

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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8 Investigates: School districts arming teachers (KAIT, Channel 8, Jonesboro)

Lawmakers in Arkansas are reviewing legislation to increase security at public schools in the state. In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, the discussion about school safety has been renewed. School administrators, staff and parents want mass school shootings to end, but everyone doesn't agree on how to do it.

"Everybody watched Sandy Hook and I believe that principal did everything correct and she had that school as secure as she possibly could," said Superintendent Dr. Ann Webb of the Newark School District. "After Sandy Hook, we wanted to review our crisis plan again because that made me nervous. That made everyone nervous."

The Newark School Board voted in favor of a plan to allow one teacher to carry his police issued firearm on campus. The teacher will receive \$3,000 per year and has been provided a special holster to hold the weapon during class. Webb said the district is working to increase safety in any way possible.

"All that I've heard from the community is relief, just a sigh of relief that okay, they're doing something. They've moved in this direction and they have protection for our students," said Webb. "In my research, I found that yes, we could have staff members carry a weapon if they have been through the course and they have 120 hours and were certified through that."

Webb said the band director, Billy Madison, started carrying his firearm in class in early February. Madison is a reserve police officer of about 20 years at the Newport Police Department. Region 8 News visited Madison on one of the first days he was allowed to carry the gun in school.

"When I was approached with the idea, I was very insistent that safety was first. If I'm going to carry a weapon, first I want a holster that prevents students or anyone else from taking the gun," said Madison. "It's not going to come out of that holster unless you know how to get it out."

Madison said his firearm is loaded while he teaches his students, but he's not worried about a student trying to take the gun from him.

"I believe that anyone who is going to be carrying a weapon on campus should go through the full training of a reserve police officer. I think (they can) also even spend some time riding with the officers. Actually go out and do some of the work, because that prepares you for a lot of things," said Madison.

Madison said the protection he can provide with a firearm is better than the alternative of hiding students.

"I always think about what would happen if something was to happen here. I've always thought, 'what would I do?' What would I be able to do? Honestly, just get your kids to safety is all I could try to do in the past," said Madison. "If someone is coming here and they want to harm you, then it's my responsibility to do something to stop them."

"I guarantee that when I started teaching, the idea that I would be carrying a weapon someday never occurred to me," said Madison.

Arkansas legislators are working through a number of bills about school safety. Homer Lenderman of Brookland introduced House Bill 1231 to the House Education Committee on January 31st. His bill would allow school districts to select certain staff to become certified police officers. Lenderman told Region 8 News the bill could serve as a national guideline. Some items in the bill include a physical evaluation, psychological evaluation, training from a police academy and final examination for individuals who may carry a gun on campus.

Webb said other teachers have expressed interest in carrying firearms on campus.

"Unfortunately in the world we live in today, the danger is real and is there and a lot of times it's at the smaller school level," said Tim Cunningham, who teaches agriculture at Cedar Ridge High School.

While Cunningham said he would carry a weapon on campus if asked, he doesn't believe every teacher in the district should tote a gun.

"I think it's important the campuses do have some armed people available," said Cunningham. "It is a sad day in time where we have to worry about these things, but when this last shooting happened, my heart just bleeds for those people and for those families."

As with any hot topic, people feel differently on both sides of the debate. Among those who oppose arming teachers is Missouri Governor Jay Nixon.

Nixon reportedly said he has told superintendents across the Show-Me-State he is against any measure to deputize teachers. The democratic governor joins a number of republican lawmakers against such measures.

"Putting loaded weapons in classrooms is quite simply the wrong approach to a serious issue that demands careful analysis and thoughtful solutions," Nixon is quoted by a website.

During our investigation, we analyzed statistics from the Arkansas Department of Education Data Center. According to disciplinary infraction reports since the 2004-2005 school year, 529 firearms were reportedly brought on campus by students, mostly handguns. On average, 35 handguns, shotguns and rifles were reported on campus or confiscated from students. However, the Arkansas Department of Education indicated the statistics do not include the number of guns not reported.

Interestingly, the overall number of assaults on students and teachers has gone down significantly since 2004-2005.

Region 8 News asked law enforcement agencies about the prospect of arming teachers. Corporal Brad Snyder with the Paragould Police Department said teachers need to be trained as certified police officers if they carry a weapon.

"I think it's hard to answer it just for the fact there's no litmus test for this. There's no example for us to look at," said Snyder.

The possibly, according to Snyder, is that armed teachers could stop mass shootings in a timely manner. While they may not stop the attack overall, they could limit the damage done. However, Snyder also said the problems may outweigh any action.

"Where's it going to be kept? Is it going to be kept on their person? Is it going to be kept in some sort of safe? Is that safe going to be able to be secure and not be breached? There's just a lot of questions that we don't have answers to," said Snyder.

However, even if an "active shooter" scenario is underway, Snyder said there's a certain element of luck for police in eliminating the threat quickly.

"Our SWAT team has gone to every school, every building and gone through with the administrators of those buildings. Basically, we have pretty much made the same protocol for every school district," said Snyder. "We can prepare all day long for every single possible outcome, and we still may not touch them all."

The Cedar Ridge School District also employs a school resource officer, who travels between all campuses throughout the day. Sergeant Rob Leonard, who works through the Independence County Sheriff's Office, said his presence greatly increases safety.

"I really feel that a school resource officer in a school is a big time deterrent. Because if somebody wanted to come do something, they're going to see (us) and they may think twice about it," said Leonard. "If they (teachers) do get the chance to carry weapons or whatever they decide to do, they're going to have to go through some of the exact same training I had."

Webb said she's gotten nothing but positive response from teachers and parents about allowing Madison to carry his handgun, but she said every district is different.

"They send us their children and they know we're going to do the best we can to protect them. Just like people praised the teachers that hid the kids at Sandy Hook, all I can do is just pray every day that our school will be safe and the children will arrive safely and they'll get home safely."

MHS presents new student schedules to board (Advanced Monticellonian, Monticello)

Monticello High School Interim Principal Jim Lucas presented a new schedule for the high school next year during Tuesday night's regular school board meeting.

Lucas said the new common core curriculum, which will be implemented fully at the high school next year, will require a shift in teaching practices.

"It's a lot easier to plan a lecture than it is to plan a project-based learning activity like the ones required with Common Core state standards," he explained.

Lucas wants to go from a 'four- by-four' block schedule to an A/B/C schedule.

Lucas said the four-by-four block schedule will not prepare the students for the end-of-the-course and PARCC exams, which will begin to be given to the students in 2014-15. He said with the four-by-four schedule, there can be as much as eight to 13 months between sequential courses such as Algebra I and Algebra II, because of the way the courses are offered. Under the four-by-four block, the students take one subject in a semester. For example, Algebra I would be taken in the fall. Currently, those end-of-course exams are given in January.

Lucas said the implementation of the PARCC assessments will require those tests to be taken at the end of the year, after 90 percent of the school has passed.

“Those January tests will be no more in 2014-15,” Lucas told the board. “If we don’t change the schedule, they will finish the course in the fall but have to wait until the end of the year to take those tests.”

The current four-by-four allows teachers 450 minutes of planning time per week, where only 200 minutes per week is required by the state.

Lucas explained the A/B/C schedule would make the students better prepared for the end-of-the-year exams and the PARCC exams because the students are in those courses for the entire year instead of one semester. Under the proposed plan, Mondays and Wednesdays will be A days; Tuesdays and Thursdays will be B days; and on the C day, which will be every Friday, the student will have an eight period day, where they see every teacher.

“This schedule gives the students three days per week with the teacher,” Lucas said.

He said the new schedule will still be able to maintain extra-curricular activities by the semester as they are doing now.

Lucas said one of the drawbacks of A/B/C schedule is that should a student fail a course, he or she would not be able to immediately repeat the course as they can under the current four-by-four block schedule.

He added that even though the proposed schedule will give teachers less instructional time with the students with 270 minutes per day, they will actually be able to get better coverage of the material because Common Core State Standards has the teachers going deeper into the material instead of just covering over it and a moving onto something else. He also said that while teachers have students for a full 90 minutes, it is not probable that they spend the entire class time teaching and covering material.

The proposed schedule will continue to allow teachers to have 450 minutes of planning time per week.

“They are going to need it to do what we need to do with common core,” he added.

Lucas wants to adopt the new schedule for next year so that the high school can pilot the PARCC assessment next year before it’s required in 2014-15.

“When Kentucky piloted the PARCC assessment, they lost 37 percent,” Lucas said. “I don’t have 37 percent to lose. I’d rather make the changes, pilot (the PARCC assessment) and work all the bugs out.”

While the presentation was made to the school board, president Hani Hasham told the crowd, that attended the meeting because of the possible schedule change, that Tuesday night’s presentation was for informational purposes only, and that no decision would be immediately made.

“I know there is some anxiety about this issue,” Hasham said. “We are not taking any action tonight.”

Hasham also stated that the board would probably hold a special meeting to further discuss the scheduling so they could hear the opposition to the measure before making any decisions.

The board also heard a presentation from Brett Timmons with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission about the possibility of stocking the Monticello School Pond so that it could be a part of Commission’s Community and Family Fishing Program.

The board agreed to allow the pond to be used in the program.

Timmons said he expects the pond to begin to be stocked in April. The pond will be stocked on a monthly basis. However, there will be signage posted with restrictions such as no fishing during school hours, and no driving on the grass.

“We certainly understand this may be a security issue so we don’t want anyone fishing during school hours,” Timmons said. “And, we can’t have anyone driving on the grass, disturbing the habitat.”

More information on this will be released as the pond becomes ready for fishing.

The board voted to move the school board meeting to March 26 since the regular scheduled meeting falls during spring break.

Parental choice, race play into school debate (Van Buren County Democrat, Commentary by Steve Brawner)

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.

Center to reflect historical jackrabbit (Lonoke Democrat)

The Lonoke School Board voted unanimously on Monday night during its board meeting to have the "fighting jackrabbit" mascot logo used throughout the new Gina Cox Center.

According to Superintendent Suzanne Bailey, million-dollar donor Gina Cox-Wiertelak and husband Jim have requested that the school mascot be phased back into the fighting jackrabbit rather than the current running jackrabbit. After a long discussion, Rick Pennington suggested that the decision be put to the school staff for vote. Matt Boyles disagreed and said most of the current staff are not Lonoke Alumni, so they would more than likely go with the current mascot logo because they are not familiar with the old fighting jackrabbit.

After narrowing down the logo use, the board determined that the fighting jackrabbit was phased out in 1983-1984. Since the old logo was phased out, the school has had four or five different mascot logos, according to Boyles. During the early 2000's, due to a number of different mascot logos being used throughout the school for the band, football team and other sports, the district chose to stick with one mascot logo, the current running jackrabbit.

"Maybe we should put it [the fighting jackrabbit] on the floor [of the gymnasium] and see what kind of feedback we get from there," Tony Kelleybrew said.

The board all agreed that a fighting jackrabbit be used throughout the new Gina Cox Center. The mascot will be displayed throughout the building, including the tables and the gymnasium floor.

New safety enhancements will soon be installed in the buildings. According to Bailey, with the approval from the board a buzzer and security system will be installed in the entryways of the main buildings. This will include digital video recording capabilities. The board voted unanimously to approve the purchase of the new security system from Advanced Cabling Systems of North Little Rock for \$11,528.

Amanda Rather provided an overview of the new Teacher Excellence and Support System (TESS) training and implementation schedule for the district. According to Rather, the district is trying to train and pilot the program for the 2013-2014 school year in each school. She said the program will become mandated by the state as an evaluating system for the 2014-2015 school year. Rather said all the building principals will be required to take the test to evaluate teachers.

“We are really digging deep,” Bailey said.

Although Bailey is not required to complete the training and testing, she said she has taken it upon herself to take part in the training.

Rather said the program is designed to recognize teachers who strive for excellence. She said some of the key points of the program include its ability to identify specific areas, the expectancy for teachers to grow, identifying continued growth in student learning and more than one means to evaluate teachers. Rather said the middle school is currently piloting the program for the state and is required to relay their feedback on the program.

“It’s going to be a lot for the teachers, as well as the principals,” Bailey said. “Its going to force them to present the artifacts.”

Although completion and testing is required to be completed by Dec. 31, the district plans to take its tests in April.

A district-wide tornado drill is scheduled for Friday. According to Bailey, the drill will begin at 1 p.m. with the primary school practicing loading the buses. At 1:30 p.m. each school will make there way during the drill to the district safe rooms.

Bailey said loading the buses and transporting primary school students to the safe rooms will be the districts top priority in the event a tornado was to threaten the area. She said anytime there is bad weather, everyone is alert and watching the news. Bailey said there is an area surrounding the district that is used a pre-notification area in the event of severe weather. This area is used so that primary school students can be transported to the safe rooms prior tornado outbreak. According to Bailey, in the unlikely event there was not time to transport the students, they would remain in the building for their safety.

The Friday drill will be video recorded so it can can evaluated and items noted in need of improvement. In the event of bad weather, the drill will be postponed until a later date.

The district safe rooms are designed to hold 1,800 students. One can hold 800 students and the other 1,000 students.

The Middle School has received a \$4,400 grant for the new “Grab and Go” breakfast program. Bailey said this is a program that offers students a second chance at breakfast around 9:30 a.m., when they might otherwise not get to eat breakfast. She said items including such as donuts, juice, milk and hotpockets are offered to the students.

During the meeting, the primary schools student and employees of the month were recognized. Primary school principal Ross Moore presented awards to students of the month, preschool student Jordan Gatter and second grade special education student Angel Williams. Employees of the month presented with gifts were second grade interventionist Susan Lilly and first grade aide Pat Frizzell.

In other board business, the board unanimously approved To pay the Arkansas School Board Association's workers' compensation premium of \$26,476.

Extend the contract of Superintendent Suzanne Bailey for one year.

Eddie Pennington was absent from the meeting. Due to spring break vacation, the next meeting will be at 6 p.m. on March 26 in the administration building.

Flurry of Activity on House Floor (Clay County Times-Democrat, Column by State Senator Robert Thompson of Paragould)

In every regular session the legislature may refer three proposed constitutional amendments to Arkansas voters. Last week saw the deadline for legislators to introduce proposed amendments, and 37 were filed. The 18 filed by senators were referred to the Senate Committee on State Agencies and Governmental Affairs and the 19 filed by representatives went to the House State Agencies Committee. The proposals are in the form of Senate and House Joint Resolutions.

SJR 1 would require voters to present a photo ID when voting. The identity card would have to be issued by a government agency.

SJR 2, SJR 5 and SJR 6 are tort reform measures that would establish procedures used by courts in trying civil cases. In 2003 the legislature enacted a tort reform law that set limits on how much a plaintiff could claim in punitive damages, and setting standards for admitting evidence. However, a series of court decisions has eroded many of the original provisions of the 2003 law. Supporters of tort reform want it written in the constitution. If tort reform is approved by voters in a statewide election and written into the constitution, it cannot be struck down as unconstitutional.

SJR 3 would restructure the Highway Commission and the Game and Fish Commission to require that their members be elected, instead of appointed by the governor. SJR 4 would require a 75 percent majority of the legislature for passage of all tax increases. Now, some tax increases, including sales tax increases, require a 51 percent majority for passage.

Many of the Senate Joint Resolutions filed last week were shells. They have a title that describes the general topic, but they have no details yet. Examples are proposals to change the process for placing referendums on the ballot, to set ethical standards for public officials and to delineate the regulatory power of state agencies. The details will emerge when the resolutions are amended by their sponsors.

School Choice

Three public school choice bills have been filed. SB 65 allows student transfers with the restriction that transfers may not violate a federal desegregation order that is still being enforced. Under SB 65, the transferring student is responsible for transportation.

SB 114 allows school districts to petition the state Board of Education for an exemption from the school choice law. Exemptions could be based on the potential of transfers to racially segregate schools or to violate standing court orders to desegregate schools. Also, the petition to not participate in school choice could include an argument that transfers would interfere with the school's efforts to eliminate the vestiges of the Jim Crow era.

HB 1181 uses poverty as a method to regulate student transfers. First, the bill allows transfers only to geographically contiguous districts and only if the accepting district is not in academic distress.

The superintendent of the receiving district may reject the transfer if the student is eligible for a free or reduced priced lunch, based on their family's income, if the transfer would bring the district's national school lunch count to more than 65 percent.

Last year a federal judge struck the entire Arkansas school choice law, in a lawsuit filed by parents who had been prevented from transferring their children because of restrictions in the previous law that were based on racial guidelines. In a ruling that surprised many observers, the federal judge struck the Arkansas school choice law in its entirety, not just the racial provisions. His decision has been stayed while the ruling is being appealed.

Court affirms county misused mills (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — The Arkansas Supreme Court on Thursday upheld a lower court's ruling that the Washington County tax collector improperly used part of a Fayetteville School District millage increase to retire redevelopment-district bonds.

In *City of Fayetteville v. Fayetteville School District No. 1*, the court unanimously found that the 2.75 ad valorem school millage increase was approved by voters for a specific use - school improvements - and was not meant to be diverted for other purposes.

Associate Justice Jo Hart wrote in the opinion that the ballot "specifically indicated that the 2.75 new-debt-service mills would be a continuing debt-service tax for the principal amount of \$51,000,000 in bonds." Voters were told that the money would be used to erect and equip new school facilities and renovate existing facilities.

In 2005, the city established a tax increment financing, or TIF, district and issued TIF bonds for a redevelopment project at College Avenue and Mountain Street.

About 30 days later, the Legislature passed Act 2231, which amended the "total ad valorem rate" to exclude future increases in millage rates "if the additional money is pledged for repayment of a specific bond."

The city filed for declaratory judgment to clarify which definition of "total ad valorem rate" should be used for the TIF district, and a circuit judge ruled that the act should not be applied.

The case went to the Supreme Court, which remanded the case back to the circuit court for a judgment that explained how the mills collected by the county should be applied.

In that case, the city was able to keep some of the millage money because the city entered the bond purchase agreement before Act 2231 was enacted.

Voters approved the tax increase in 2010 to fund construction on Fayetteville High School, and in May of 2011, the county assessor diverted 1.45 mills of the 2.75 mills - about \$25,000 a year - from the school-construction fund to pay for TIF district bonds.

Fayetteville School District No. 1 filed for declaratory and injunctive relief in November 2011.

During oral arguments, Fayetteville City Attorney Kit Williams argued that the language in the judgment of the previous case applied to both cases because the paragraphs “used the future tense and all spoke about how this whole issue about how to divide these millages - the increments of these millages - should be handled forever.”

In the opinion released Thursday, Hart disagreed and said the cases were “distinctly different.”

Legislative summary (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — This is a summary list of bills (by bill number, lead sponsor and title) introduced through Thursday in the 89th General Assembly, except for appropriation bills, which, along with other bills and resolutions, may be found at the legislative website: www.arkleg.state.ar.us

HOUSE

HB1413, Ratliff - An act to regulate the liability of livestock owners, livestock activity sponsors, livestock facilities, and livestock auction markets with respect to livestock activities.

HB1414, Hammer - Concerning the criminal offense of theft of scrap metal; concerning regulations governing scrap metal transactions; and to declare an emergency.

HB1415, Vines - Concerning scheduling a controlled substance as a Schedule VI controlled substance.

HB1417, Harris - To extend the concealed handgun license exemption to current and former certified law enforcement officers, auxiliary law enforcement officers, bailiffs, and retired law enforcement officers.

HB1418, Barnett - To dedicate sales and use tax revenue from the sales of new and used vehicles and road-user items and services for roadway maintenance, construction, and reconstruction; and to declare an emergency.

HB1419, J. Burris - To regulate the practices of health insurance companies; and to prohibit the accumulation of excess income, reserves, capital, capital surplus, or investment savings in the course of providing health insurance.

HB1438, Shepherd - To amend the Arkansas Governor’s Scholars Program.

HB1439, D. Altes - To eliminate the requirement that a prosthetic device be prescribed by a physician.

SENATE

SB410, Maloch - An act to allow the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality to award grants for certain activities relating to asbestos abatement, stabilization, and remediation; and to declare an emergency.

SB411, Bledsoe - To repeal the requirement for the Administrative Office of the Courts to develop a Web-based mandated reporter training curriculum.

SB417, J. Hendren - To modify the definition of an unborn child in the criminal code and in wrongful-death actions.

SB420, J. Key - To amend the law concerning the filling of vacancies in county elective offices.

SB422, B. Pierce - Concerning the definition of “exempt commodities and services” in the Arkansas Procurement Law.

SB423, B. Pierce - To provide for the expansion of testing of newborn infants for genetic disorders.

SB425, D. Johnson - To amend the distribution of state funding to school districts based on 98 percent of the school district assessment for the uniform rate of tax.

Calendar (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — This is a calendar of public events of the 89th General Assembly for today, the 40th day of the 2013 legislative session.

HOUSE

9 a.m. Aging, Children and Youth, Legislative and Military Affairs, Room 130 9 a.m. State Agencies and Governmental Affairs, Room 151 9 a.m. City, County and Local Affairs, Multi-Agency Complex, Room B 10 a.m. House convenes

SENATE

The Senate is in recess until Monday.