

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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Spring break lunch program gives missing meals to students (Channel 40/29, Fort Smith-Fayetteville)

Several businesses and restaurants are offering free lunches to students whose families are unable to afford the meals when their kids are out on spring break.

School officials said 21,700 kids in Sebastian and Crawford counties receive free or reduced-price meals in school. About 32,000 students in the Food Bank eight-county area and 281,000 kids in Arkansas depend upon federally-supported school nutrition programs.

Seven out of every 10 students in the Fort Smith School District receives a free or reduced-price lunch at school. In some schools, nearly every child qualifies.

Fort Smith Public Library Director Jennifer Goodson said she sees many of the students come to the library during spring break.

"They stay all day and eat nothing," Goodson said.

Several businesses were helping by providing food at the Windsor Branch of the Fort Smith Public Library.

Golden Corral is providing lunches on Monday and Golden Living Cafeteria is providing them on Tuesday.

Saint John's Sack Lunch Program volunteer Ling Ling Moorman will provide a ham sandwich lunch on Wednesday.

Alex Catsavis with George's Restaurant is providing a mixed deli tray for the children to make up their own lunches Thursday.

Friday's lunch is being provided by Joe's Cantina.

Carl Davis at Davis Iron and Metal will be offering a hot dog lunch to Main Library visitors.

State Senate OKs New Requirements for Higher Education Chief (Arkansas Business)

LITTLE ROCK - The Arkansas Senate has approved legislation that would remove a requirement that the state's higher education director have background as a college administrator or teacher. It's a change that could allow the interim director to keep the job permanently.

The Senate voted 26-2 Monday for the bill removing a requirement that the director be an experienced educator at a college or university.

The measure instead requires the director to demonstrate competence in areas such as agency management, financial aid or institutional research. It also requires advanced coordination and communication skills.

Former state Sen. Shane Broadway has been serving as interim director since 2011. He took himself out of the running for the job permanently after questions were raised about whether he met the legal requirements for the job.

Teacher-pension bills gain panel's backing (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Arkansas Teacher Retirement System's trustees would be granted authority to increase the amount charged to the system's working members and to cut a \$75 monthly stipend for retired members under bills a legislative committee endorsed Monday.

The bills are among several measures proposed by the system that would give the trustees options to increase revenue and/or reduce costs to cut the system's projected payback period of more than 100 years for its \$4.6 billion in unfunded liabilities as of June 30, 2012.

The payback period for the unfunded liabilities was 66 years on June 30, 2011, said system actuary Gabriel, Roeder, Smith & Co. of Southfield, Mich. The Governmental Accounting Standards Board says pension plans shouldn't have more than 30 years of unfunded liabilities.

Senate Bill 123 by Bruce Maloch, D-Magnolia, would allow the trustees to increase the rate charged to working members from 6 percent of salary to a maximum of 7 percent if the unfunded liabilities remain above 30 years.

About 49,000 of the system's 71,000 working members pay into the system; the bill wouldn't affect the system's other 22,000 working members, actuary Jody Carreiro said, in a report to the Joint Committee on Public Retirement and Social Security Programs.

The system hasn't increased the 6 percent rate for 43 years and a 1 percentage-point increase in the rate would raise about \$20 million more a year, system Executive Director George Hopkins told lawmakers. The trustees also could increase the 6 percent rate to 6.25 percent or 6.5 percent under the bill, he said.

He assured lawmakers that he wouldn't recommend increasing the 6 percent rate until after the trustees increased the 14 percent rate charged to system employers. The earliest that the employer rate could realistically be increased is July 1, 2015, Hopkins said.

Sen. Eddie Cheatham, D-Crossett, said he would ask the committee next week to approve his Senate Bill 162 to allow the trustees to increase the rate charged to employers up to a maximum of 15 percent of employee payroll.

Sens. Joyce Elliott, D-Little Rock, and Jason Rapert, R-Bigelow, questioned the merits of granting the trustees authority to increase the 6 percent rate for teachers, including many who are struggling to pay higher health-insurance premiums.

Rapert said he hopes the trustees would be "very, very reluctant" to raise the rate.

Hopkins said the trustees must weigh several options to reduce the system's projected 100-year-plus payback period for unfunded liabilities, and the trustees will seek input from lawmakers before taking action.

The system's investments were valued at about \$12.75 billion as of Friday and investment return is more than 13 percent since July 1, Hopkins said afterward.

Sen. Jeremy Hutchinson, R-Little Rock, said he doesn't want to squeeze teachers' pocketbooks further, but lawmakers sometimes have to cast tough votes to allow for things that the system needs.

Board Chairman Richard Abernathy said the system's trustees need a menu of options to consider in order to minimize the effect of any changes on system members and make sure no one group is singled out.

Steve Singleton, executive director of the Arkansas Retired Teachers Association, said the association's board supports the system's legislative package to give the trustees the flexibility to consider various options.

Hutchinson said his Senate Bill 130 would allow the trustees to cut the \$75 monthly stipend paid to retired members, if the system needs to do so based on an actuarial reports showing that the unfunded liability payoff period is more than 30 years.

The bill would allow the trustees to cut the stipend to \$1 per month, effective July 1.

Afterward, Hopkins said the bill would allow the system to save up to \$43 million a year.

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, the actuaries reported.

The system has 34,160 retired members with annual benefits of \$709 million or \$20,755 annually and 4,432 deferred retirement participants with an annual payroll of \$268 million.

LR district announces temporary school chief (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Marvin Burton, the Little Rock School District's associate superintendent for high schools, will serve as the district's interim superintendent after Superintendent Morris Holmes' resignation takes effect on Friday.

School Board President Dianne Curry announced Burton's temporary title Monday.

Burton will hold the title while also serving as part of a three-person leadership team until the district's newly selected superintendent, Dexter Suggs Sr., starts work for the district. Suggs, who is currently chief of staff for Indianapolis Public Schools, is expected to begin work in Little Rock by July 1, if not earlier in June.

On Thursday, the Little Rock School Board appointed the leadership team of Burton, Dennis Glasgow, who is associate superintendent for accountability, and Kelsey Bailey, the district's chief financial officer. The board authorized Curry to meet with the team to designate a member as interim superintendent, which is necessary to fulfill state legal requirements for operating a school district.

Curry said Monday that all three members of the team will take on extra duties during the interim period. She said she anticipates adjustments will be made to their salaries to compensate for that. An attorney for the school district will work on those amounts for the School Board's consideration, she added.

Holmes announced plans last month to resign. His resignation comes in advance of the June 30 expiration of his contract with the district.

The board voted March 5 to hire Suggs after conducting a national search for a new superintendent.

Curry said efforts are under way to negotiate both a contract and a starting day of work for Suggs. Suggs is expected to provide some guidance to the leadership team before starting regular work in the district, Curry said.