

# ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

April 24, 2013

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## **Educators accept new roles (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)**

Leadership changes are in the works at the Arkansas Department of Education and in the Pulaski County Special School District.

Laura Bednar, the Arkansas Department of Education's assistant commissioner for learning services, is resigning from the state position to become deputy superintendent of the Pulaski County Special School District on July 1.

Megan Witonski, currently superintendent of the Elkins School District, has been selected by Arkansas Education Commissioner Tom Kimbrell to replace Bednar at the state agency, Phyllis Stewart, chief of staff at the Education Department, said Tuesday.

Witonski has been superintendent in Elkins for three years. Earlier she was superintendent in what was then the Wickes School District, which has now become part of the Cossatot River School District.

In February, Witonski accepted a job as an assistant superintendent for human resources in the Springdale School District for the coming 2013-14 school year, but she received a release from that commitment after Kimbrell offered her the state job last week, Stewart said.

Witonski has served as a principal in the Mena and Wickes school systems and was a teacher in the Bryant School District.

Her salary for the state job was not immediately available Tuesday afternoon.

In the Pulaski County Special district, Bednar will replace Linda Remele, who earlier announced plans to resign June 30 to better meet family obligations.

Bednar has worked at the state Education Department since 2010. She was superintendent of the Stuttgart School District from 2004 until 2010, and she was the language arts curriculum coordinator for the Pulaski County Special district from 2000 until 2004.

She has also been a classroom teacher and school administrator.

Bednar has a bachelor's degree in elementary education from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, as well as master's and doctoral degrees in education administration and education administration and supervision from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.

In her new role as deputy superintendent, Bednar will manage instruction, curriculum, professional development for certified employees, federal programs, work-force development, gifted and talented programs, fine-arts programs, athletics, counseling and testing.

Her annual salary will be \$128,401, district officials said Monday.

Bednar is the second assistant commissioner to leave the state agency to go to the Pulaski County Special district.

Bill Goff, the district's chief financial officer, left the Education Department in 2011 to work for the Pulaski County Special district, shortly after the state agency took over the district because of audit findings of mismanagement and overspending.

The district remains under the control of the state Education Department and Kimbrell. The district is operating with a state-appointed superintendent and without a locally elected school board.

Jerry Guess, the district's superintendent, on Monday welcomed Bednar to the district's administrative team.

"Dr. Remele has done good work in her two years with us, and we have the ideal person to continue that progress," he said. "We're looking forward to the expertise, experience and respect for public education that Dr. Bednar brings to the table."

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## **Manila School board hires principal and assistant superintendent (Northeast Arkansas Town Crier)**

Manila School board members hired an elementary principal and assistant superintendent following an executive session at the regular April meeting held Thursday.

Board members are President Danny Robbins, Vice President Brandon Veach, Secretary Jeremy Jackson, Tracey Reinhart, Johnny McCain, Tony Crowell and Tommy Wagner.

Superintendent Pam Castor recommended hiring Chris Ferrell as assistant superintendent as of July 1. The board voted in favor of hiring Ferrell 7-0.

The board voted 7-0 to hire Jason Evers as elementary principal. Evers is presently an elementary teacher. He will be filling the position left by Principal Dale Case who submitted his resignation at Manila and will be taking a position in the Jonesboro district.

The board also voted to accept the resignation of Christy Duffell, high school teacher, at the end of the school year. They voted to grant a leave of absence for Misty Humway, choir director.

Classified contracts as presented by Ms. Castor were approved.

Architect John Mixon of Cromwell and Associates in Jonesboro addressed the council on the cost and options on construction of a concession/restroom facility on the football field.

Board member Wagner asked if the facility could be attached to the back of the gymnasium.

"Regardless if a decision is made to move the high school to another location, these facilities will be used," Wagner said. "If a weight room and the concession area could be located at the back of the gym we could use the existing dressing rooms and the rest rooms."

The board asked Mixon to prepare an estimate for an expansion of the gymnasium to accommodate the additions.

The board heard from Coach Bill Taylor, athletic director, on ways to generate more interest in the football program. He suggested double blocking the junior and senior high first and second periods and seventh and eighth periods. He said this would take care of the kids who ride the bus.

"Double blocking would help all sports but I think football will benefit the most," Coach Taylor said.

Castor said there is possible legislation there for middle levels.

"We anticipate some mandated requirements," she said. "We will watch for that."

Manila will host a football camp Aug. 1-2 for grades 3-11.

Coach Taylor talked about season tickets for the football program, creating a tailgate area on the northwest side of the football field and working on improving the atmosphere. He also requested more availability for the brown gym for football.

"We need it open first and eighth periods," he said. "He (Coach Castor) can't get a team ready when it is raining or cold with nowhere for the boys to go."

Coach Castor spoke to the board presenting a schedule and roster.

"We are dressing out almost 50 kids with 22 lockers," he said. "Anything you can do we appreciate it. These kids are deserving. If we can get double blocking it would be helpful."

Coach Castor reviewed the summer schedule with board members and camp dates.

Following the approval of minutes and review of financial reports, the board voted to approve expenditures for Technology Title I equipment including a reading program and Netbooks.

In other business:

\*The Board voted to use Cromwell and Associates as the district architect service.

\*Castor asked the board to consider a construction management company at the next meeting and millage increase in association with construction. She said they will need to look it over and it can be changed.

\*The board approved Castor's request to get legal advice in relation to the new building construction possibilities. The board approved Don Mixon of Jonesboro, longtime school attorney.

\*The board voted to change the date for the year's staff development hours to June 1.

\*The board voted to accept the mandated teacher/administrator evaluation process by the Arkansas Department of Education starting in the 2013-2014 school year.

\*The board discussed the School Choice Policy. Board member Wagner asked if the district should benefit from the policy can the district accommodate the additional students. Castor said the board will need to be ready to act on this as she has had three requests and they will be analyzing the numbers.

\*Among the policies reviewed by the board were recommendations from the Personnel Policy Committee including allowing three bereavement days for the loss of immediate family members, and if reduction in force is necessary, residency in the district should give extra points in the decision. They also discussed the number of days for family medical leave in conjunction with adoption. They adopted the federally defined policy on obtaining and releasing information on students. They also added a statement to the vacation policy stating if one is not granted vacation and takes it anyway, it could result in termination. Weapons on campus, with the exception of law enforcement officers, will be excluded even if a person has a concealed carry permit, and the removal of kids from the classroom based on new rules of student disciplinary policy.

\*Castor distributed proposed policies and asked the board to review them before the next meeting. One will deal with participation in extracurricular activities by home-schooled students and student acceleration.

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## **Legislature completes major work of regular session (Pine Bluff Commercial)**

LITTLE ROCK — The House and Senate on Tuesday wrapped up the business of the 2013 regular legislative session, the first since Reconstruction with Republicans in the majority.

Both chambers passed and sent to Gov. Mike Beebe legislation to set spending priorities for a \$4.9 billion budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1, along with legislation setting aside about \$170 million from the state surplus to be allocated by the governor and legislators for capital projects.

The session lasted 100 days. Legislators are scheduled to return on May 17 for formal adjournment. They also can use that opportunity to make technical corrections to legislation and attempt to override gubernatorial vetoes. Override attempts are expected on three vetoes that Beebe issued Tuesday.

The new priorities of the GOP-dominated Legislature became clear early in the session. Legislators passed measures to ban most abortions at 12 weeks; keep secret the names of people with concealed handgun permits; allow people with concealed handgun permits to carry their guns into church unless a church bars them; and allow employees of colleges and universities to carry concealed handguns on campus unless a school bars them.

Democratic Gov. Mike Beebe vetoed the 12-week abortion ban, as well as another measure banning most abortions at 20 weeks, both of which he said were unconstitutional. Legislators overrode both vetoes. The American Civil Liberties Union has already filed a lawsuit challenging the 12-week ban.

Beebe also vetoed a measure, supported by Republicans and opposed by Democrats, to require voters to show photo identification at the polls. The Legislature overrode that veto as well.

The governor decided not to sign or veto the bill to keep the names of people with concealed handgun permits secret, saying he would let it become law without his signature. However, Lt. Gov. Mark Darr irked Beebe by signing the bill into law as acting governor while Beebe was attending a National Governors Association conference in Washington.

In the closing weeks of the session, legislators approved the so-called “private option” for expanding health care coverage in the state under the federal Affordable Care Act. The plan, Arkansas’ unique alternative to expanding the state Medicaid rolls, calls for federal Medicaid dollars to be used to pay the premiums for about 250,000 of the state’s working poor to buy private insurance through the state insurance exchange.

Also passed in the final weeks were a package of incentives for a proposed \$1.1 billion Big River Steel plant in Mississippi County, including a \$125 bond issue, and package of tax cuts that will be phased in and will total about \$140 million by the 2015-16 fiscal year.

Beebe also pushed through the Legislature a reduction in the state sales tax on groceries from 1 1/2 cents on the dollar to one-eighth of a cent, to take effect only if certain of the state’s financial obligations decline by \$35 million for six consecutive months.

Over his two terms in office, Beebe has successfully pushed for gradual reductions in the tax, which was 6 cents when he first took office in 2007.

“Off the top of my head, I can’t think of anything that I wanted to happen that did not happen,” Beebe said Tuesday after signing the legislation on the private option, although he said he would have liked to see his vetoes stand.

Beebe called the passage of health care expansion “a victory for all of Arkansas.”

Sen. Hank Wilkins, D-Pine Bluff, said it was “a tough session” but ultimately one that lawmakers could be proud of.

“As we got the guns and the abortions and all of that stuff behind us and really started dealing with the meat of the issue, which has to do with the state’s budget and particularly our Medicaid expansion, it

was at that point that people really began to buckle down and work together, understanding that we've got to have cooperation or we won't get anything done," he said.

House Speaker Davy Carter, R-Cabot, called the session "a home run."

"Any one of those three big issues that we focused on — the steel mill, the tax reform, dealing with health care and the private option — any one of those by itself is a huge deal, and for this body to tackle all three of those things in one session I think is pretty remarkable," he said.

Senate President Pro Tem Michael Lamoureux, R-Russellville, a lawyer, said he regretted not passing any kind of tort reform but was pleased overall with the session.

"We probably learned it was harder to do than when we were criticizing those who were trying to do it before us, but we were able to work with the Democratic Party and the Republican Party and make it work," he said.

Health care expansion passed with solid Democratic support, but it was divisive for Republicans, many of whom had campaigned for office on promises to fight implementation of the federal Affordable Care Act.

House Majority Leader Bruce Westerman, R-Hot Springs, tried unsuccessfully to rally Republican House members against the plan. He said Tuesday that "time will tell" whether approving it was a good decision.

"I hope for the state that the private option works out well," he said.

Last year, the Republican House Caucus unveiled a conservative agenda for the session that included an annual growth cap on state spending, an overhaul of the state's income tax system, a voter ID law, Medicaid reforms, new abortion restrictions, mandatory drug testing for people seeking welfare and unemployment benefits, legislative oversight of legal settlements collected by the attorney general, tort reform, reduced government regulation and more education options for parents.

With the exceptions of the spending cap, drug testing and tort reform, all of the above passed in some form. Westerman said at least 50 bills that fit into the caucus' agenda passed.

"I think as we get further away from the session and reflect back on it, we'll see that there was a lot of conservative legislation passed, that (Republicans) did do a good job as the governing party for the first time in 138 years," he said.

House Minority Leader Greg Leding, D-Fayetteville, said that "all in all I do think it was a successful session for the Democratic caucus."

"We did have some trouble at the beginning," he said. "We saw a lot of legislation passed that we would have preferred to be able to stop. But we were able to help get Big River Steel passed, we were able to get Medicaid passed. There's a quarter of a million Arkansans who are going to be able to get access to insurance."

Sen. Jake Files, R-Fort Smith, said that during the session he received 25 to 30 emails a day from constituents in support of gun rights, so he was pleased to help pass several bills on that issue.

“It wasn’t perfect, but I think that we showed people that Republicans and Democrats could get along and could work together and work for the best of their districts and of the state,” he said.

Rep. Patti Julian, D-North Little Rock, said she was disappointed by the passage of the abortion bans and the voter ID bill but pleased by the passage of the private option, the Big River Steel incentives and tax relief.

“Even though the session sort of started off in a partisan manner on some of social-issue legislation, we ended on a really strong bipartisan note,” she said. “I wish that Washington could learn a lesson from us.”

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## **West Memphis teacher among praised in D.C. (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)**

WASHINGTON - Standing in the White House Rose Garden on Tuesday, the eyes of Arkansas’ Teacher of the Year brimmed with tears when President Barack Obama mentioned the December shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut.

Alexia Weimer, a kindergarten teacher at Avondale Elementary School in West Memphis, joined 53 other teachers from the 50 states, U.S. territories and the Department of Defense in Washington, D.C., to receive 2013 White House Teacher of the Year awards. Jeffrey Charbonneau, a high school physics and engineering teacher from Zillah, Wash., was named National Teacher of the Year and the others were honored as finalists.

Obama reminded them how a first-grade teacher huddled with students in a bathroom during the Connecticut rampage and whispered to them: “I love you.”

“In those moments, those brave teachers showed the world what they do is more than just educate kids,” Obama said. “They embrace them and they nurture them and they love them.”

That’s when Weimer’s eyes welled up.

“I tell my students I love them every morning, and I tell them again before they leave” in the afternoon, said Weimer, who started teaching at the school seven years ago after she earned a master’s degree at Arkansas State University.

“She leads with her heart,” said her mother, Kelly Bourisaw, who joined Weimer at the event.

Growing up in Blytheville, Weimer whittled her career aspirations down to two possibilities: elementary school teacher or president of the United States - a job with a minimum age requirement of 35.

Weimer, 30, said she doesn't regret her choice for a moment. Just leaving school for three days, she said, while her 19 students learn about frogs and butterflies with a substitute teacher, was difficult.

Next year, she'll be away from the classroom for even longer. As the Arkansas winner of the National Teacher of the Year program, Weimer will take a year's sabbatical. She'll serve on the Arkansas Board of Education in an advisory role and plans to spend time counseling education students before they take jobs in the classroom.

Weimer said she only accepted the award and the year off after she was guaranteed a position in the classroom at Avondale upon her return.

To be considered for the Arkansas honor, Weimer filled out an application, and had Avondale's principal, Glenda Bryan, and other colleagues send letters of recommendation. The Arkansas Education Department interviewed her twice and sent observers to her classroom before giving her the award.

Weimer said one of her biggest challenges is the different "skill sets" of her students.

"Some students already know their letters and some can't even write their name," she said.

To overcome those differences, and to get children with different learning styles to respond, Weimer tries to make the classroom a fun place. Some students, she said, are better at learning through visualization. Some need to touch and get a hands-on appreciation for the lesson. And others learn best by listening.

It's what Weimer and other educators call the "whole brain" approach to teaching.

At the ceremony, Weimer said she told Obama that her students voted overwhelmingly for him during their mock election, which was held about a week before the November elections.

"In all the years I've been there, they've never been wrong," she told the president.

Weimer said Obama responded that children usually have a "natural instinct" in those kind of predictions.

In his 10-minute speech congratulating the teachers, Obama steered clear of policy pronouncements. Instead, he praised teachers for their dedication and the emotional commitment they have for their jobs.

"They're not just filling blackboards with numbers and diagrams," Obama said. "In classrooms across America, they're teaching things like character and compassion and resilience and imagination. They're filling young minds with virtues and values, and teach our kids how to cooperate and overcome obstacles."