

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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Education agency exec gets new job (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Phyllis Stewart, chief of staff at the Arkansas Department of Education, is leaving to become chief of staff and director of communications at the Arkansas School Boards Association, effective July 1.

Stewart, 59, has worked at the Education Department since 2009. She's been involved in policy development, including the state's federally approved waiver of the No Child Left Behind Act.

She also is the department's liaison to the state Board of Education and, more recently, she took on the supervision of the agency's communications department and the role of department spokesman.

"The position opened up and those kinds of jobs don't come around that often," Stewart said Thursday about the School Boards Association job. "It fits my skill set, and it's a slower pace. I'm really looking forward to it."

Stewart will fill a vacancy created by the retirement next month of Suellen Vann, the association's director of communications, Stewart said.

The association is operating under new leadership. Tony Prothro is the new executive director of the association following the retirement of Dan Farley.

Stewart said Thursday that Prothro intends to travel in the state to work with districts and educational cooperatives. Her job will include managing the association's Little Rock office in his absence.

Stewart previously worked at the Arkansas Association of Education Administrators, and from 1987 to 2005 was a longtime administrative assistant to the superintendent in the Pulaski County Special School District.

The Education Department also is undergoing changes at the administrative level. In addition to Stewart, Assistant Commissioner Laura Bednar, who oversees the learning services division, is moving to the deputy superintendent's job in the Pulaski County Special School District. Jared Cleveland, assistant commissioner for fiscal and administrative services, is moving to the assistant superintendent's job in the Springdale School District. Megan Witonski, superintendent of the Elkins School District, is replacing Bednar. Cleveland's replacement has not been named.

Houston school chief: Outsiders' voices key (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

At their first meeting, members of Arkansas Learns heard about expanding advanced placement courses, learning from charter schools and incorporating local business needs into the classroom.

Houston Independent School District Superintendent Terry Grier addressed the crowd at the Wally Allen Ballroom in the Statehouse Convention Center on Thursday.

Grier stressed the importance of public schools listening to new voices, such as the private sector and charter schools, when it comes to policy.

"You've got to engage the business community," he said.

Grier said schools should establish programs and classes for students that relate to jobs local industries need filled; in Houston, the school district has started a Chinese language learning school for kindergarten through the eighth grade for businesses that wanted employees who could speak Mandarin. He said the district plans to start a middle school for students to learn medicine and a high school that focuses on energy that would be funded by local businesses.

"We listen and learn from our business community," Grier said.

"I think his message of a third voice is impactful for our group," said Gary Newton, founder and chief executive of Arkansas Learns.

Newton, who left the Arkansas Chamber of Commerce to start Arkansas Learns, said his organization was founded to give a voice for businesses, parents and other residents in Arkansas in regard to education.

Newton said Arkansas Learns is for people other than school board members and teachers - which he called the traditional voices in the discussion on education - who want to help make sure Arkansas spends its education dollars wisely.

"Our organization is more about results," Newton said, adding that results matter more than the means used to achieve them.

"Unfortunately, our public school system has been focused on means," he said.

According to Newton some kind of post-secondary education or training is necessary for success after high school, but high school is a good place to give students a start.

"It's all about the work force," he said.

Since Grier took over Houston schools in the fall of 2009, the dropout rate has hit an all-time low (10.8 percent), the graduation rate has hit an all-time high (78.5 percent), the amount of scholarship money offered to the district's seniors has more than tripled and the number of students scoring a passing grade on AP exams has increased by 2,000, according to a news release from Arkansas Learns.

After he took over Houston schools, Grier said he expanded AP classes to 15 offered at every high school, with the students required to take the exams, which the district pays for.

“We expect rigor,” Grier said. He said that setting high expectations for students and faculty was one of the reasons his district is successful.

Grier said a teacher who isn’t effective has no place in Houston schools. During his first year, Grier fired the principals at nine struggling schools, made each teacher reapply for his job and only hired 20 percent back, he said.

Houston schools use a value-added data system to determine teachers’ strengths and effectiveness in the classroom, adjusting teachers’ positions if the data show their strengths would better suit them for a different classroom.

Grier has a doctorate in education from Vanderbilt University and was a superintendent in two districts - in San Diego and Greensboro, N.C. - before Houston.

2 school projects in NLR still a go, forum is assured

North Little Rock School District leaders assured audience members at a forum Thursday that plans remain intact for building a new Glenview Elementary School and converting Pike View Elementary into a pre-kindergarten center.

They also said that the dozen schools that will be built anew or extensively renovated in the next few years will be safer than the existing schools in terms of protection from intruders and from acts of nature such as tornadoes.

The North Little Rock School District hosted the forum at Lakewood Middle School to update the community on the \$265.5 million school facilities program that will reduce the district’s 21 campuses to 13, nearly all of which will be rebuilt or remodeled.

District leaders broke ground last week on the construction of the Phase I projects, which are replacement schools for Meadow Park, Boone Park, Lakewood and Amboy elementary schools and the \$108.5 million expansion of the North Little Rock High School-West campus, which will grow to 481,000 square feet, or about four times its current size.

Pat Brewer, a member of the audience, questioned what the plans are for replacing Glenview Elementary. She said there was no mention of the Glenview building plan in a recent district publication and that the option of retaining Lynch Drive Elementary in lieu of building a new Glenview was mentioned as a money-saving measure at a recent School Board meeting.

“We are excited about the events that we are seeing in the community about the building of new schools but we are concerned about the fact that we never see Glenview mentioned,” Brewer said. “We hope and pray that you will stick to the original plan and never phase out Glenview,” she said.

Gerald Cound, the district's facilities construction manager, said that the district is moving forward with the planning for a replacement school for Glenview. That work includes necessary soil testing for hazardous materials, he said. That testing was also a concern Thursday to Glenview community members.

The Glenview campus, 2101 Edmond St., is part of Phase II of the capital-improvement program that also includes additions to Crestwood, Indian Hills and Seventh Street elementaries and conversion of Ridgeroad Middle to an elementary school.

Another audience member had questions about the district's plans for Pike View and when that campus would become a pre-kindergarten center.

Brad Kiehl, architect and principal for DLR Group of Overland Park, Kan., the company hired by the district to help with the project planning, said pre-kindergarten classes will be transitioned to new schools and Pike View when the new buildings are completed and Redwood pre-kindergarten center is closed.

Other audience members raised questions about the safety of the new schools, particularly from dangerous weather.

"All the windows are beautiful but they are scary," one audience member said about the school designs.

"Codes today are quite a bit different than they were even five years ago," Kiehl responded. "We are designing these buildings to 2012 standards and those standards take the wind speed loads from 90 mph up to 120 mph. These buildings are substantially different than the 1900s buildings you are in now.

"We are also looking at interior safer areas," he said of windowless storage areas, kitchens, restrooms and some interior classrooms, but added that the construction will be short of the costly shelters capable of withstanding the most severe tornadoes.

"We are building as much as we can for the budget we have at this time," Kiehl said.

District looks to contract substitutes (Cabot Star-Herald)

Red tape and new laws are pushing the Cabot School District out of the business of managing substitute teachers, turning instead to contract services. "The reason most [districts] are looking at this is the cost of the new healthcare regulations," superintendent Tony Thurman said during the May 21 school board meeting.

Other matters considered by the school board included changes to district personnel policies, student handbook changes and school meal price increases.

The board also recognized a graduating senior on 13 years of perfect attendance. "This is certainly an accomplishment worthy of our recognition..." Thurman said.

Thurman and board members Wendel Msall, Ricky Hill, Donna Nash, Corey Williams, Mark Russell, Brian Evans and Dean Martin attended the meeting.

Board members approved a lengthy list of recommended changes to various district policies that were presented by assistant superintendent Harold Jeffcoat during a committee meeting held before the regular board meeting.

The hour-long presentation included changes to school board operation, licensed and classified personnel policies, student handbook, curriculum and instruction, homeschool participation in sports and student drug testing.

Jeffcoat explained the recommendations primarily as housekeeping to bring the district into compliance with a number of changes made by the recent General Assembly, clarify language in some requirements, and simply keeping the policies current.

Changes include counting abstained votes by board members as "no;" giving the board wider discretion with requests from the community; bringing school choice into alignment with new legislation; and added appeal procedures for suspension.

The Student Handbook was revised to include "e-cigarettes" in the list of prohibited items; further defined "bullying;" clarified the term "controlled substances;" and clarified consequences for level I and II offenses.

The number of random drug tests was reduced to four per semester but testing more students each time.

The full Interscholastic Activity Home School policy is still being developed, but will reflect changes made during the General Assembly, Jeffcoat said.

Thurman said bids were requested about six weeks ago for businesses to assume the staffing of substitute teachers. Cabot is one of the larger districts to not yet go to such a service, he said.

The change is coming about because of the changes to healthcare requirements, Thurman said. It is simpler and more cost-effective for the district to contract with a service, which would take care of the requirements for health insurance with the "hundreds" of substitutes managed by the district until now, he said.

"There is a lot more responsibility for the substitutes in terms of paperwork," Thurman said.

District comptroller Tina Wiley explained that the proposal from Kelly Educational Staffing provides more services and benefits to the substitute teachers than the district is able to provide.

Russell questioned changing to the service. "I do not see any benefit for us," he remarked. He said outsourcing is used to reduce costs, but he saw no such reduction for the district.

The board voted to accept to the bid from Kelly Educational Staffing to manage the substitute teachers, with Russell voting against.

Meal prices need to be increased to meet federal requirements, Thurman told school board members. To meet the requirements, the charge for meals needs to be increased 10 cents, he said.

New prices would be \$1.35 for elementary and secondary breakfast; \$2 for elementary lunch and \$2.20 for secondary lunch.

Jeffcoat reported on the district construction projects. "A lot of progress being made, a lot of work happening in our construction and maintenance," he said.

All structural steel for Building 1 of the freshman academy is complete.

Installation of ceiling grids and painting has begun at one end of the building, and will "work its way around" to the rest of the structure.

Only the millwork remains to be done on the career and technical building, Jeffcoat said. "We plan to start that next week," he said.

The track resurfacing project began last week, with a planned completion date of July 4, Jeffcoat said. "We think we can make that happen as long as the weather works with us," he said.

Work on the band shell and press box began in early May; estimated completion date is Aug. 10, Jeffcoat said. "We aren't going to guarantee it, but we should have everything finished by Aug. 10," he said.

Work on the Ward Central Elementary School driveway and parking lot project has started, Jeffcoat said. "We have pushed a lot of dirt at Ward Central," he said.

Work on expanding the Ward Central cafeteria is expected to begin next week, Jeffcoat said.

During recognitions at the beginning of the meeting, board members were told of Talan Evans' 13 years of perfect attendance. Evans was given a plaque marking the accomplishment.

"I didn't think it could be done, perfect attendance in 13 years at Cabot schools," Thurman said. "It's an amazing feat."

Evans said he faced a slight dilemma on "senior skip day."

Although he considered skipping the day, "I'm not going to give up one day and ruin 12 years of work," Evans said. "The classes were pretty empty," he remarked.

Thurman said that Evans did miss one day, the first day of school last year. Thurman said Evans is active in church youth groups as a mentor and leader, and had been on a mission trip to South Africa, but his return airline connections did not get him back on time.

“I felt I could have executive leniency, and I excused him that day,” Thurman said. “I think it was appropriate to do so,” he said.

Evans said there never was a conscious decision to try for perfect attendance. “It was never pushed, I just went to school,” he said.

Thurman congratulated Evans on continuing beyond high school to the University of Arkansas.

“Typically I tell people, ‘Make sure you go to class.’ But I don’t have to worry about that,” he said.

Special note was given during the May 21 school board meeting, to a graduating senior for perfect attendance, not for a year, or high school, but for his entire 13-year school career.