

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

May 7, 2013

Good schools build thriving communities, Editorial (Pine Bluff Commercial)

Over 40 years ago, my husband and I settled into our first home on West Orlando Street in Pine Bluff. For ambitious 20-somethings, locating a half block from the newly built Edgewood Elementary was a no-brainer. I was eager to begin my teaching career and we knew we wanted our children to attend the Watson Chapel School District.

For a community to thrive, good schools are a necessity. As parents, grandparents, citizens and leaders, we cannot afford to remain voiceless while our once-flourishing community wastes away and our public education system crumbles.

I taught civics, government and U.S. history at Watson Chapel Junior High and High School for 26 years before entering the public service arena. Both my children are graduates of Watson Chapel and have built successful careers as a principal and doctor through the excellent education they received. This community is where I raised my family, built a career and was elected to proudly serve my neighbors and friends in the state Legislature.

During my six years in the Arkansas House of Representatives, I served on the Education Committee, which worked to provide the means for every young person in the state to receive a quality education. You and I share the same responsibility as members of this community, and must continually strive to provide the very best opportunities for our precious children. As I reminisce about the school where my kids began their education, it is clear we must stop ignoring the realities of our suffering school system, take action and start over by building a new Edgewood Elementary.

The Watson Chapel School District is under a state mandate from the Arkansas Department of Education to replace Edgewood Elementary. From deteriorating buildings to traces of asbestos and classrooms that do not meet basic state safety and health regulations, Edgewood Elementary is simply not able to provide our youngest students with a suitable environment for learning. Aging facilities are not attractive to families — whether they live in the district or consider Watson Chapel through school choice. New families, bright young students and businesses are overlooking our community everyday and planting their roots in nearby areas with better resources and newer schools. Thankfully, we can change that.

On May 14, the Watson Chapel School District is asking voters to approve a 2.3-mill increase to build a new, safe and healthy elementary school. There has not been a millage increase in our community in nearly four decades, since 1974. Watson Chapel has the lowest millage rate in Jefferson County, and even with this increase our rate would still be at the very bottom.

Neighbors and friends approach me often with concerns about declining population and the inability for our school system to compete with surrounding districts. Working together is the only way we can secure the best possible future for our children.

Weak schools do not build strong communities. We must offer families considering a move to our area a quality education and safe learning environment for their children. That's what my husband and I were looking for over 40-plus years ago when we bought our first home on West Orlando. We found it then, and with your help in passing this millage on May 14, young families and their children can find it as well.

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Toni Bradford is a retired Watson Chapel teacher who served three terms in the Arkansas House of Representatives from 2007 to 2012. She and her husband currently reside in the Watson Chapel community.

Police investigate vandalism at north Ark. school (Associated Press)

OMAHA, Ark. (AP) - Classes are back on Tuesday at a north Arkansas school district after thieves broke into the school over the weekend, stole electronics and vandalized school buses and classrooms.

Omaha School District Superintendent Jerry Parrett says the vandalism and theft happened Friday night. Parrett tells the Harrison Daily Times (<http://bit.ly/10fRIGn>) that the vandals sprayed fire extinguishers inside 9 of the school's 10 buses.

Parrett says the vandals then broke a window at the elementary school, trashed two classrooms and stole 10 iPads and two laptop computers. He says they also stole cases of food from the school's backpack program, which sends food home for underprivileged students.

He says the vandals also stole a defibrillator.

Boone County Sheriff Mike Moore says surveillance video captured the vandals and that investigators have identified suspects.

Supporting state scholars by Gov. Mike Beebe (Russellville Courier)

LITTLE ROCK — As excitement builds toward graduation ceremonies this spring, it's a good time to look at Arkansas' progress in our efforts to improve higher education.

With all the advances we've made in K-12 education, we're still situated toward the bottom of national rankings when it comes to obtaining bachelor's degrees. The good news is, we are starting to turn that

trend around, and the young men and women celebrating their high-school graduations now stand a better chance of success in college, as well.

In 2010, only 38 percent of Arkansas' four-year public university students graduated in six years or less. The two areas that most commonly leave our higher-education students at a disadvantage are inadequate preparation and the lack of financial means to fund a college education all the way to fulfilling a degree program.

Just two years later, we're already seeing progress. In 2012, the state's average six-year graduation rate reached 40.8 percent. While the increase is slight, it is a sign that we're headed in the right direction, and more of our students are finding success.

One of the most efficient ways to continue our progress is through the support of our highest performing high-school graduates. The Governor's Distinguished Scholars Award, administered by the Arkansas Department of Higher Education, does just that.

The law allows ADHE to fund up to 300 scholars per class, and recently, we've given that program ongoing General Revenue monies so that they no longer have to rely on fund balances that had dwindled drastically.

In recent years, available funding allowed us to increase the number of Distinguished Scholars in the state. However, as fund balances have waned, we faced a significant decrease in available money for the Distinguished Scholars Award for the next fiscal year.

In the past, 300 of our incoming college freshmen received the award annually. For the coming fall, however, there would be only enough money for about 100 new students. As a result, several freshmen who met the stringent qualifications would not receive this state support to continue their scholastic achievement.

My office was inundated with numerous letters and emails from students and their families who had worked hard to become eligible for the award. These students were some of the brightest, hardest-working high-school seniors in Arkansas.

While their pleas highlighted a problem we were facing, it was also heartening to see the passion these students felt about continuing their education in Arkansas.

During the recently concluded legislative session, members of the Arkansas Legislature and I worked together and crafted a solution to help these students. We found savings in one part of the budget that could be re-directed to support the Governor's Distinguished Scholars program. As a result, the state will once again be able to assist 300 new Distinguished Scholars this fall.

Education is our state's top priority. I pledged two years ago to double the number of college graduates in Arkansas by 2025, and we will have to overcome many challenges to reach that goal in the decade ahead.

Dedicated students, their families, teachers and administrators are the key to our continued improvement in obtaining college degrees, and elected leaders and state officials will do all we can to support that effort all the way to graduation day.

'13 school-choice act spurs judges' query (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

A panel of judges wants to know whether an appeal of a lower court's decision to throw out the Arkansas Public School Choice Act of 1989 on constitutional grounds is moot after state legislators recently repealed and replaced the law.

The 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in St. Louis on Monday asked attorneys in the case to weigh in on the matter in briefs to be filed by May 22.

A three-judge panel from that court heard oral arguments Jan. 16 over appeals of U.S. District Judge Robert Dawson's decision to strike down the state's broadest school transfer law over constitutional concerns about a racial restriction included in the rule. The panel has not issued a ruling.

"Briefs should address, among other points of interest to the authors, whether the conduct challenged in the complaint continues under the new law," the court wrote in the order, citing previous cases in which state legislatures took action before judges made final rulings in court challenges to laws.

The Arkansas Public School Choice Act of 1989 - repealed by legislators in an act signed by Gov. Mike Beebe on April 16 - allowed students to transfer out of their resident school districts with a few exceptions. Those exceptions include a prohibition of such transfers if the percentage of enrollment for the student's race in the new district exceeded that percentage in the student's resident district.

Dawson sided with a group of parents of white children who were forbidden transfers from Malvern to Magnet Cove schools under the former law and who argued that the exemption used race too broadly. In a departure from their wishes, he invalidated the entire law when he determined that the offending racial restriction could not be severed from the surrounding language in the law.

Dawson stayed his decision, halting its application while the higher court considered appeals.

The Arkansas attorney general's office, defending the former law on behalf of the state Board of Education, argued that the racial restriction was a constitutional method of promoting racial balance among the state's school districts, citing previous decisions in a decades-old desegregation case involving the state and the Little Rock, North Little Rock and Pulaski County Special school districts.

In the time since the appeals court heard oral arguments over Dawson's decision, state legislators replaced the law involved with the Public School Choice Act of 2013, which mimics much of the language of the previous statute and replaces the racial restriction with a provision that allows a district to opt out of allowing transfers under the law if the district "is subject to the desegregation order or mandate of a federal court or agency remedying the effects of past racial segregation."

The new law also says transfers granted under the 1989 School Choice Act will remain in effect, even though that act has been repealed.

Jess Askew III, attorney for the parents, said he will study the new law's effects on his clients' ability to transfer before writing his brief.

"We do not think the entire case is moot," he said.

Other attorneys in the case, including those at the attorney general's office, said Monday that they were studying the judges' order before determining how to proceed.

The portion of the new law that "grandfathers in" transfers allowed under the previous law gave some attorneys pause, said Allen Roberts, an attorney for the Camden Fairview and El Dorado school districts, which intervened in the case.

It can be problematic to base a law on a previous statute ruled unconstitutional by the courts, he said. But those students whose existing transfers were "grandfathered in" would likely be allowed to transfer under the new law, eliminating the concern, he said.

"I don't see how anybody who transferred out in the first place [under the 1989 law] could not go," Roberts said. "Some of the people who didn't get to go in the first time still won't get to go, but it's for an entirely different reason."

Askew's clients, for example, would be prohibited transfer under the new law if the Malvern School District opts out. Their transfers may also be blocked under other restrictions in the new law, which limits school-choice transfers to 3 percent of a district's enrollment and allows districts to set limitations if they don't have adequate facilities or teaching staff to add students.

Four districts have notified the Arkansas Department of Education that they plan to claim an exemption from allowing transfers under the new law, said Phyllis Stewart, chief of staff for the department. They are Camden Fairview, El Dorado, Blytheville and Hope.

Districts have until May 17 to notify the department if they consider themselves exempt, according to a memo from department attorney Jeremy Lasiter.

Education Department data show that 12,691 of the state's 471,867 students have transferred out of their resident school districts in the 2012-13 school year. While it is not possible to determine how many of those students used the School Choice Act, the department has said the policy is the most popular method of transfer.

NLR district wants \$9.25 million more in state school aid (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

North Little Rock School District leaders made plans Monday to ask for an additional \$9.25 million in state facilities aid on top of the \$26.4 million approved by a state commission last month for the district's citywide school construction and renovation program.

School Board members didn't vote during a lengthy work session Monday but raised no objections to recommendations from consultants Brad Kiehl and Fred Cashaw that they ask the Arkansas Division for Public School Academic Facilities and Transportation for increases to the amount approved by the division's three-member commission April 24.

The district will seek \$6.75 million to be shared among the construction of four elementary schools and nearly \$2.5 million for the expansion of the North Little Rock High School-West Campus.

The anticipated appeal is the latest development in the 9,000-student district's \$265.5 million plan to reduce its 21 campuses to 13, nearly all of which would be built anew or extensively renovated over the next few years. The magnitude of the district's capital-improvement project - to be financed with the proceeds from a 7.4-mill voter-approved property-tax increase and savings in district operating costs in addition to the state aid - is unprecedented in the state.

The district originally sought more than \$80 million, anticipated receiving \$66 million and was allotted \$26 million from the state Educational Facilities Partnership Fund last month.

The state fund, created to equalize the condition of school buildings across the state, is expected to provide \$212.3 million to dozens of Arkansas districts for replacing utility systems, reroofing projects and new construction over the coming 2013-15 funding cycle. The aid is distributed in part based on a formula that takes into account the condition of existing buildings, the need for classroom space and a district's local property-tax wealth. Districts that have greater wealth must pay a greater percentage of the building cost.

The commission committed \$617,698 each for what will be five newly built North Little Rock elementary schools despite the district's request for greater amounts per campus. The new elementary school are expected to cost in excess of \$13.3 million and \$15 million each.

State officials reduced the requested dollar amounts for new elementary schools based on the fact that the district will continue to use Pike View Elementary School, thereby reducing the need for classroom space district wide.

However, district representatives argue that the plan calls for using Pike View as a pre-kindergarten center and not as a regular elementary school, making additional elementary school space necessary.

The district plans to make more than \$5 million in improvements to the repurposed Pike View campus but not with the state aid, which is not available for pre-kindergarten centers.

Groundbreaking ceremonies are tentatively planned for Amboy, Meadow Park, Lakewood and Boone Park school construction projects later this month, with completion dates set for mid-2014. With the exception of Amboy, the new schools will be built on the current schools' land.

The district also is planning a groundbreaking ceremony for Phase I of the expansion of the North Little Rock High School-West Campus this month. The state has approved \$18.9 million for that campus over the two-year funding cycle. The district is seeking another \$2.4 million for the high school, contending that the state erred in counting the district's alternative school space at the former Rose City Middle School as available high school classroom space.

The state disapproved the North Little Rock district's request for more than \$18 million for a new middle school for grades six through eight. School Board members and their consultants agreed that the district could wait to reapply for state aid for that campus in the 2015-17 funding cycle.

Board members talked briefly about ways to cut costs elsewhere in the building program to generate funds for the middle school, such as retaining Lynch Drive Elementary rather than building a new Glenview Elementary.

Board member J.T. Zakrzewski said the district has to act based on available financial information, but urged that the district "move forward with the appeal."

"We should change the plan only as a last resort," he added.

NLR assistant superintendent Acklin to lead Dollarway district (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

North Little Rock's assistant superintendent has been tapped to lead the Dollarway School District in Pine Bluff.

Education Commissioner Tom Kimbrell picked Bobby Acklin to lead the district effective July 1, the Department of Education announced in a news release Tuesday. Acklin replaces Frank Anthony, who came out of retirement in June to help temporarily lead the district.

Of Acklin, Kimbrell said in the release, "His heart is in the right place, he's about kids. His understanding of the educational process and his ability to build and sustain trusting relationships within a community will drive improved student and educator performance."

Acklin has served the North Little Rock School District since 1989, according to the release.