

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

February 5, 2013

P.C. district hires superintendent (El Dorado News)

PARKERS CHAPEL — Parkers Chapel School board has selected Michael White to be the new school superintendent beginning July 1, to replace John E. Gross who has been superintendent since 1986. Gross has been associated with the school since 1970.

Working with consultants from McPherson and Jacobson L.L.C., the board received resumes from 13 applicants and interviewed five finalists for the position Jan. 25-31. The board held meetings Friday and Saturday to make their final decision and announcement.

White is superintendent at Bloomburg, Texas. He has worked in the Bloomburg Independent School district as superintendent since 2008. He worked in the Atlanta Texas School District from 1982 to 1999 as a teacher and coach and was the high school principal there until 2008.

He began his educational career in 1978 as a teacher and coach at Blytheville High School.

According to the Bloomburg Independent School District website, in a “greetings” from the superintendent dated Sept. 23, 2011, White wrote, “I was born in Brooklyn, New York, and lived on Long Island for most of my youth. I am the oldest of eight brothers. My mother decided she wanted the family to return to her roots in Texas, so we made a move in 1970.

I graduated from Liberty-Eylau High School in 1974.

“I was accepted to the U.S. Air Force Academy where I attended basic training and one semester of schooling before I decided the military was not what I wanted as a career.

“During my first Christmas break, I was offered a scholarship to play football at Southern Arkansas University (formerly Southern State) in Magnolia, Arkansas. I completed my degree there with a B.S.E. in mathematics. The day after I graduated college, I married my wife, Debbie and we just celebrated our 34th anniversary this past May (2011).

“My wife and I began our teaching career in northeast Arkansas in Blytheville. After four years, I accepted a position in Atlanta, Texas as a coach and math teacher. In 1992, I completed my master’s in educational administration and my mid-management certification at Texas A&M, Commerce. In 2002, I completed my superintendent certification at Texas A&M, Texarkana. I worked 26 years at Atlanta High School, where I served the last nine years as the principal. During those years, my wife and I served as youth directors for First United Methodist Church of Atlanta.”

Greenwood Superintendent Retires (SW Times Record, Fort Smith)

GREENWOOD — The Greenwood School Board reluctantly accepted Superintendent Kay Johnson Headley's resignation Monday and followed the action by extending a promotion and three-year contract to Assistant Superintendent John Ciesla.

Headley's resignation — a retirement — is effective July 1.

"She is constant. She is really cool under pressure. She just handles things and makes it look easy. ... It's not an easy job. We will miss her. But we got a good man," board President Todd Hales said, nodding in Ciesla's direction.

Ciesla's superintendent contract is effective July 1.

Headley said this is a time in her career when retirement is a good option. She recently remarried, and her husband, Glenn Headley, who was a pharmacist and Home Depot owner, retired last month.

Headley, a Greenwood native, began teaching in 1978 at age 28, as a Greenwood Elementary School fifth-grade teacher. Seven years later, she moved to County Line School District and worked there for 13 years, serving first as elementary principal then as superintendent.

In 1999, she became director of the then new Western Arkansas Technical Center, and in 2002, she returned to Greenwood as superintendent. Headley said her home is Greenwood, and she will continue to live there.

Ciesla, who has served the district for seven years, called his selection as superintendent a "dream come true." Ciesla said he has been honored to have Headley as mentor and what she's taught him is immeasurable. There are many things he will miss about working with her, he said.

"Her professionalism; she's a class-act person just inside and out. She's an easy leader to follow, well-respected across the state," Ciesla said.

Assistant Superintendent Jerry Cecil said he admires many things about Headley.

"Among those are her understanding of people and her willingness to make tough decisions even when it is not the popular thing to do, but it is the right thing to do," Cecil said.

In other business, the board extended the contracts of the assistant superintendents, principals, assistant principals and preschool director for the 2013-14 school year.

Arkansas Legislature: Senators Briefed On \$1.1 Billion Steel Mill Project (SW Times Record, Fort Smith)

LITTLE ROCK — The board of the Arkansas Teacher Retirement System voted Monday to invest \$60 million in the proposed \$1.1 billion Big River Steel mill in Osceola, while Gov. Mike Beebe and state officials briefed the Senate on financial details of the project.

The deal is contingent upon the Legislature approving a \$125 million bond issue for the project.

“We recognize that this is an enormous investment that we are asking the people of Arkansas to make. We have done everything we know how to do to try and ensure the safety of the taxpayers’ dollars,” Grant Tennille, director of the Arkansas Economic Development Commission, told senators.

“Like with anything, this is not without risk, but we’ve done our due diligence to ensure that we’ve mitigated the risk as much as possible,” Tennille said.

Tennille and other AEDC officials, along with officials with the state Department of Finance and Administration, Arkansas Development Finance Authority, ATRS and Delta Trust spent nearly three hours on the Senate floor discussing the project and answering questions from lawmakers. Beebe, who appeared at the briefing for only five minutes, urged lawmakers to study the proposal carefully.

“If the Legislature doesn’t like this, if the Legislature doesn’t think this is good for Arkansas, it’s not going to happen,” Beebe said.

Last week, Beebe announced plans to build the steel mill in Mississippi County. The project is projected to employ more than 500 people with annual average pay of \$75,000.

The Legislature will be asked to authorize the issuance of \$125 million in general obligation bonds to support the project under Amendment 82, the first such use of the so-called superprojects amendment passed in 2004.

Officials told the Senate on Monday that under the \$125 million bond proposal, \$50 million would be loaned to Big River Steel, to be repaid to the state over time.

Another \$50 million would be used for site preparation for the plant and \$20 million would be used for subsurface stabilization at the site. The remaining \$5 million would cover the cost of issuing the bonds.

Earlier Monday, the ATRS board voted to invest \$60 million into the steel mill project for a 20 percent interest in Big River Steel.

ATRS Executive Director George Hopkins said later that the board has confidence in the steel mill project.

“This is an ... investment where we see great opportunities for quality returns in 20 to 30 percent conservative, and it could be a lot better than that, and this is after stress testing this investment to make sure that even at lower capacities of operation of the mill and tighter spreads between scrap and finished steel, this mill will pay all its obligations and do well based upon long historic averages,” Hopkins said in an interview with the Arkansas News Bureau.

Estimated value of ATRS is about \$12.25 billion, with about 55 percent of that invested in the stock market.

Hopkins compared the board’s decision with its investment of about \$65 million since 2010 in South Arkansas timber land.

Senate Pro Tem Michael Lamoureux, R-Russellville, told reporters after the Senate meeting that the ATRS investment was a positive sign.

“For me personally it provides a high degree of confidence,” Lamoureux said. “I know the level of detail (ATRS) puts into evaluating a project.”

During the briefing, Sen. Bruce Holland, R-Greenwood, expressed concerns about the state investing \$125 million in a project being backed by an unknown company that doesn’t have a national reputation.

“You are absolutely right,” Tennille told Holland. “This is a start-up, but this is a start-up that is being helmed by people who have done it 14 other times. So, we factored that into our risk analysis, but again we feel fairly comfortable ... this will work.”

Tennille told reporters later that the project has a number of safeguards in place to protect taxpayers.

He said the state will not sell any bonds until Big River Steel has all its funding in place.

“That’s one safeguard. They’ve got to have their money in before the people of Arkansas take on the risk,” he said. “The second thing is, they’ve got to spend \$250 million in project costs before they can start to spend any of our \$120 million, so we’ll start to see that mill coming out of the ground before we start to spend.”

The House is to be briefed on the project Wednesday.

House panel to vote on school consolidation (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — An Arkansas House panel is considering a proposal to change the criteria for determining when a school district is consolidated.

The House Education Committee is set to vote Tuesday on a bill that would change the formula for calculating the number of students in a school district for the purposes of consolidation.

School districts with fewer than 350 students are currently placed on the consolidation list.

The state determines the number of students by taking the average daily membership of the school district.

The proposed legislation calls for the state to include home-schooled students in its count.

The bill is sponsored by Democratic Rep. James Ratliff of Imboden.

Trustees pull \$420 million from fund (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — The Arkansas Teacher Retirement System’s trustees on Monday terminated its investment of about \$420 million in a fund managed by a Boston based firm.

The company is Wellington Management Company LLP, which has been an investment manager for the system since 2007, according to Chicago based system investment consultant Hewitt Ennis Knupp.

Wellington Management Co. manages two global stock market portfolios for the system with a combined value of about \$699 million as of Dec. 31, Hewitt Ennis Knupp said in a memo to the system's trustees.

The trustees voted to end the system's investment of about \$420 million in Wellington's "opportunistic equity portfolio" and invest the proceeds into a global stock market index fund.

Hewitt Ennis Knupp said it has become "increasingly concerned regarding the consistency and repeatability of the investment process, as well as the robustness or risk management procedures surrounding the strategy" for this particular fund.

The trustees also learned that the system has invested \$5.8 million to purchase a 436-acre organic citrus farm in Polk County, Fla., and \$3.03 million to purchase an 892-acre farm in Des Arc, known as the James Miller farm.

The trustees also learned through a preliminary report from Hewitt Ennis Knupp that the system's investments were valued at \$11.85 billion as of Dec. 31. The system's investment return for the last quarter was 2.2 percent and the return for the first six months of the fiscal year is 6.4 percent, the report said.

System Executive Director George Hopkins said the system's investments were valued at roughly \$12.25 billion as of Jan. 31.

In other business, the trustees decided that they want Senate Bill 123, sponsored by Sen. Bruce Maloch, D-Magnolia, to be amended.

The bill, one of about 20 proposed by the system as part of its legislative package would give the trustees the authority to increase the amount system members contribute to the retirement fund from 6 percent to a maximum of 8 percent of their salaries.

The trustees said they want the bill changed so they would only have authority to increase that rate from 6 percent to 7 percent. The trustees would be able to increase the rate charged to system members if it's projected that it would take more than 30 years for the system to pay back its unfunded liabilities.

State law encourages the state's retirement systems to have fewer than 30 years of unfunded liabilities to pay back.

System actuary Gabriel, Roeder, Smith & Co. of Southfield, Mich., told the trustees in December that the system's projected period for paying off its unfunded liabilities exceeded 100 years on June 30.

Calendar (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — This is a calendar of public events of the 89th General Assembly for Tuesday, the 22nd day of the 2013 legislative session.

HOUSE

10 a.m. Judiciary, Room 149 10 a.m. Public Health, Welfare and Labor, Room 130 10 a.m. Education, Room 138
10 a.m. Public Transportation, Multi-Agency Complex, Room B 1:30 p.m. House convenes

SENATE

10 a.m. Insurance and Commerce, Room 171 10 a.m. State Agencies and Governmental Affairs, Old Supreme Court chambers 10 a.m. City, County and Local Affairs, Room 272 1:30 p.m. Senate convenes

ALSO

7:30 a.m. Joint Budget Committee (Personnel), Multi-Agency Complex, Room B 9 a.m. Joint Budget Committee, Multi-Agency Complex, Room A

Legislative summary (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — This is a summary list of bills (by bill number, lead sponsor and title) introduced through Monday 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 Bills

HB1245, Hammer - An act to amend the law concerning regional solid waste management districts.

HB1246, Copenhaver - To create for issuance a special license plate in support of law enforcement.

HB1247, McElroy - To amend the law concerning declaration of emergencies under the Arkansas Emergency Services Act.

HB1248, Hobbs - To exempt home addresses of nonelected school employees from disclosure under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act.

HB1249, Hobbs - To amend the deadline for a school district board of directors to complete rezoning following a decennial census.

Notable Resolutions HR1005, Steel - To designate the month of March as “Multiple System Atrophy Awareness Month” to increase public awareness of this progressive neurodegenerative disorder that affects the autonomic functions of the body.

HR1006, Lenderman - To recognize National Future Farmers of America Week.

SENATE Bills

SB237, Hester - An act regarding the administration of a lethal injection at the Department of Correction; and to declare an emergency.

SB238, Wyatt - To amend the records required of certain scrap metal transactions.

SB239, Hendren - To enhance the protections provided for international student exchange students.

SB240, Wyatt - To allow a county to appoint more than one (1) deputy sheriff.

SB241, Wyatt - To amend the law concerning sport shooting ranges.

State revenue beats forecast for January (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — An inability to process tax returns plus higher tax rates in the new calendar year led state revenue to come in \$61.3 million - or 13.5 percent - above the forecasted amount in January, the state finance department announced Monday.

State general revenue in January increased by \$30.5 million - 5.5 percent - over the same month a year earlier to \$583 million.

Last month's overall collections exceeded the state's forecast by \$34.7 million, the state Department of Finance and Administration reported Monday in its monthly revenue report.

The total collected also represented a record for the month of January. The old record of \$552.5 million was set the previous year, in 2011.

State Finance Director Richard Weiss said the \$31.2 million (10.1 percent) increase in income tax collection in January was caused by an inability to issue tax refunds until about a week later than normal because of congressional wrangling over tax increases and spending cuts.

"The whole thing really is about the 'fiscal cliff,'" Weiss said.

Individual income taxes are made up of payroll withholdings, estimated payments and payments from income tax returns and extensions.

Weiss said the Internal Revenue Service wasn't prepared to release tax returns in January because of uncertainty about how the tax code might change and hadn't authorized the states to do so either. Weiss said the state Department of Finance and Administration had expected to refund \$30 million in January but couldn't.

"We have a one-time blip that really drove the collections up," he said.

Individual tax refunds totaled \$10.3 million, which is \$23.9 million or 69.8 percent below January 2012.

Gov. Mike Beebe cautioned that collection anomalies made the month look better than it was.

Beebe said the net amount available is "distorted because the [federal government] didn't get their stuff together on what they were going to do on the fiscal cliff [and] what the tax code was going to look like and so everybody's delayed being able to file returns on the [federal government] which automatically delays us too," Beebe said. "So there haven't been any refunds. They will be coming."

He said the spike in the net available amount in January should be matched by a drop in what's available in February's report.

"People need to be aware of that. You'll see a big reversal of those numbers in the coming months," Beebe said. Weiss said collections were also skewed by companies shifting income in 2012 so that the money would not be taxed at higher 2013 rates.

General revenue comes mainly from income and sales taxes.

It amounts to about 20 percent of the state's \$25 billion a-year budget, which includes federal funds, special revenue such as the gasoline tax, cash funds such as college tuition and fees and other money. In the first seven months of fiscal 2013, which began July 1, gross general revenue totaled \$3.4 billion.

That is \$120.9 million or 3.7 percent above the total general revenue collected in the first seven months of fiscal 2012.

Sales tax collections continue to be below forecast, coming in \$1.8 million, or 1 percent less, than in January 2012.

At \$178.3 million for the month, sales tax collections were 5 percent below forecast.

Some sales taxes and other revenue collected during the holiday season and held up by the Christmas snowstorm didn't arrive until January, so they're included in the latest report.

Weiss said he doesn't know what has caused the low sales tax collection, which has been below forecast in each of the first seven months of the fiscal year.

"We don't have a real clear answer on [why]," he said. "It has been a problem just all through this recession." Beebe expressed concern about the sales tax collections.

"There's a troubling statistic in there in that sales tax is not performing well. It's been absolutely consistent, which means that people are still wary about spending money and people are still concerned about what their future might be, so there's a caution there that affects the economy," Beebe said.

According to the Finance Department, January's general revenue included:

A \$1.7 million (6.7 percent) increase in corporate income tax over the same month last year to \$27.9 million.

A \$55.2 million (12 percent) increase in net available revenue over January 2011 to \$516.1 million, above the state forecast by \$61.3 million (13.5 percent). The net available is the amount agencies are authorized to spend.

A \$1.7 million increase (6.7 percent) in corporate income taxes over a year earlier to \$27.9 million, which was \$700,000 (2.5 percent) above the state's forecast.

Corporate income taxes are a volatile source of revenue that often fluctuate on a monthly basis.

Gross general-revenue collections are reduced by refunds and about a dozen other reductions, leaving a "net" revenue that agencies spend.

During the first seven months of fiscal 2013, the net increased by \$146 million (5.2percent) over the same period in fiscal 2012 to \$2.95 billion, the department reported. That's \$83.4 million (2.9 percent) above the Nov. 15 forecast.

Superintendent files kept private by LR board, firm (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — The Little Rock School Board and the Omaha, Neb., company it hired to assist in a search for a new superintendent refused Monday to release the job applications received by last week's deadline, despite a state law that subjects the information to public access.

A representative of the McPherson & Jacobson executive recruitment firm responded Monday to a newspaper's request Friday for the applicants and their positions with only a reference to a 2007 Arkansas Supreme Court case and no other explanation. The cited case dealt with public disclosure of building costs on the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville campus.

McPherson & Jacobson, which conducts several superintendent searches for Arkansas school districts every year, has in the past released the names and positions of applicants upon request immediately after the application deadline.

The firm did that most recently in the just-completed search for a new superintendent in the neighboring North Little Rock School District and did it with the Little Rock School District as recently as 2011.

But Dianne Curry, president of the Little Rock School Board, said in a telephone interview Monday evening that McPherson & Jacobson was acting in accordance with the School Board's wishes in not releasing the applicant names before the board receives at least some of the names - the recommended finalists - at a board meeting in two weeks, on Feb. 18.

"We feel they shouldn't release the information before the board gets it," Curry said. "We sure don't want the public to get it before we get it," she said and added later, "That's only fair to us as a board."

The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette renewed its request Monday evening to the company for the applications and included the seven individual School Board members in that request. No one responded Monday night.

The Little Rock board is seeking a replacement for Superintendent Morris Holmes, whose two-year contract with the 25,000-student district expires at the end of June.

The board late last year hired the McPherson & Jacobson firm to assist with that search at a cost to the district of \$21,500 plus expenses for the consultants and the job applicants.

The company's tasks have included advertising the position, accepting applications and recommending potential finalists for the School Board to interview.

The three-page contract for services between the district and company also states that the company will recruit applicants who meet the district's needs, keep all applicants informed of their status in the selection process, evaluate each applicant and conduct reference and background checks. The company also pledges in the contract to review the candidates with the board and assist the board in determining which candidates it will interview.

Curry said in an interview Monday that the decision to keep the names of the applicants confidential until the board receives them later this month was "contractual."

But the contract contains no restrictions on disclosure of the applicants. It says that "all materials developed in this search shall remain as property of the District."

The Democrat-Gazette on Friday asked McPherson & Jacobson representatives for the applicants and their positions, noting that the application deadline had passed and that the information was public information and subject to disclosure under the provisions of the Arkansas Freedom of Information Act.

The state act says all public records shall be open to inspection and copying by any citizen of the state.

The law also lists 19 types of records that are exempt from public scrutiny. Job applications are not among the legally exempted documents.

The law states that any person who negligently violates any part of the law “shall be guilty of a Class C misdemeanor.” The penalty for a Class C misdemeanor is a fine not exceeding \$500 and/or up to 30 days in jail.

Lorethie “Loe” Dunn of Bastrop, La., the consultant for the McPherson group, responded to the Freedom of Information Act request with a citation of a 2007 Arkansas Supreme Court case, Nabholz Construction Corp. v. Contractors for Public Protection Association.

The Contractors for Public Protection Association sought receipts and other records for the cost of a campus project at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.

In the case, the Supreme Court concluded that the construction company, which was building a dormitory at UA-Fayetteville, could not be sued by itself, absent the university, in an effort to access documents under the Freedom of Information Act.

The plaintiffs in the Nabholz case cited the 1990 City of Fayetteville v. Edmark decision in which Fayetteville officials refused to release documents that they argued weren’t public records at least in part because they were in the hands of a private contractor.

The Supreme Court said in that 1990 case that the Freedom of Information Act “cannot be circumvented by delegation of regular duties to one specifically retained to perform the same task.”

In the Nabholz ruling, the court referred to earlier cases in which private entities received public funds. But in each case, the request for records was directed to a public agency and not solely to a private organization.

On Monday, Curry said that she learned Friday from the company that there was an “issue” about the release of the applications.

“We provided our reply back to them today,” Curry said, “and our board group said we would not like to have that information released until it comes to us.”

Asked how the board made that decision, Curry said, “I called each of my board members to let them know what was going on or I e-mailed them, or the attorney did. He e-mailed them,” she said.

“Just say I consulted with our attorney about what our legal rights are,” Curry added. “Our attorney has told us that based on the request the contractor doesn’t have to release the information and I don’t have the information to release it so it can’t be released if we don’t have it.”

Curry denied that the board had in effect voted on the issue by e-mail. She said it was a recommendation from an attorney based on law.

“We have properly communicated and I have gotten responses back that a majority of the people don’t want information released before we get it,” she said.

The Arkansas attorney general’s office in 2001 and 2008 opinions cautioned public boards about the use of e-mail.

A 2001 opinion stated that “a violation of the FOIA’s open meeting requirement could occur under circumstances involving e-mail communications.” After the Feb. 18 meeting in which Curry said the board will receive at least the applicants that the consultants believe might best meet district needs, she said the board will conduct interviews of the candidates the week of Feb. 25. The board has tentatively set March 4 as the date for selecting a superintendent.

Protecting the children (Editorial, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — It’s reassuring to see schools in Northwest Arkansas and statewide taking the initiative to better secure buildings for their students and employees.

District officials in Springdale began locking down some of their schools late last summer by implementing new security techniques such as keeping all exterior doors locked when classes are in session.

If a person wants inside, a staff member peering at the visitor through a camera in the office has to make that happen electronically. The system also allows for electronic conversation between the office and the guest. Five additional Springdale schools soon will have the system.

While lock downs are welcome and necessary in today’s society, far more effective safety measures, unfortunately, are needed to keep children as safe as possible. And those additional methods will cost taxpayers a considerable chunk of money.

The disturbed young man who assaulted the Sandy Hook Elementary School encountered basically the same security lock down system now installed in Springdale; he just shot out a window and walked inside. That tells me that while school officials certainly are heading in the right direction, the existing glass on all first-floor accesses to a school eventually will have to be replaced with the unbreakable variety. Another idea: Perhaps small “safe rooms” with automatic heavy-duty locks in each classroom.

What a shame to find ourselves in such an horrendous place as a nation. Yet practically speaking, what good does a buzz-in system practically do to deter any suicidal madman intent on blasting his way into a school through a thin layer of glass?

Strange as it may seem, I’ve had other thoughts about this critically important matter. The fact that I’m thinking also doesn’t mean I’m right, you understand. But in order to protect the children, the time has come to outsmart those who would slaughter our children.

First, our nation has to decide if the criminal use of deadly force against innocent children has to be met with the potential for at least equal force in 2013 America.

I’ve said before (and still believe) that having armed police or well trained guards in schools also could provide effective insurance against a repeat of Sandy Hook, Columbine, Jonesboro, you name the U.S. school shooting out of at least 137 since 1980.

Notifying armed authorities during-or after-such events has never stopped or prevented one, right? Plain ol' common sense tells us that much.

By armed security I'm not talking about the nonsensical, hyper-exaggerated ones depicted by some editorial cartoonists with Neanderthal-looking guards armed with rocket launchers. It's that kind of emotional, utterly ridiculous cartoon depiction that prevents us from rational discussion.

As in gated communities, perhaps such a goal could be achieved by placing a guard at the entrance to schools who would allow parents displaying appropriate tags on their dashboards to drive onto the grounds. Others would be required to check in at the gate before being allowed anywhere near the school.

That's also what we do today (and have done for decades) on military bases. At my granddaughter's elementary school, every arriving parent must display such an ID tag before a human monitor with a walkie-talkie calls to have that child or children sent outside.

And isn't that the very idea behind buzzing anyone into a locked school? To stop potential problems from having access to the students?

It might be wise to consider asking volunteer parents and grandparents with two-way radios to stand watch at the main entrances to the schools. I suspect the vast majority of such folks would be willing (and probably eager) to volunteer.

I have to presume that many schools already have an emergency method of instantly contacting local police in case of an emergency. If not, that needs to be in place at every school.

And it can only be beneficial to ask police officers to include regular patrols that never take them far from the schools in their communities, something I also suspect many departments already do.

I applaud the Springdale School District and others who are taking steps to ensure safety for the children left in their care each weekday. I'm simply saying these monitored doors are a good beginning to hopefully one day fully resolving such a deadly serious problem.

Not Lee

My column last Saturday, which spoofed the arrest in Benton County of former Washington County Constable Tom Clowers for impersonating a police officer by comparing the matter to fictional character Barney Fife of the former Andy Griffith television show, concluded with my comment, "I miss Andy."

That sentence was changed in the editing process to "I miss Andy Lee," who happens to be the real-life former sheriff of Benton County. While I do like the colorful and sometimes controversial Andy Lee, I was referring to Andy Griffith. Shazam! Sometimes these things just happen.

Armed guards in schools (Commentary by Roy Ockert, Pine Bluff Commercial)

The Arkansas Legislature's only answer to dealing with the mass shootings plaguing our nation and especially its public schools is to arm the potential victims.

That is in line with the catch phrase of National Rifle Association Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre: “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” If you put good guys with guns in the schools, churches, movie theaters, etc., maybe they’ll be able to stop, or at least minimize, the carnage.

One of many problems with that mentality is how to tell the “bad guys” from the “good guys” before one decides to attack, especially if you believe LaPierre’s recent testimony, contradicting his previous stand, that universal background checks don’t work.

The many solutions then apparently depend heavily on each person who would be one of the good guys with a gun telling us whether he is good. If so, and if he undergoes the prescribed training, he can qualify as a protector.

That’s the theory behind the guns-in-churches bill, which was headed to Gov. Mike Beebe’s desk after passing 85-8 in the House on Monday, and also a new proposal, House Bill 1231, which would authorize selected school employees to be trained and armed on campus in an attempt to provide protection in case a bad guy shows up.

The bill is sponsored by state Rep. Homer Lenderman, D-Brookland, a former teacher, and I know it has good intent. But it’s just another attempt to deal with the problem of mass shootings at the back end — when the shooter attacks — rather than trying to prevent one from happening.

Such efforts are as pointless as the many proposals to impose new gun controls, such as an assault weapon ban. Those arguments come from opposite ends of the political spectrum and fuel the debate while failing to address the root cause of most mass shootings — mental illness. We’ve seen, after the fact, that almost every mass murderer has some form of mental illness, whether officially diagnosed or not.

The real argument should be how we can better detect and treat mental illness and how we can prevent people with mental illness from getting the weapons of tragedy that in recent years they’ve found easy to stockpile.

Having armed protectors in schools is not a new idea. In the aftermath of school shootings at Westside, Columbine and others, then-President Bill Clinton in 2000 started a program that provided federal funding for police officers to be placed in schools. These “school resource officers” helped children become familiar with and learn to trust law enforcement personnel while at the same time providing an armed deterrent to violence on campus.

Jonesboro and several other area schools took advantage of the program, which worked well. At one time Jonesboro had nine SROs, each assigned to a different school.

Unfortunately, the money was never enough to cover all public schools, and it began to dry up under the Bush administration, which had different priorities. Jonesboro and some other schools, working with local law enforcement agencies, have managed to keep some SRO positions.

Lenderman’s bill would take a different approach. It would authorize a school board to contract with an existing employee to provide security during school hours in addition to his or her other job duties and for additional pay. The employee would have to complete a 40-hour training course and then another 8-hour course annually at an accredited law enforcement training academy.

The employee must also pass a physical exam, but the bill does not say anything about determining mental fitness. Presumably, that would come from another requirement, obtaining a license to carry a concealed handgun. The Arkansas licensing process may include a background check when obtaining a handgun.

Once qualified, the employee “may carry a firearm and a concealed handgun on school property,” the bill says.

The problem is that, as LaPierre says, the background check system, as conducted by the FBI, is not working well, especially in regard to detecting mental illness. According to a recent Washington Post survey, 38 states maintain a database of people who have been adjudicated as mentally defective that is linked to the FBI system. Arkansas is not one of them. Arkansas has a database but is not required to make it available to the feds.

Why don't our legislators fix that gap first?

Three of our border states — Oklahoma, Louisiana and Mississippi — don't even maintain mental-health databases.

So finding the good guys to hire for these positions won't be as easy as it sounds.

Then there's a matter of money. How many schools have teachers or staff members who need something else to do and who are capable of fulfilling all the requirements, the most critical of which perhaps may be the ability and courage to engage a shooter in a gun battle.

And where do we get the extra money to pay those people?

If we get past all that, each armed guard would actually have to carry a firearm at all times, or the exercise would be pointless. Concealing a handgun is relatively easy, and we may not want a teacher or principal to carry something bigger. But most school shooters have brought plenty of firepower.

Such legislation does nothing more than make us feel better.