor. Under Amendment 42, the governor appoints members to 10-year terms on the commission, and the commission hires the director of the highway department.

— HJR 1004 by Rep. Jeremy Gillam, R-Judsonia, which would set new term limits for members of the Legislature. The proposal is in shell form and has no specifics.

— HJR 1006 by Douglas, which would allow counties to vote to abolish the office of constable.

— HJR 1007 by Rep. Kim Hammer, R-Benton, which would determine the manner of publishing notices required by various sections of the state constitution.

— HJR 1009 Rep. Warwick Sabin, D-Little Rock, an ethics reform measure that also would extend term limits. Sen. Jon Woods, R-Springdale, filed an identical proposal in the Senate, SJR 18. Woods also filed SJR 17, which would create a panel to consider pay raises for legislators and constitutional officers.

— SJR 3 by Sen. David Burnett, D-Osceola, which would require members of the state Game and Fish Commission and the state Highway Commission be elected rather than appointed by the governor.

— SJR 4 by Sen. Jason Rapert, R-Conway, known as the Taxpayer Protection Amendment. It would raise the requirement for the Legislature to increase the state sales tax from the current 51 percent to a three-fourths vote in both the House and Senate.

Texarkana board picks schools' head (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

TEXARKANA — The Texarkana School Board voted 6-1 to hire Becky Kesler as superintendent Thursday.

Kesler, 47, is an assistant superintendent in the Texarkana School District. She will replace Russell Sapaugh, 62, who announced in November 2012 that he plans to retire as superintendent at the end of the academic year.

Kesler becomes superintendent of the 4,300-student district on July 1. She will earn \$133,900 per year initially, according to a two-year contract that would expire, unless renewed, on June 30, 2015.

The board interviewed three applicants: Kesler, assistant superintendent for secondary education in the Texarkana district; Bradley Reed, director of student services for the Bentonville School District; and Sharon Ross, superintendent of the Jefferson Independent School District in Jefferson, Texas.

The Texarkana district paid the McPherson and Jacobson recruiting firm of Omaha, Neb., \$7,350 to do a nationwide superintendent search.

Crossett schools interviewing 4 superintendent finalists (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

CROSSETT — The Crossett School Board has narrowed its list of superintendent candidates to four people.

They are:

Daniel Brackett, principal, Har-Ber High School, Springdale.

Sue Castleberry, assistant superintendent of elementary education, Jonesboro School District.

David M. Clark, principal, Cross County High School.

Stephen Landers, principal, Marion High School.

The School Board interviewed Clark on Friday. Castleberry will be interviewed Friday, Landers on Feb. 25 and Brackett on March 1.

Tommy Tyler, who is serving as Crossett superintendent, is retiring.

Judge acquits, commits former school principal (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

FAYETTEVILLE — A former Farmington High School principal accused of assaulting a woman and killing a dog was acquitted Wednesday of criminal charges by reason of mental disease or defect and committed to the State Hospital.

Christopher Webb, 43, was arrested while nude and covered in blood July 19 after choking his fiancée, Shannon Shrum, and trying to jab her eyes, according to police reports.

He also slit the throat of Haus, a 13-week-old Labrador puppy, according to a petition for an order of protection filed by Webb's ex-wife, Dina Andrejck.

Webb's 12-year-old daughter was reportedly at the home during the attack.

Webb spent several weeks in a hospital after his arrest.

Webb pleaded innocent in August to a felony charge of aggravated cruelty to an animal and misdemeanor charges of domestic battery and resisting arrest. His attorney then sought a mental evaluation.

The results of the evaluation prompted Washington County Circuit Judge William Storey to dismiss the case with an order of acquittal due to mental disease or defect.

The order cites State Hospital doctors who concluded Webb was mentally ill at the time he committed the offenses. Webb was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, the most recent episode being manic and severe with psychotic features.

Storey ordered Webb committed to State Hospital for treatment.

"Once a bed opens up, he'll be transported down there," said Denis Dean, deputy prosecutor. "It is totally up to them how long they keep him. A couple of hours, a couple of days, a couple of weeks, a couple of years, who knows."

Dean said Webb will continue to be monitored after being treated and released.

"When they deem him not to be a danger to society, they release him, and he's monitored in what's called the Act 911 Program for five years," Dean said. "If he screws up or does something he shouldn't during that period, he can be incarcerated or taken back down to the State Hospital for further treatment. But, he is acquitted. It's done. He cannot be criminally prosecuted for these crimes."

Dean said the order does affect Webb's gun rights.

"He can't have any guns," Dean said.

Webb resigned shortly after the incident from the Farmington School District, where he worked for about four years. He previously worked in the Prairie Grove and Siloam Springs school districts.

In LR, new school a heated subject (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — Little Rock School Board members are poking around at the topic of constructing a middle school in northwest Little Rock, trying to decide how best to tackle it along with other facility needs.

Residents in the fast growing part of the city have cried out in School Board meetings and in various social-media outlets for a new middle school that would serve at a minimum the pupils who attend the new Roberts Elementary School.

In only its third year of operation, Roberts Elementary - at Cantrell and LaMarche Drive - is at capacity with an enrollment of 899. It has become the district's largest elementary school.

The nearest middle schools to Roberts Elementary are Forest Heights Middle, which is about 8 miles and 17 minutes away at University Avenue and Evergreen Drive, and Henderson Middle, about 7 miles and 17 minutes away.

School Board member Jody Carreiro suggested at an agenda-planning meeting last week that a place be reserved on the board's Feb. 28 meeting agenda for a discussion on land acquisition for one or more schools.

The board eventually acquiesced to board President Dianne Curry's call for a work session on the matter in March - but not before Superintendent Morris Holmes assured the board that he and his staff have been committed to the west Little Rock middle school project ever since he became superintendent two years ago.

He said he and his staff have been anything but lackadaisical in their approach to it and to a possible replacement campus for McClellan High in southwest Little Rock.

A lot of information has been gathered and the administration is ready to move forward on the matter, Holmes said, but added that facilities is an issue in which the board has much discretion.

"As superintendent I get a lot of calls and I get a lot of conversation ... and I report to the board. This is an area where the board has a tremendous responsibility and prerogative, and not the administration," he said.

Gary Newton, a parent whose children attend Roberts Elementary and who leads the Arkansas Learns education advocacy organization, said Friday that the discussion by Holmes and the board on Thursday didn't signify any true movement on a new middle school.

"I have respect for Dr. Holmes but saying something and taking definitive action are two different things," Newton said. "We've been hearing the same thing for years."

Board member Michael Nellums said at the School Board meeting Thursday that the 25,000-student district has building needs throughout the city.

"It's a wide-open conversation. I would be remiss if I didn't say that if you are going to build out west and if you are going to build out southwest, I want you to consider building in the central part of the district," Nellums said. "I'm just going to lay that down on the line for you, too."

Nellums said that existing district schools have vacancies and that closing some campuses and reconfiguring others may be necessary if new schools are to be built.

"That's a whole lot to put on the plate," Nellums said. "We need to have that conversation but it's a large conversation. It's not just buying a plot of land out west or buying a plot of land in southwest. Let's look at the whole picture."

Of the district's seven middle schools, only Pulaski Heights and Mabelvale are considered to be operating at full capacity, said Frederick Fields, the district's senior director of student services.

Holmes responded that it is correct to talk about district wide needs.

"But you won't build three, four schools at one time," Holmes said. "There is not enough money in Fort Knox. We are going to build two schools. You don't have enough bonding capacity to build over two schools. You don't

have it. I as superintendent am not going to interact with parents in such a way to make them think we will build more than two schools.”

Holmes also told the board that finding some 40 affordable acres for a middle school in west Little Rock is like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

Board member Greg Adams urged that the board take advantage of the work that has been done by the district in recent months toward identifying possible property for schools.

“We have made a decision as a board to look at facilities, including two [new] schools. That is part of our board’s goals,” he said. “There are disadvantages to waiting longer if we have done the proper research for land. I would hope that if the administration can get to the point of proposing the purchase of land, we could do that and then move to have the big discussion and have [the land] as part of our assets.”

Adams said there is some urgency to take “concrete” action because the district sometimes loses families to nondistrict schools when their children are ready for middle school. He noted that there is an effort under way by some families in west Little Rock to organize an independently run charter school.

For some families, “proximity of schools takes precedence and if there is not a neighborhood school they will look for any other resource because it is such a high priority,” Adams said.

He also said the charter school organizers are likely to argue for the charter school in part by saying that the district hasn’t respond to the need for a traditional middle school.

Newton, the Roberts Elementary parent, said Friday that there are only three schools in the School Board’s Zone 4 in northwest Little Rock and three others in Zone 5, also in west Little Rock, while there are at least twice as many schools in each of the other zones.

“Those people in Zones 4 and 5 are not asking for anything that hasn’t been afforded every other community and neighborhood in this city,” Newton said about having nearby schools. He added that the residents of the two west Little Rock zones are the victims of stereotypes or biases that people have against people who live in that part of town.

Newton said he will pursue the development of the charter school and traditional public school in west Little Rock so that parents will have a choice.

Holmes told the board Thursday that district administrators are “moving with dispatch on these matters,” but emphasized that the issues surrounding school construction are complex.

“We are dealing with capacity; we’re dealing with proximity; we’re dealing with location; we’re dealing with class; we are dealing with race; we are dealing with a plethora [of] stuff that has come forth since 1957 and it’s time to unravel it,” Holmes said. “There is no need to think we can have a simple conversation about these issues.”

Arkansas schools join wave of New Tech teaching system (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — Michael Drain sat with his school-issued laptop at a table in his integrated English and U.S. history classroom at Lincoln High School, searching online for examples of photojournalism.

U.S. history teacher Kaylyn Busch led students through a discussion on photo- and investigative journalism to help them with a larger group project that requires them to research a social, political, economic or educational problem and produce a newspaper or magazine about the topic.

The students are learning about the problems America faced in the early 20th century for history, and they are learning about researching and citing sources for English, Busch said.

Students at Lincoln High School increasingly are learning the skills and concepts the state requires through projects that relate to what they might experience as adults.

Lincoln High School is in its second year of operation under a new learning environment as part of the national New Tech network. The New Tech model started in the mid-1990s in Napa, Calif., to equip high-school graduates with work-force skills, such as communication or the ability to work as part of a team.

New Tech schools share three components: project based learning, computers for each student, and a culture that emphasizes trust, respect and responsibility.

Projects start with a basic question. The Progressive Era project in the American studies class started with the question: “How can we, as reporters, draw from historical events to create a newspaper/ magazine in order to expose and change a problem we see in society today?”

The project to produce a newspaper or magazine requires each group to write three articles, one by each student, about a topic and to include pictures and other pertinent information. Busch told them she expects their projects to “be neat and presentable and reflect the month of work that you have put into this project.”

TRANSITION TAKES TIME

The State Board of Education last year granted the Lincoln Consolidated School District a district-conversion charter to assist the district in implementing the New Tech philosophy for the ninth through 12th grades. A district conversion charter school is open to students within the district, as opposed to an open-enrollment charter that does not have a geographic boundary.

Heather Bottoms, a master teacher for Lincoln High School, said the transition to New Tech will take four years to complete. Lincoln is converting the entire high school to New Tech. Other districts have created separate New Tech high schools or New Tech academies within their high schools.

Lincoln teachers continue to receive training on creating projects that integrate the standards students are required to learn and that apply those standards to the real world, Bottoms said. They are in various stages of implementing project-based learning in their classes.

Bottoms said the teachers are in ongoing discussions about the right mix of the traditional lecture style of teaching and project-based learning, but project-based learning hits on traits that will help students compete for jobs as adults.

Change is hard, she said.

"I can't see the traditional format of classrooms being the strength of education," Bottoms said.

JOB SKILLS ARE PRIORITY

Ten high schools across the state are part of the national network of New Tech schools. The network of Arkansas schools started with Cross County High School and Lincoln High School two years ago and expanded to include eight more campuses in 2012.

The Rogers School District will open Rogers New Technology High School in August in an annex building at 2922 S. First St. in Rogers. The application deadline is Friday, and so far 220 students have applied, said Lance Arbuckle, who will serve as the new school's director. The campus will start with up to 300 ninth- and 10th graders and will grow to up to 600 students through the 12th grade.

Rogers school leaders spent several years researching models of 21st century schools before deciding on New Tech, Arbuckle said. Classes will have some direct instruction, note-taking and tests like in a traditional classroom, but those activities will not be the primary instructional method.

"Students are learners. Teachers are facilitators," he said. "As the learners go through their projects, they learn the content."

At the same time, the projects teach students 21st century job skills: collaboration, creativity, critical-thinking and problem-solving, Arbuckle said.

Interest in project-based learning is expanding statewide because of the Common Core State Standards and an initiative of Gov. Mike Beebe, said Phyllis Stewart, spokesman for the Arkansas Department of Education.

Project-based learning fosters the same skills and traits the Common Core promotes for ensuring students graduate high school prepared for college and the work force, Stewart said. Those desired traits include creativity, the ability to present information, critical-thinking, problem-solving, research and inquiry.

In 2011, Beebe and his Workforce Cabinet announced a STEM Works pilot program focused on integrating science, technology, engineering and math education in high schools and universities. Lincoln High School in Washington County and Cross County High School in Cherry Valley were the first to implement STEM Works by joining the New Tech Network.

New Tech is one of three project-based learning models for high schools supported by the pilot program.

The University of Arkansas at Fayetteville is in its second semester of offering a graduate certificate in STEM education as an option for early childhood education majors, said Cathy Wissehr, assistant professor of elementary science education at the university.

The focus of STEM education is teaching four subject areas together, Wissehr said.

"Project-based and problem-based learning are both pretty high right now," Wissehr said. "It's putting them together to create something or solve a problem. That's how things are done in the real world. If we want to prepare them for life, that's a much better way to go about it. It makes everything relevant."