

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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Districts size up funding portions (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Leaders of Arkansas school districts that will share in \$212.3 million in state facilities aid in 2013-15 are grateful for the revenue source that didn't exist 10 years ago - even as they work to understand their allocations and find local money to supplement the state funds.

The Public School Academic Facilities and Transportation Commission on April 24 approved state aid for 2013-15 for new schools, additions, roofs and utility systems.

The money is from the state Academic Facilities Partnership Program, established after the Arkansas Supreme Court in 2002 declared that the state's public-school system was unconstitutional, partly because of disparate conditions of school buildings.

The state program provides a portion of the cost. The state percentage varies among districts, with poorer districts receiving a larger percentage of the building aid.

The North Little Rock School District, one of dozens seeking and receiving funds, is embarking on a \$265.6 million capital-improvement program. District leaders sought more than \$80 million from the state and expected to get about \$66 million.

The commission - acting on recommendations of the state Public School Academic Facilities and Transportation Division - approved less than half of that amount. The amounts approved for specific North Little Rock projects were reduced and state funding for a proposed middle school was disapproved.

"We have the possibility of getting \$26.4 million," North Little Rock Superintendent Ken Kirspel said about the commission's decision. "You can't be unhappy when you get \$26 million."

But Kirspel also said that district representatives are continuing to review figures with the state division. He didn't rule out the possibility of appealing some of the state decisions. The appeals are due in mid-June.

"We are happy. We could be happier," Kirspel said.

Arkansas school districts, large and small, submitted applications a year ago for 381 projects for the 2013-15 funding period, with 263 projects, or 69 percent, approved.

The number of applications was a 26 percent increase over the 302 applications submitted for the 2011-13 funding period. In that period, 219 projects were approved - 72.5 percent.

The amount of money committed to projects for the 2013-15 funding cycle is \$130.7 million, plus an anticipated \$20 million more from the General Improvement Fund available after July 1.

In comparison, \$151.3 million was committed to partnership projects in the 2011-13 cycle.

A total \$102.3 million was allotted in 2009-11, \$262.5 million in 2007-09 and \$205.2 million in the single 2006-07 fiscal year, the first year for the program, according to the Public School Academic Facilities and Transportation Division.

Facility projects are categorized as either warm, safe and dry projects, or space projects, the latter of which includes - for this new funding cycle - a total of 14 new schools and 67 additions.

There are 173 approved warm, safe and dry projects for the coming two years, which include 53 roofs, 47 new heating and air-conditioning systems, and 19 fire and safety systems.

The Osceola and Mountainburg school districts, for example, both requested state funding only for projects in the warm, safe and dry category.

"This is my fifth year as a superintendent in Mountainburg and this is the first time we've asked for anything," Dennis Copeland said.

The district was prompted to apply for funding for seven projects - all dealing with electrical, plumbing, roofing or heating/air-conditioning systems - at least partly out of concern that state funding for those kinds of projects may be phased out in subsequent funding periods, Copeland said.

The state turned down one Mountainburg project because of what Copeland called a mistakenly incomplete application. The district will appeal to get funding for a heating and air-conditioning system at the elementary school.

"I hope we will get that as well," said Copeland, who added that the district was "tickled to death" for what was already approved.

The state's share of Mountainburg's six approved projects will be about \$2.4 million. The district's share will be about \$1.3 million. The district's local wealth is such that the state share of an approved project is about 66 percent of the cost, Copeland said. The district is expected to ask voters in September to allow the district to restructure debt payments to free up some local revenue for the project costs.

The Osceola district received approval for heating and air-conditioning systems for the high school, middle school, alternative school and one elementary school.

But Michael Cox, Osceola superintendent, said the total amount approved for the four projects was less than requested.

He expected to get about 65 percent of the total cost from the state but received about 50 percent, which will cause him to seek more details from state officials in coming days.

“It’s an energy-saving project,” Cox said of the planned work, noting that some school ventilation systems date back to the early 1970s and don’t necessarily pull fresh air into the buildings.

Osceola will have to borrow its share of the \$5.4 million project, Cox said.

He said the district recently completed a new elementary school, and the other campuses are satisfactory.

“We’ve got good buildings, but we need to do some work on the energy part of them,” Cox said.

The Bryant School District, like the North Little Rock district, sought millions of dollars for new spaces as well as for warm, safe and dry projects.

“We are excited about the \$22 million ... provided to move us toward our project goals,” Bryant Superintendent Randy Rutherford said in an e-mail.

A total of \$13.3 million in state aid was approved to go toward a new auditorium, a physical activity building, high school additions, and classroom conversions. Another \$8.2 million, approved for the first year of the cycle, is not yet funded. That would go toward expanding Collegeville and Davis elementaries, and building an elementary and a 950-student middle school.

The North Little Rock District’s capital-improvement program calls for reducing its 21 campuses to 13 - most of which would be built anew or extensively renovated.

The state commission did not approve the district’s request for state aid for a middle school where Lakewood Middle and North Little Rock High, East Campus, sit now.

“As far as the transitions go, if any project was to be not approved, that was the best one,” Kirspel said. “All the middle-schoolers can go to the current campus. There is plenty of space and it’s in good condition. Of course, it is 45-plus years old. As we build new, it would become old.”

If state funding for the middle school - a requested \$18 million - is not available in the 2013-15 cycle, the district could seek it in 2015-17, he said.

The district is relying on state funding, savings in district operating costs and the sale of bonds, the latter of which would generate about \$200 million.

Kirspel has said the North Little Rock School Board is committed to proceeding with the building program, despite the prospect of lesser or delayed state aid.

“The economy is working in our favor in the last year or so with bond rates and construction costs staying somewhat level, so I think we feel confident enough that we can go ahead and move forward right now,” he said.

That means Phase I projects will proceed - rebuilding Amboy, Boone Park, Lakewood and Meadow Park elementaries and initiating the first phase of the high-school project. The district signed contracts Tuesday for preconstruction work at the four elementary sites, and is reviewing the bids submitted for the ground work at the high school, Kirspel said.

The district’s School Board will meet at 5:30 p.m. Monday to discuss building and funding issues.

Event To Kick Off Construction Of Mansfield Clinic (Southwest Times Record, Fort Smith)

A public hard-hat tour event with visiting dignitaries at noon Monday will kick off construction of the planned Mansfield Schools-based community Wellness Clinic, according to school and Mercy Clinic representatives.

The clinic is funded through a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Mercy Clinic Family Medicine-Mansfield will provide medical care at the clinic.

The clinic, which will serve the community as well as students and school staff, is expected to open for the August start of the school year on the Mansfield Elementary School campus at the corner of Walnut Avenue and Center Street.

Kickoff program attendees Monday will include Arkansas Lt. Gov. Mark Darr, state Rep. Terry Rice, R-Waldron, state Sen. Bruce Holland, R-Greenwood, School Superintendent Robert Ross and Mercy Clinic representatives, according to a joint announcement by Mercy Fort Smith and the school district.

The clinic will offer dental, vision, mental health and physical health care in a stand-alone building, Ross has said.

Mansfield Coordinated School Health Director Tracey Sadoski said the project is the first such partnership in the state between a school-based clinic and a large health-care provider.

The Mercy Clinic will occupy 2,700 square feet, including five exam rooms. Vista Health will occupy 900 square feet and will provide full-time mental health services for students. Eye doctor Adam Schluterman will provide part-time vision care, and dentist Cody Friddle will provide part-time dental services for students. The clinic will include space for occupational and physical therapy.

The Mansfield School Board voted last spring to become an Arkansas Department of Education Coordinated School Health district to provide the best possible educational experience for the rural district’s students.

The Coordinated School Health program focuses on eight components — physical health, mental health, nutrition, physical education, health education, healthy school environment, parental involvement and staff wellness, Sadoski has said.

Northeast Arkansas School District "Uninvites" Gay Man to Speak at Graduation (KARK, Channel 4)

LITTLE ROCK, AR - The graduate of a Northeast Arkansas School has been uninvited to speak at Sloan-Hendrix High School's graduation this year.

Bryant Huddleston says he feels it's because he is gay.

Huddleston says Superintendent Mitch Walton told him he couldn't speak because two school board members felt there were concerns for the community.

Huddleston, now a single dad and TV Writer and producer in Los Angeles, grew up in Imboden.

He got his degree in broadcasting from Arkansas State and felt he could share his story, possibly helping a kid deal with the situation he experienced growing up. Huddleston's father, Steve, is a retired Arkansas State Trooper and President of the Sloan-Hendrix school board.

Huddleston's younger sister is set to graduate from Sloan-Hendrix this year.

Huddleston wrote a letter to Walton expression his feeling about the situation.

The letter is below:

To the Sloan-Hendrix School Board and Superintendent Mitch Walton:

Dear Mr. Walton,

I am writing to express my disappointment in your recent decision to recant your invitation for me to be the keynote speaker at my little sister, Madicyn's, graduation from Sloan-Hendrix High School this year, based solely on the fact that I am gay.

What baffles me Mr. Walton is that you chose to disregard the fact that I grew up in Imboden, and my career accomplishments--KAIT news anchor and reporter, successful television producer in Hollywood, producing shows such as E! News, Access Hollywood, etc., --were dismissed and instead you chose to make me a hot bed controversial issue.

Mr. Walton, your decision forced the members of the Sloan-Hendrix School Board to vote on my participation but what was equally unfair is that you forced the President of the Board Steve Huddleston (my father), to abstain from voting, thus forcing a tie and then declared there would be

"no speaker this year," ultimately nixing any opportunity to share my pathway to success with the graduates. Was this in the students' best interest or is this a decision based on religious beliefs?

During my years at SHHS, I was the student body president for two years in a row. I also helped lead our Student Council to receive state-wide recognition for the first time-- all despite being bullied on campus for many years. Mr. Walton, your decision here is like being bullied again twenty-three years later. Personally, it's both sad and disappointing. I'm disappointed that board members Preston Clark and Aaron Murphy, who represent the school that my sisters and I hold so dear, fear that I would be unfit as a role model, and I'm saddened that you Mr. Walton, appear to be more concerned with what your congregation might say on Sunday, rather than doing what is right for the students.

I understand that Mr. Clark and Mr. Murphy both stated there would be "concern from the community" if I were allowed to speak. I'm curious--did you think my speech would have focused on recruiting youngsters and passing out "Go Straight to Gay" cards over sharing the tools that I used to achieve success? You might be surprised to know that "recruitment" does not and never will work. And just for the record, just so we're clear, my words were not going to address a "certain agenda," but I was hoping to empower your students to continue their education. My speech would have also touched on the importance of women, like my sister, who will go out into the world and know that they can now pull their chairs right up to the table of equality. To encourage them that they can no longer sit in the back and let men make the important decisions for them. And for that matter, letting them know that someday a woman or two or three can become a member of the Sloan-Hendrix School Board. After all, there's an opening, since my father will resign from the Board later this month.

I could just sit back and let this slide, but if I did, the discrimination that has taken place here would go unnoticed like it has so many times in history. Unless my arguments here cause you to reevaluate, nothing will change. But what must change, is the way we treat our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth because, News Flash, the world is changing and it starts in our homes, our schools and yes, even in our places of worship. The suicide rate amongst LGBT teens is staggering. As Superintendent, Mr. Walton--I hope you are aware that LGBT youth already attend classes on your campus. They are going from class to class with a fear of being outed or being treated horribly by their classmates--so adding educators and mentors to that mix prohibits these teens from thriving. The Board represents them too, and by silencing me, you're telling those students that it isn't okay to be who they are.

Being gay is not all that I am and it's certainly not something I chose. I'm a loving son, brother, a professional, and a fantastic friend. But what I am first and foremost is a father who tries every day to do the best he can to raise a kind and loving son. My little boy came into my life from the Los Angeles foster care system. I was the luckiest man in the world when, as a single parent, the adoption was complete. I'm raising him to understand that there are all kinds of people on our planet, all kinds of families and all kinds of love. While you want me to steer clear of the commencement podium, I am asked to speak annually to hundreds of potential parents about the importance of adopting these forgotten children.

Finally, I heard someone say that progress comes from those who are willing to walk a mile in someone else's shoes. We are currently fighting against inequality in our country. It's a fight--by the way--which we will ultimately win. Your decision to ban me from speaking solely because I'm gay is not unlike the

arguments white men made years ago, to not allow black children to share the same school house halls with white children. It's the same thing, Mr. Walton, it's called discrimination. And, in closing, in the words of Eleanor Roosevelt:

"...Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world."

Today, by your actions, that small place is in a small town called Imboden, where decisions are made around a small table, surrounded by five men and a School Superintendent. So, next time you're faced with an important decision, I hope you take time to think twice, have a proper dialogue, and most importantly choose to be on the right side of history.

Bryant Huddleston, Sloan-Hendrix Class of 1990