

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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New Summer Option Keeps Kids Learning (nwaonline)

Decatur School District Superintendent Larry Ben saw an opportunity to keep children learning through the summer.

“In Decatur one of the first things I’ve noticed is when the gym is open, the kids just show up,” Ben said. “We have a pool downtown. Other than that, there’s not a whole lot going on for kids to do.”

Beginning June 10, the school district will begin a summer school program for the first time in at least three years for about 90 students in the Benton County district of 530 pupils. The district will offer a summer school in two three-week sessions.

“We didn’t want this to be the traditional ‘You have to go to summer school because you’re behind or because you’re failing,’” Ben said. “It is to be creative and enriching. It’s for kids to come and do activities they find interesting and have fun.”

Students in the elementary program will work on projects that relate to a field trip scheduled for the end of the week, including trips to the Tulsa Zoo, the Oklahoma Aquarium in Jenks, Okla., and War Eagle Cavern in Rogers, Ben said. Online courses offered during the summer will allow high school students to retake courses they failed or to take courses that didn’t fit in their schedules.

A national organization estimated that 17 percent of children in Arkansas participate in summer learning programs in a May 2010 summer school report. The organization, the Afterschool Alliance, is a nonprofit that promotes access to quality after-school and summer programs.

The alliance defines a summer learning program as safe, structured classes with activities that promote learning during the long break from school. The study on summer school came from data collected by RTi, a market research firm, between March 2009 and May 2009. The firm surveyed 29,754 parents and guardians across the country.

The Arkansas Department of Education does not track participation in summer programs offered by school districts because they are not required by the state, said Laura Bednar, the department’s assistant commissioner for learning services.

State education officials recommend districts consider offering summer school programs because they have a positive impact on the development of reading skills in young children, Bednar said.

Districts use different sources of funding for summer programs, including money from their operating budgets and from state and federal funds to assist children from low-income families, officials said.

Participation in summer school statewide is limited because of the lack of programs offered, the cost of fees charged to enroll or a lack of transportation, said Laveta Wills-Hale, director of the Arkansas Out of School Network. The network is a project of the Arkansas State University Childhood Services and receives funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, based in Flint, Mich., and the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation.

The Arkansas Out of School Network has worked since 2005 to build support for more comprehensive summer learning programs that would increase participation in academics during the long break from school, Wills-Hale said. Ideally, children would spend six hours a day for five to six weeks involved in activities and projects to strengthen academic and social skills, Wills-Hale said.

The organization supported passage of legislation in 2011 that created a Positive Youth Development Grant Program, but lawmakers have not yet appropriated money to fund the grant program, Wills-Hale said.

Comprehensive programs would stop the learning loss that occurs over the summer, especially for low-income children who may not have the opportunity to learn from activities, such as visiting libraries, museums and experiencing the arts, Wills-Hale said. The network encourages schools to partner with community organizations to meet the need, she said.

“Kids are engaged, having fun and they are learning at the same time,” she said. “Particularly for lower income families who don’t have those opportunities ... everything they learned during the school year, it’s lost. It is not retained unless those concepts are reinforced.”

Some districts offer a limited number of summer programs.

Cedarville School District’s summer programs are limited to a kindergarten academy in the first week of June, a summer feeding program and a driver’s education course, Superintendent Dan Foreman said.

Bentonville School District quit offering elementary summer school because of a decline in state and federal funding, district spokeswoman Mary Ley said. The district will provide 30 classes for high school students needing to make up classes to graduate on time, as well as an ACT test preparation course and driver’s education.

Harrison School District had little money for a traditional summer school, Superintendent Melinda Moss said. With a grant from a federal program for homeless children, the district created an electronic reading lab for children involved in the annual summer feeding program, which provides any child under 18 with free breakfast and lunch. The “Lunch and Learn” program also allows high school students to retake courses online that they failed during the school year.

“We know that students need good positive things to do during their summer days,” Moss said. “Why not take advantage of having those students on site and help promote literacy? Every summer kids will regress a little bit. This is to try to keep their skills up.”

The first week of the district’s annual summer feeding program, which provides free breakfasts and lunches, drew 150 children. The new Lunch and Learn program, which is expected to cost \$32,500, begins June 10.

“Costs are rising,” Moss said. “When expenses go up, sometimes revenue lags behind. It’s just getting harder and harder to offer extra support programs that are not required by standards. We had to get creative.”

Ben said he hopes the Decatur program will prevent children from forgetting what they learned during the school year, he said. The district combined money from its operating budget with state and federal money it receives for assisting low-income children to cover the estimated cost of \$42,500.

Browner: For one night, Arkansans spoke up (Commentary, Log Cabin Democrat)

On April 4, 2002, something pretty amazing happened — people across Arkansas had a serious discussion about an important political issue. They agreed; they disagreed; they were nice to each other; they didn’t yell; and they might even have accomplished something.

The occasion was Speak Up, Arkansas! Almost 6,000 Arkansans met at 90 locations, at least one in each county, to talk about the future of education. A youth group had met earlier.

The event was organized by the Arkansas Blue Ribbon Commission on Public Education. Created by the Legislature in 2001, the commission was designed to help lawmakers respond to the Lake View school funding case. For the second time in less than a decade, courts were being asked to decide if Arkansas was complying with the state constitutional mandate to provide “a general, suitable and efficient system of free public schools.” For the second time, they would decide the state wasn’t in compliance.

The commission, made up of 25 state leaders in education, business and elsewhere, wanted public input into its report to the Legislature, but public meetings often don’t accomplish much. Often, an official speaks, the floor is thrown open for comments, and then people line up at a microphone to have their say. Sometimes, the more they smart off, the louder the applause.

Instead, the commission adopted a process known as “study circles” that was being coordinated by the Arkansas School Boards Association, with which I publish a magazine called Report Card. In a study circle, a facilitator guides a discussion, not a debate, that leads somewhere constructive rather than to someone “winning.”

During Speak Up, Arkansas!, people were asked a simple question: “What do we want our schools to do to educate our children?” They then discussed the answers to that question. Themes emerged that were organized into a report that helped the Blue Ribbon Commission write its final recommendation to the Legislature.

Speak Up, Arkansas!, which was covered live on AETN and KATV, didn't lead to earth-shattering conclusions. Common ideas included raising teacher salaries and increasing parental involvement. What was most important was that average citizens were involved in the process. Their voices were heard. And as the report on the event prepared by the University of Arkansas at Little Rock Institute of Government stated, "People will support what they help to build."

Speak Up, Arkansas! succeeded because everyone could agree that the central question – "What do we want our schools to do to educate our children?" – was worth asking, even if they didn't agree on all the answers.

What if average citizens were asked basic questions about other pressing issues and then given a chance to express themselves and listen to each other?

For example, what should the United States do about immigration? If diverse Americans were to gather to discuss that issue, the results would be far different than the ugly tone that debate usually takes now. Likewise, what should the United States do about the national debt? Average citizens gathered around a table would create more solutions and a healthier dialogue than today's hopeless finger-pointing has produced.

Imagine if such a process had been incorporated during the debate over health care reform. What if medical providers, patients, insurance companies and government officials across the country had engaged in a constructive conversation about how to contain costs while still providing adequate care? The discussion would have been much more fruitful than the sloganeering we instead saw throughout that time period. I suspect something better than either the status quo or Obamacare would have emerged.

It would be hard for a Speak Up, America to occur regarding one of these issues. The current system incentivizes discord, not discourse. To put it simply, the more we yell at each other, the more likely some people are to get elected and the more money some people make.

Those are the people who are controlling our national discourse now. Those of us who want something different must speak up.

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No big changes seen for teacher pensions (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

The Legislature granted more authority to the trustees of the Arkansas Teacher Retirement System to raise money and cut costs to reduce the system's unfunded liabilities, but thanks to growing investments, system officials said they expect to hold off making major changes for now.

An investment return of about 14.2 percent has helped fuel an increase in the system's holdings to roughly \$13 billion so far this fiscal year.

“For the most part, our road map of the future that we are recommending to the board is implement the small things and not do anything big until until July 1, 2015, unless the investments make us,” said George Hopkins, executive director of the Arkansas Teacher Retirement System.

Richard Abernathy, chairman of the system’s board of trustees, said he doesn’t expect the trustees to take “any swift action” on options such as raising rates charged to system employers and working members or cutting a \$75 monthly stipend paid to retirees.

However, Abernathy, who serves as executive director of the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators, said he expects the trustees to move fairly quickly to implement Act 606 of 2013.

Act 606 - sponsored by Sen. Eddie Cheatham, D-Crossett - grants the trustees the authority to develop a voluntary buyout program for the system’s 11,000-plus members who have earned benefits but are neither retired nor currently working for a system employer. The liabilities for those benefits exceed \$700 million.

“If we have good luck, we are expecting we can eliminate close to a 1 percent employer contribution rate [increase] off our books forever by doing this,” said Hopkins. For example, a 40-year-old member who has earned retirement benefits and wants cash to buy a car or invest in an individual retirement account could be interested in having his benefits bought out by the system at a discount, he said.

Unfunded liabilities are the amount by which an actuarial value of the system’s assets falls short of the system’s anticipated liabilities, or the total amount due members in future retirement benefits. Actuaries often compare them to a mortgage. The system’s actuary estimated that on June 30, 2012, the teacher retirement program had \$4.6 billion in unfunded liabilities, which would take more than 100 years to pay off - up from 66 years on the same date in 2011.

In December, a representative of the system’s actuary told trustees that a combination of higher investment returns, raising the rates charged to system employers and other changes might cut the projected payoff period to about 30 years.

The system has 71,195 working members with an average age of 45, average service of 10.1 years and average annual salary of \$34,362, according to actuary Gabriel, Roeder, Smith & Co. of Southfield, Mich. The system also has 34,160 retired members with annual benefits of \$709 million, or an average benefit of \$20,755 annually, and 4,432 deferred retirement participants with an annual payroll of \$268 million.

Buoyed by a rising stock market, the value of the system’s investments has increased by \$2 billion in this fiscal year, with about \$350 million to \$400 million of that paid out in retirement benefits, Hopkins said.

Hopkins said the system’s investment return is 14.2 percent as of April 30, based on a report from Chicago-based investment consultant Hewitt Ennis Knupp.

If the system earns an investment return of at least 17 percent in the current fiscal year, which ends June 30, and recognizes its investment gains immediately, the system will have about a 30-year projected payback period for its unfunded liabilities, he said.

One law enacted this year, Act 1446, sponsored by Rep. David Kizzia, D-Malvern, will allow the trustees to increase the rate charged to system employers starting July 1, 2015. School districts make up most of the employers.

The current rate is 14 percent of employee payroll, and the act allows the rate to increase by 0.25 percent a fiscal year if the projected payback period for unfunded liabilities exceeds 30 years. A 0.25 percent increase in the employer contribution rate would raise about \$7 million more a year for the system, according to an actuary for the Legislature. System employers pay about \$400 million a year into the system.

And the law states that any rate increase may be enacted only “if the system implements cost savings from member benefit programs and increased member contributions, measured after July 1, 2013, that equal or exceed the value of the employer contribution increase before or at the same time as an employer contribution increase.”

Another law passed this year - Act 1399, sponsored by Cheatham - requires any employer rate increase to be paid from funds appropriated to the state Department of Education.

The trustees could increase the amount charged to working members under Act 602, sponsored by Sen. Bruce Maloch, D-Magnolia. However, the increase would be allowed only if the projected payback period for the system’s unfunded liabilities remains above 30 years.

Working members pay 6 percent of their salary, a rate that hasn’t changed in more than 40 years. Act 602 allows the rate to be increased up to a maximum of 7 percent, and the maximum increase would raise about \$20 million more a year, according to Hopkins. About 49,000 of the system’s 71,000 working members contribute about \$120 million a year to the system.

Act 603, sponsored by Sen. Jeremy Hutchinson, R-Little Rock, allows the trustees to cut the \$75 monthly stipend paid to retired members. The law would save up to \$43 million a year, according to Hopkins. Again, the stipend can be cut only if the projected payback period for the system’s unfunded liabilities remains above 30 years.

Act 966, sponsored by Rep. John Catlett, D-Rover, allows the trustees to change the multiplier for service earned after July 1, 2013, for members paying into the system to between 1.75 percent and 2.15 percent, and the multiplier for members not paying into the system to between 0.5 percent and 1.39 percent. The act requires that service earned by members through June 30, 2013, would be subject to the current multipliers of 2.15 percent for members who pay into the system and 1.39 percent for members who don’t.

Multipliers are used to calculate a worker’s annual pension: the multiplier, times the worker’s total years of service, times the worker’s average salary based on his three highest-paid years.

The trustees wouldn't be allowed to cut the multipliers for members who pay into the system after their first 10 years of service unless an actuary projects the payback period for the system's unfunded liabilities exceeds 30 years.

Hopkins said the trustees have expressed concern about teachers from Missouri, Oklahoma and other states retiring in their home states and driving across the border to Arkansas to teach for several years before retiring again. He said the trustees could establish "a special [lower] multiplier" for the first 10 years of service for new members and a standard multiplier for service beyond 10 years.

Act 967, sponsored by Rep. Gary Deffenbaugh, R-Van Buren, would allow the trustees to reverse a "compounding" of the annual 3 percent cost-of living adjustment for system retirees and other participants. The bill would lessen increases in retirement benefits.

"I think what you will see for the next two fiscal years, absent some major negative market dynamics, no changes whatsoever in our employer contribution, no changes whatsoever in our member contribution, no changes in the multiplier absent a potential change to address that first 10 years of service that relates to border crossings," said Hopkins. "You won't see anything on a compound COLA [cost-of-living adjustment reversal] ... and no change whatsoever in that \$75 stipend that our retired members get."

Forty-five states have enacted changes in their state pension and retirement plans during the past four years, often with the goal of reducing the unfunded liabilities for the state, according to Tamara Rivale, a research analyst for the National Conference of State Legislatures.

At least 30 states have enacted increases in employee contributions to their retirement systems and at least 24 states have enacted reductions in cost-of-living adjustments for retirees during the past few years, she said. Many states also have increased age and service requirements for normal retirement, she said.

Conway Jr. High Quiz team wins nationals (Log Cabin Democrat)

The Conway Junior High Quiz Bowl team's first trip to nationals was a winner.

Eleven members competed and won at nationals last week at the sixth annual Junior National Academic Championship in New Orleans, La.

Coach Paula McKee said her team "loves the game."

"I had 11 kids who are all really good. Everyone played and that makes us unique and reflects well on our school district," McKee said.

McKee said though competition is over, her group wishes they could still have practice.

"When they get to be seniors we plan on going back," she said. "There's a national championship for the senior high division. My kids are very goal oriented and I could see them doing that."

Championship highlights on the Quiz Bowl group's website say Conway took a lead over Altamont, Ala., answering a question about the shootout at the OK Corral. Altamont took the lead in the close game after a Greek mythology question. Conway retook the lead with a question about Kurt Cobain, and Altamont led again with a question about the Nazi encoding machine, Enigma. Conway was back with a question about kerosene, and Altamont on a composer question. Conway identified North and South Korea as nations that have been at war since a 1953 cease-fire. Conway won 365 to 350. Organizers said it was the all-time record for lead changing hands.

The last game in the New Orleans finals brought Conway facing another Arkansas team, Hazen Middle School.

Conway won 330 to 315 with an audio clue when members identified "Puttin' on the Ritz."

"Winning a national championship in quiz bowl is just another indication of the quality of students, teachers, parents, and community that are part of Conway Public Schools," said Superintendent Dr. Greg Murry. "We are so very proud of these students and their great accomplishment."

Team members are Alex Brewington, Joe Coker, Tim Ablondi, Ben Coney, Zelda Engeler-Young, Connor Lichtenwalter, Kennedy Reynolds, Megan Haase, Kate Lange, Trey Smith and Matthew Sweere.

"They're all really smart," McKee said. "It rotates but Tim Ablondi would be captain. We have all kinds of questions from geography, history, language, Broadway musicals, to pop culture and sports. We have a well-rounded team. Tim has geography. Sam has math and Kennedy knows pop culture."

McKee said Ben Coney is the group's expert on classic and hard rock music. He also knows his sports, she said.

Matthew Sweere is her other sports buff.

"I have to brag on this group. Sometimes you have a few really smart kids and others who just sit around, but we have a team. They've learned to defer to each other," she said. "I've been proud of their teammanship and sensitivity to each other."

McKee said final credit goes to teachers in the school district.

"I consider myself a facilitator. I contribute as a coach, but I just enable them to use what other teachers have taught them. I credit our curriculum. Coaches will ask me how I get them to be so good, but I say that they come to me this way. I credit the teachers and whole school district for that."

Conway Christian won the junior high division at nationals in 2012.