

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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South Arkansas Students Upset by Impending District Shake-up (KARK, Channel 4)

An 80 year school tradition will be coming to an end for Claiborne Parish students in South Arkansas.

More than 100 Claiborne Parish students who attend schools in the Junction City Arkansas School District will no longer be able to do so next school year.

Claiborne Parish School officials say the historical agreement is having a negative affect on the student population, causing rising health care and retirement benefits.

Junction City School officials say the latest decision is unfortunate.

"The bottom line is those 105 kids that want to attend school here, to attend their neighborhood school and they will no longer be able to," says Junction City School Superintendent Danny Thomas. "And that's why, to be quite honest, they're very upset."

It's estimated that Junction City will lose about \$150,000 after the first year the Claiborne Parish students leave their district.

Van Buren Schools Ahead On Teacher-Evaluation Changes (Southwest Times Record, Fort Smith)

The Van Buren School District has a leg up on many other Arkansas districts regarding state-mandated teacher evaluation changes because it already uses a version of the new system, Assistant Superintendent Brian Summerhill told school board members last week.

Summerhill said the Arkansas Teacher Excellence and Support System, Act 1209 of 2011, has undergone many changes since the state received a federal waiver from No Child Left Behind requirements.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Arkansas is among 34 states and the District of Columbia whose flexibility plans were approved for waivers from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The intent of both No Child Left Behind and the flexibility granted for certain provisions of the act are to hold schools accountable for students' educational achievement, according to Education Department literature.

According to the Department of Education, under its new flexibility plan, Arkansas is tracking its graduation rates, reporting dropout rates, participation and performance in advanced coursework and ACT scores. The state is using the information to develop support programs and closely monitoring schools rated as needing improvement.

Summerhill said the Arkansas Legislature's intent with the Teacher Excellence and Support System is to provide an evaluation, feedback and support system that will encourage teachers to improve their knowledge and instructional skills.

“It’s about student learning,” Summerhill said.

The pilot program will be implemented for the 2013-14 school year in all districts. Although Van Buren is not among the 11 schools testing out the new teacher evaluation system this year, the local district has already been using a version of the Charlotte Danielson Framework for Teaching Evaluation upon which the state’s evaluation system is based, Summerhill said.

The new system has four evaluation categories or domains: Planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction and professional responsibilities, Summerhill said.

Teachers will be rated among four performance levels: Distinguished, proficient, basic or unsatisfactory. Standards have been raised, and every district is getting more professional development support for their teachers, he said.

Until now, Summerhill said, more than 80 percent of the state’s districts were still using a checklist system to evaluate their teachers. Because it has been using Danielson’s original framework, Van Buren was more detailed in its evaluations and has been using the same evaluation categories as the newer version to be adopted statewide, he said.

Under the new system, teachers’ professional growth plans will be more enhanced, Summerhill said.

Student growth — determined by individual students’ achievement — will be part of the teacher evaluations, but state and federal education officials are still negotiating just what student data will be used to determine growth. For that reason, student growth will not be a major focus the first year, Summerhill said. However, student growth will be measured over a year’s period and from the point at which each student enters a teacher’s classroom.

A district’s teachers will be evaluated by a district’s administrators. Van Buren’s administrators have already undergone that one-day training, Summerhill said, adding that he’s taken the evaluator test, and it is a rigorous test.

Board Member Kevin Bell asked if the principals of each building will evaluate their own teachers, and Summerhill said yes.

Teachers will undergo a four-day training program beginning June 1, he said.

Board President Jamie Hammond asked how teachers who score unsatisfactory will be treated.

Summerhill said those teachers who don’t meet growth goals, those scoring unsatisfactory or basic, will be placed on an intensive support track. By state law, they may only stay in that intensive program for up to two semesters.

In his opinion, Summerhill said, teachers should be good when they start because a child doesn’t have 180 days in the school year to wait for his or her teacher to get up to speed.

Beginning in 2017, districts must report to the state their teachers who don’t meet proficiency standards, he said.

Little Rock School Board meets Monday to pick superintendent finalists (Arkansas Times Blog)

The Little Rock School Board meets Monday afternoon to narrow applicants for the school superintendent's job to to finalists.

I'm interested particularly in one applicant, Walter Milton Jr., currently superintendent in Springfield, Ill., and a finalist the last time Little Rock filled this job. I've talked with him and he insists questions raised about his tenure in Springfield and elsewhere during his quest for a job in Wisconsin are just the sorts of things long-term superintendents inevitably face. Bosses don't make everybody happy, after all, and they can't be held responsible for the occasional mistakes in hiring of subordinates. But, my, what a lot of smoke.

There's this; and then there's this.

And that's just a sample.

Forget the single applicant. The larger question is whether any of the applicants offer hope for departure from status quo, change-at-the-margins leadership. Leadership is lacking on the School Board itself, though that's something of a product of racial factionalism. The superintendent selection process was delayed far too long and is occurring now at a bad time during the school year. The process was outsourced to a consultant firm that hasn't produced stunning choices before. Race of the superintendent choice seems likely to be a disproportionate factor in the selection process.

It's far too late for me to make this suggestion, but I'll make it again anyway. Little Rock could have sought a waiver from state law to bring in an independent local businessman without political baggage to evaluate, even ruthlessly, the old order of things. Heck, they could look next door or elsewhere in Arkansas for somebody like Jerry Guess, who's used a powerful portfolio as state-appointed leader of a district in receivership to right the Pulaski County Special School District. He, incidentally, had a noteworthy career at a Camden school district well-versed in coping with desegregation and flight issues.

Why can't the district recruit a shining star rather than fall back on the usual sorts of choices that inevitably include candidates fleeing difficult circumstances?

Sherwood police search for possible gunman near Sylvan Hills Middle School (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

SHERWOOD — Sherwood Police responded to a report of a possible gunman near Sylvan Hills Middle School, prompting the facility to go on lockdown for more than two hours.

No gunman was located but police are continuing to investigate, Lt. Jamie Michaels said shortly after 12:30 p.m. The lockdown was lifted about then and roughly 60 teachers who had been ushered into the gym were allowed to return to other parts of the building.

No children were in class because Monday is a holiday in observance of George Washington's Birthday and Daisy Gatson Bates.

Michaels said the department received a call from the school about 10 a.m. referring to radio traffic heard at the school about a possible male with a gun near the campus, but there was no confirmed sighting.

Michaels said the initial call to 911 came from a school employee who heard the witness report of a man with a gun through a school radio.

Michaels said police have not yet found the witness who relayed the first report, but she stressed officers were still responding as if it was a "valid call."

"It's still being investigated," she said. "There's still a lot of people that need to be talked to."

Sylvan Hills Middle School is at 10001 Johnson Drive in Sherwood.

Chief of Elkins' schools to resign (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

ELKINS — Elkins School District Superintendent Megan Witonski is resigning at the end of the school year.

Witonski is taking the position of deputy superintendent for the Springdale School District. She will succeed Hartzell Jones, who is retiring after 44 years in education.

Jones' contract ends June 30. Witonski plans to begin her new job July 1.

"We are sorry to see her go, but she will do well in her new position," said Bryan Delozier, Elkins School Board president.

The district posted the job opening with the Arkansas Association of Education Administrators.

Witonski coordinated a successful millage campaign in 2011 to build a new Elkins High School, which is under construction.

She came to Elkins nearly three years ago after serving as superintendent in the Wickes School District.

Elkins is part of the Fayetteville and Springdale metropolitan area in Washington County.

Schools adopting tech standards (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — Kendall Miller, 11, had a hard time imagining creating the same poster by hand that he had created on the computer.

Using an online program on a library computer, Kendall clicked on a button that added a black-and-white houndstooth-check background to his poster. He browsed through blinking animated arrows and picked one to highlight features on his poster. He found images of nonfiction book covers online and added them, too.

"I couldn't do anything like this" on poster board, said the fifth-grader from Root Elementary in Fayetteville. "It would take three times as much time. It'd be a lot easier to come on here and do it."

Technology is becoming more prevalent in classrooms as teachers adapt to the new Common Core State Standards, which set expectations for what students should learn, as schools prepare students for a new era of online testing.

Districts continue to add to their desktop computers and wireless devices so students have more access to technology beyond just a computer lab. More teachers, particularly those who are just starting their careers, are comfortable using technology.

A growing number of online tools, some free, are at their disposal.

Under new writing standards, starting in the third grade, students will be expected to use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

By fourth grade, students need to have enough keyboarding skills to type a one-page paper in a single sitting. Beginning in the 2014-15 school year, students will take new standardized tests on computers or portable devices.

Arkansas is part of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, which is a consortium of 23 states using federal grant money to design a student achievement test on the basis of new standards.

“The test in an odd way will be the catalyst that will spur teachers [to use more] technology in the classroom,” said Cheryl Gall, literacy specialist for the Northwest Arkansas Education Service Cooperative.

The cooperative provides training and resources for 16 school districts in Northwest Arkansas.

The use of technology continues to vary by district, by school and by teacher, Gall said. Many students still create posters by hand, instead of on websites such as Glogster.

Some teachers in Benton and Washington counties still struggle with basic computing skills, but their students will have to type and submit work on computers for new standardized tests that are in development, Gall said.

The most proficient teachers are comfortable with technology and make an effort to take their students to computer labs or check out carts of netbooks or iPads, she said. Teachers also are more likely to use technology for learning when campus and district administrators show an interest in technology.

TAKING THE LEAD

Districts in Benton and Washington counties tend to be ahead of the rest of the state regarding technology use in classrooms, though some districts have more technology than others, said Sam Karnatz, technology coordinator for the Northwest Arkansas Education Service Cooperative.

“Everybody’s got a lab for the kids to use,” Karnatz said.

Districts have purchased iPads and netbooks to increase student access to computers, he said.

He anticipates that more districts will follow Fayetteville’s lead in allowing students to use their own smart phones and electronic tablets in class, Karnatz said.

The next step is getting everybody accustomed to the technology, he said.

The Fayetteville School District spends an average of \$2 million a year on technology, using money from the state and federal programs, said Susan Norton, chief information officer for the district of 9,140 students, which has an annual budget of more than \$109 million.

“The expectation is that students will be comfortable and familiar with all kinds of technology,” Norton said. “Technology is an essential resource to allow students to be more proficient in reading and math.”

Within the past two years, the district has upgraded its wireless network to accommodate more devices and to ensure wireless access throughout campuses, Norton said. Zero-interest bonds from the federal government provided money for campuses to purchase electronic devices for students’ use.

“There’s so many resources out there. It’s astounding,” Norton said. “There’s an outbreak of creative resources.”

Every classroom in the Fayetteville School District has at least a mounted video projector and screen, audio equipment, document camera and video player, according to the district’s technology plan. Many campuses also have interactive “whiteboards,” which are high-tech screens mounted on classroom walls that can function like computer screens and can be manipulated with a finger or a stylus.

The campuses also have carts with classroom sets of mobile computing devices, such as mini-laptops or iPads.

The district continues to work toward increasing the ratio of devices available to students, according to the technology plan.

STARTING IN FIRST GRADE

Even first-graders are logging onto computers. At Asbell Elementary, first-grade teacher Lindsey Griesse had her 6- and 7-year-old pupils log onto a collection of netbooks, laptops and computers to create talking avatars, or animated characters, through the online Voki Classroom.

The talking avatars are called “Vokis.” The website explains that the name is a combination of the Latin word for voice, “vox,” and a prankster character in Norse mythology, Loki.

Griesse spent about 15 minutes guiding 17 children through the process of turning on their computers, launching a web browser, typing in an abbreviated website address, and typing in a user name and password. At least one boy shouted, “Yeah!” when he succeeded in logging onto the Voki Classroom website.

Each first-grader had written a short paragraph on a worksheet the previous day about staying safe during severe weather. Madeline Dinger, 7, chose to write about hurricanes.

Her paragraph read, “I am going to tell you how to stay safe during a hurricane. First take your pets with you. Next evacuate your town. That is how you stay safe.”

“I did these all by myself,” she said.

On her computer, she clicked a blue box for typing text and typed in her sentences.

“You go to there, press this,” she said, demonstrating.

The children had to finish typing their sentences before they could choose their avatars. Madeline chose as her avatar a girl with purple hair in pigtails. She could push a button and hear the avatar read her sentences.

“It’s fun,” she said. “You get to make your own character. I wish I could have this at home.”

Madeline said her family has computers, but they are usually in use.

Deisy Mendez-Hernandez, 6, chose a puppy as her avatar. Her family has a computer, but it doesn’t work, she said.

“I looked at the letters,” she explained of working in the Voki Classroom. “I pressed a dog, and it was funny when he talked.”

The online program allows the children to hear what they have written, said Griesse, who is in her third year as a teacher.

“I just remember a paper and pencil,” Griesse said of her days as a student. “We had the projector with the transparency paper. We never had computers in our classroom.”

STUDYING LITERATURE

As a teacher, Griesse routinely uses technology, whether creating a presentation for her pupils or letting them play math and literacy games on her interactive whiteboard.

The district also has instructional technology coaches such as Marjo Burk to assist with incorporating technology into lessons. Burk assisted Griesse on the day her children worked on their Vokis.

“I am able to easily access it,” Griesse said. “It’s user friendly. In every single subject I teach, I use some sort of technology.”

At Root Elementary, fifth graders chose one of five genres of literature to study, librarian Diane Carpenter said. Computers assisted them in researching each genre and creating interactive posters on Glogster for their chosen topic.

Kendall selected four titles for his poster: *Afghan Dreams* by Tony O’Brien and Michael P. Sullivan; the *Candy Bomber* book; *Owen and Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship* by Isabella Hatkoff, Craig Hatkoff and Paula Kahumbu; and *2030: A Day in the Life of Tomorrow’s Kids* by Amy Zuckerman and James Daly.

Kendall had read *Afghan Dreams*. The book tells the story of two children from Afghanistan who are split apart, with one child going to Australia and one going to the United States. They reunite 30 years later, he said.

“I’ve learned about some other books I did not know were nonfiction,” he said.

The children also will be recording themselves discussing one of the books from the genre they are studying, Carpenter said.

“The kids are a lot more engaged,” Carpenter said. “It’s always kind of amazing just watching them and listening to them.”

LR kids get more lunch control (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — The Little Rock School District has changed the way it serves lunch to some younger students in hopes of keeping uneaten food out of the trash and cutting unnecessary costs.

Last week, third- through fifth-grade students started participating in a national initiative called Offer Versus Serve, which allows them to take at least three out of five food items, leaving behind dishes they don't intend to eat. At least one of their selected foods must be a vegetable or fruit.

Previously, the district required those students to take all five items, even if they knew some of them would be bound for the trash.

"We monitored plate waste and we found that a lot of the foods we were putting on the plates, students weren't consuming," said Lilly Bouie, director of child nutrition for the Little Rock School District.

The change comes as the school district is complying with new school lunch standards under the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which call for more-nutritious items, such as black beans and dark, leafy greens.

Those standards have been cause for concern in some school districts.

At a public hearing hosted by U.S. Rep. Rick Crawford, R-Ark., in Jonesboro in October, school leaders said pupils were throwing away much of their food and going to their afternoon classes hungry.

Bouie said it's important to serve nutritious foods to the district's students because, for many of them, lunches and breakfasts served at school are a primary source of nutrition.

Of the district's 23,594 students, 72 percent qualify for free or reduced lunches because of their family income levels, according to data from the Arkansas Department of Education. That figure does not include pre-kindergarten children.

The district has used Offer Versus Serve in its high schools for years, Bouie said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture approved the program in 1975. It made elementary schools eligible to participate in 1981.

Previously, schools that claimed federal reimbursements for free and reduced priced student lunches had to serve every dish to every student to maintain eligibility.

Bouie said the program should help the district trim "plate waste" and save money.

Little Rock public schools expect to spend \$4.65 million on food in the current fiscal year, said Kathy Davidson, finance director for the child nutrition department.

In the past, students from vegetarian households threw out meat dishes they were required to take, even though they had no plans to eat them, Bouie said.

Some foods, such as beans, are more commonly rejected. And some days, students just don't want a certain dish, Bouie said, recalling a day when countless students left uneaten bananas on their lunch trays.

“This is the wise thing to do if you see that the children aren’t eating all of the food items that we’re putting on the plate,” she said.

The district calls the new food-service plan Your Stars, Your Tray, Your Way, marking each food group with a different colored star to help students make choices.

Throughout the district last week, teachers gestured toward large signs explaining the options and students took home free bookmarks to help them learn the food groups.