Greenbrier U

Arkansas is 49th in its percentage of adults with a college degree, but that could change if other school districts follow Greenbrier’s lead. There, students like Trenton Harlan soon should be able to graduate high school with a two-year associate’s degree, giving them a head start on college and careers.
For more than seven decades, Stephens has been the leader in financing Arkansas education projects. Since 1990, we have consistently led the state in providing financial advisory services to local school districts, helping raise more than $6.5 billion for education-related facilities. Our clients know we put them first, and deliver honest, forthright opinions, insights, and advice.

As Arkansans, we know that the best way to ensure a strong future for our state is investing in public education today. At Stephens, we appreciate how Arkansas teachers and administrators strive every day to prepare our children for the future, and we thank them for their continued confidence in us.
ASBA News and notes

ASBA seeking applications for 2015 scholarships

The ASBA Educational Foundation is currently seeking scholarship applications for the ASBA Freshman and J.K. Williams Memorial Scholarships.

The foundation has awarded college scholarships to children of Arkansas school board members since 1994. The awards are based on a student’s academic record and leadership potential.

Scholarship applications are available online. Deadline to apply is April 1 of the year in which the student will enter college.

The ASBA Freshman Scholarship will be at least $600 and is awarded to four high school seniors who will enter two-year or four-year Arkansas institutions of higher education. The recipients will represent each of the state’s four congressional districts.

The J.K. Williams Memorial Scholarship, named in honor of former ASBA Executive Director J.K. Williams, is a $600 scholarship that will be awarded to the son/daughter of an ASBA-affiliated Arkansas school board member who is pursuing an advanced degree in the field of education at an Arkansas institution of higher education. A committee assigned by the ASBA board of directors reviews scholarship applications and determines awardees.

Recipients must be the sons/daughters of publicly elected Arkansas school board members who are serving on their local boards on September 1 of the school year in which the scholarship is awarded. Grants are one-time scholarships.

Scholarships are based upon academic performance, demonstrated

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TEACHER CHERYL WINBERRY helps AP pre-calculus student Hannah Smith with a lesson on trigonometric functions at Greenbrier High, where students next year should be able to earn an associate’s degree at the same time they earn their high school diplomas.

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ASBA’s Annual Conference focused on seeing, accepting and teaching students.

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ASBA News and notes

leadership, community involvement, extracurricular activities, special talents or unique endeavors, and future educational and career plans. Financial need may be a consideration.

Application submissions must include:

– Completed ASBA Educational Foundation scholarship application form
– Three letters of recommendation (one each) from a teacher; principal or assistant principal; and a member of the community
– Student’s official transcript (seven semesters)
– An essay of no more than 500 words written by the student expressing goals, future plans, past activities, life/educational influences and a statement about how the scholarship would help the student to achieve his/her education and goals
– A counselor-completed form and statement to include the student’s seven-semester grade point average; class standing (rank and size of class); PACT/PSAT/ACT/SAT scores with state rank; end-of-course exam scores; and other pertinent information.

ASBA law books now are for sale

Do you own a copy of ASBA’s most recent law book? The 2013-14 edition of Arkansas School Laws Annotated is now available for a discounted rate. It includes statutes, constitutional provisions, annotations, and notes relevant to education in the state of Arkansas.

If you are a new board member or administrator, take advantage of the special pricing! The next edition won’t be published until late 2015.

To place an order, please contact Angela Ellis at 501.372.1415.

NSBA, Southern Region meetings set

The NSBA’s 75th Annual Conference will be March 21-23 in Nashville. General session speakers will be Arianna Huffington, editor-in-chief of the Huffington Post Media Group; David Pogue, founder of Yahoo Tech; and talk show host Montel Williams. For more information, go to www.nsba.org/conference.

The Southern Region Leadership Conference will be July 19-21 at the Beau Rivage in Biloxi, Mississippi. The event, hosted by the Mississippi School Boards Association, will bring together school board members and education leaders in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. For registration information, go to www.msbaonline.com. Make reservations at the Beau Rivage resort by calling 888.383.7037. The conference hotel is $159 plus a $9 resort fee.

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The Arkansas School Boards Association board of directors voted in the September quarterly board meeting to include “student focused leadership” in the organization’s mission statement. The new statement now reads, “The mission of ASBA is to promote student focused leadership in public education through training, advocacy and service for local board members.” While the change is simple, the emphasis on students is of monumental importance.

Hopefully, all board members have students at heart when they file their petitions for board candidacy. However, it is easy to lose focus on students when so much of board members’ time is consumed in areas such as financial budgeting, building projects, policy revision, review of student achievement data, patron communications and a host of other duties of board service.

I think we would agree that all of the above issues as well as most – if not all – decisions should revolve around what is best for students. For instance, any facility project should be constructed with students in mind, including the priority of the project as well as the suitability for student use. The same methodology as easily can be applied to other decision-making areas such as finance and policy.

How does a board maintain a leadership style that has a continued focus on students? One easy implementable method is to have student recognitions at the beginning of all board meetings. These can include awards students may have received, such as Student of the Month. This is not only great for public relations, but it also sets the tone for the board meeting. When board members see students at the podium or in the crowd, it is much easier to continue the meeting with students’ welfare uppermost in mind.

Another way to maintain a focus on students is with a strategically placed sign that might state, “How does this decision affect our students?” I have found a sign such as this (even in non-voting meetings) may be of great use. Occasionally a board member might point to the sign during a meeting to return everyone to the purpose of public education and the potential impact of the discussion on students.

Board members are entrusted with the education of the next generation of citizens through their governing authority in public school districts. This is a responsibility that I have seen weigh heavily on the shoulders of board members – especially during times of controversial decisions. I believe a continued focus on students is the key to surviving the rough times and is a cause of celebration during the good times. The staff and board of directors of the Arkansas School Boards Association thank you for the time and dedication you contribute to ensure the success of our next generation.
Who are we, and what do we think?

ASBA survey reveals school board members, though conservative, support more money for schools

By Steve Brawner
Editor

Arkansas school board members are more affluent and more educated than average Arkansans and tend to be politically conservative, but they favor increased public education funding. They also are pleased with ASBA’s professional development offerings and legislative representation.

Those were some of the takeaways from an ASBA survey of its membership this past fall. The 10-page, 60-question survey received 515 responses from board members attending regional meetings. Future surveys may be shorter and issued more often electronically.

Two-thirds of respondents were male, 78 percent were white, and 18 percent were African-American. Two-thirds were between the ages of 40-59. About half have served five years or less; 11 percent said they are newly elected.

About half (46 percent) said they serve 6-10 hours a month, while 30 percent serve less time. Four percent said they serve 20 hours or more.

Respondents reported more educational attainment and higher annual household incomes than the state average. More than half have at least a bachelor’s degree, compared to a state average of 20 percent for persons at least age 25, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Forty-one percent reported household incomes above $100,000, and another 31 percent reported incomes of $60,000 to $99,999. By comparison, the most current estimated median statewide household income is $40,768, according to the Census Bureau.

Continued on next page
ASBA Survey

Dr. Tony Prothro, ASBA’s executive director, said the high percentage of school board members with bachelor’s degrees may reflect the increasing complexities of the role. “A couple of decades ago, board members were largely focused on facilities and finance,” he said. “Today there is much more emphasis on student achievement. This should not, however, taint the fact that we have many insightful board members in our state who provide outstanding leadership for our schools but do not possess bachelor’s degrees.”

ASBA’s important roles include professional development and legislative advocacy. Asked how well ASBA represents them in the Legislature, 44 percent said “very well” and 38 percent said “moderately well.” Only 3 percent said “poorly” or “very poorly.” Meanwhile, 59 percent said the association meets their training needs “very well” while 32 percent said it did so “somewhat.”

Political candidates would love to have those kinds of approval ratings. Jerry Don Woods, ASBA’s president and a school board member from Dardanelle, said that the results “indicate that the ASBA is succeeding in being THE source for public school boards across the state in areas of training and advocacy. This survey reaffirms our mission and strengthens our resolve to stand for public education in Arkansas.”

Naturally, ASBA could always do better. In fact, that was the point of the survey. Asked what type of training would benefit them, the most popular response was “developing effective board policies,” which had interest from 76 percent of respondents. Almost as popular were “accountability using student testing data,” “education law,” and “promoting meaningful parent and community involvement.”

Another survey finding was that many board members prefer convenient training in the evenings and close to home. Prothro said ASBA is trying to respond to that need. “Board members have tight schedules as unpaid servants,” he said. “It is difficult to balance the time between work, family, and board service. We will continue to provide additional evening training opportunities at the local level. Hopefully, board members will also see the need for a broader perspective, collaboration and intensity that our offered through attendance at our state conferences.”

As a group, school board members lean to the right of the political spectrum. More than half (52 percent) consider themselves to be conservative, while 37 percent said they are moderate and 7 percent said they are liberal. How that translates into their viewpoints on education policy is difficult to say because education issues often don’t fit neatly into the left-right political spectrum. Not surprisingly, majorities strongly support (48 percent) or support (36 percent) increased funding for public education, while less than 2 percent oppose more funding. About 40 percent support increased pre-K funding and 35 percent strongly support it, while less than 3 percent expressed outright opposition. More opposed merit pay for teachers based on test scores than supported it (36-25 percent).

Not surprisingly, board members tend to support local control. About 33 percent oppose making superintendents state employees, while only 12 percent support it. About half oppose making teachers state employees, while only 17 percent support it. But interestingly, school board members were largely supportive of increasing mandated training for board members, as 40 percent support the idea while 25 percent oppose it.

Moreover, 61 percent said the increased accountability coming from the state and federal governments the past 20 years has led to greater or somewhat greater student achievement, while only 8 percent said the accountability has lowered achievement. Two-thirds said
the state’s curriculum standards were more stringent after the Common Core’s adoption. About half of respondents thought the Common Core would lead to greater student achievement, while 24 percent thought it would lower achievement and 20 percent thought it would have no effect.

When asked, “Do you believe private schools should be eligible for the same state funding as traditional schools?” 68 percent said no but 26 percent said yes, as long as the private school is held to the same accountability as public schools.

ASBA is strongly opposed to that idea because it would take money out of the public school system. Prothro said the answer was “a little surprising” but may have been based on the question’s phrasing. “I wonder if the responses were focused more on the desire to have a level playing field rather than the funding mechanism,” he said. “We will need to follow up on this and other data obtained from the survey.”

Respondents were somewhat upbeat about the current state of Arkansas public education. Sixty-two percent said Arkansas schools are average, 32 percent said they are above average, and only 5 percent said they are worse than average.

Regarding the challenges their districts are facing, almost half said their community rates the quality of their schools as better than average, and almost half said their communities are very supportive of their schools. Only 2 percent said their communities are “hostile.” About half said obtaining adequate funding is “somewhat difficult,” while a fortunate 34 percent said funding is “not a problem.” Numbers were similar when it comes to attracting qualified teachers but were better for attracting qualified administrators, with 56 percent not having a problem in that area. About half said creating high performing schools is somewhat difficult, while a confident 37 percent said it’s not a problem. Almost half said their districts don’t have a problem increasing broadband access.

Several challenges seemed more difficult than others. Fifty percent of respondents said increasing parental involvement is somewhat difficult and 17 percent described it as very difficult. Increasing teacher salaries appears to be even harder, as 49 percent said it was somewhat difficult and 28 percent said it was very difficult. School violence, on the other hand, was rated as not a problem by 65 percent of respondents.

Asked how often in the past two years they had communicated with a state elected official about education issues, 34 percent said 1-2 times while 22 percent said they had done so 3-5 times. Asked what would keep them from doing so, 41 percent said one reason was that they did not feel adequately informed. ASBA sends out email communications to its members and has a website (www.arsba.org). Fifty-three percent of respondents said they visit the website monthly.

Another source of information is this magazine. Asked if they read Report Card, 26 percent said they “read it thoroughly” while 54 percent said they “scan it and read selected articles.” Another 14 percent said they “rarely, if ever, read it.” Help us make it more readable by emailing suggestions to the editor, Steve Brawner, at brawnersteve@mac.com.
The Ledge: So far, so good

The good news: The private option debate was settled quickly and inclusively. The bad news: That left a lot of time to talk about other subjects, including K-12 public education.

By Steve Brawner
Editor

First a disclaimer: This article is being written 2-3 weeks before it arrives in readers’ mailboxes, and during a legislative session, much can change in two hours. Because of that, this article will describe what has already happened and will try to shed light on the biggest ongoing issues. The next Report Card will feature a more comprehensive review.

Here’s what’s happened so far.

The issue that could have ground the session to a halt, the continued funding of the Medicaid private option, was settled near its beginning. The program, which uses federal dollars to purchase private insurance, barely passed in 2013 and barely was reauthorized in 2014, and a number of legislators had promised in their campaigns to end it. In January, Gov. Asa Hutchinson proposed funding it for two years and creating a task force to consider overall health care reform. His proposals passed, and the issue was taken off the table. Hutchinson also early in the session passed the centerpiece of his campaign, a middle class tax cut affecting mostly Arkansans with incomes below $75,000.

That’s left a lot of time for legislators to consider other ideas, including those concerning K-12 public education, which comprises half the state general revenue budget. And that’s kept ASBA’s legislative team busy.

As of this writing, K-12 public education spending has not yet been approved by the Legislature, though the budget blueprint as always was drafted before the session by the Legislature’s Joint Committee on Educational Adequacy, and legislators typically do not stray far from that blueprint. The passage of the private option does remove one major concern because, had it been repealed, those lost federal dollars would have needed to be replaced from somewhere else.

Highway funding bill

However, other ideas have been floated that are of concern to public education advocates. Among them are House Bill 1346 by Rep. Dan Douglas, R-Bentonville, which would dedicate for highways and roads the tax revenues derived from the sales of cars, used cars and car parts. Supporters of the bill say the state’s growing highway needs are not being met by current state and federal funds. Revenues are shrinking from the traditional method of paying for highways, the gas tax, because cars are becoming more fuel-efficient and therefore
require less gas. There is little political appetite for raising the gas tax, so supporters are looking for other sources of money.

ASBA opposes the bill out of concerns that dedicating those general revenues to highways and roads would leave less money for some areas of education and other government services along with programs that benefit children and families. ASBA along with advocates for other state priorities defeated a similar proposal in 2013, but this one includes provisions that could make it more palatable to some, such as dedicating some severance tax revenues to higher education, and providing money to highways only after $2.2 billion in general revenue funds have been disbursed for other needs.

Lawmakers have proposed 40 constitutional amendments, of which a maximum of three can be referred to the voters. ASBA is opposed to one of them, House Joint Resolution 1013 by Rep. Nate Bell, R-Mena, which would define adequacy in the Arkansas Constitution by limiting education spending to a percentage of the overall state budget.

Bell also proposed House Bill 1054, which would require governing bodies, including school boards, to record all executive sessions and provide a copy to prosecuting attorneys, who would review the recordings to ensure no violations of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) occurred. Bell said that under current law, little can be done to determine if governing bodies are violating FOIA by discussing matters not related to personnel, the only exception allowed under the law. ASBA opposed that bill, as did the Arkansas Prosecuting Attorneys Association, which said its members did not have enough resources to comply.

ASBA polled its membership and found school board members across the state were overwhelmingly opposed, fearing recordings of legitimate discussions could be subpoenaed. As of this writing, the bill doesn’t appear to be going anywhere.

“Board members would get to the point where they either, number one, wouldn’t even go into executive session at all, and therefore the necessary and important information would not be discussed about employment issues, or they’d be so guarded when they got in there that they’d be basically ineffective,” said Boyce Watkins, ASBA’s advocacy director.

ASBA has, so far, successfully opposed other bills it believed were not in the best interest of schools or school boards. House Bill 1050 by Rep. Kim Hendren, R-Gravette, would have set all school board members’ terms at three years. ASBA opposed it, and Hendren agreed not to pursue it. Hendren’s House Bill 1052 would have prohibited school districts from using district funds to pay dues to membership organizations such

Continued on next page
as ASBA unless that organization holds open meetings. Prothro said the bill was not aimed at ASBA, which would have been able to comply because its binding decisions are made openly during the Delegate Assembly at each year’s Annual Conference.

**ASBA's legislative package**

ASBA is working with legislative sponsors on a package of technical bills that it hopes won’t be controversial. House Bill 1419, sponsored by Rep. Ron McNair, R-Alpena, a former ASBA president, would allow districts to create their own policies regarding whether a school board member attending remotely can vote. Under current law, members can attend remotely but can’t vote or help establish a quorum. Another bill by Sen. Bobby Pierce, D-Sheridan, a former school board member, and Rep. Bill Gossage, R-Ozark, a retired school administrator, would enable ASBA to provide state-required instruction in understanding an audit. Currently, the instruction must be performed by someone who has previously performed a legislative audit, but there are so few available instructors that the training often occurs via DVD. House Bill 1358 by Rep. James Ratliff, D-Imboden, would require certification to be delivered to county clerks when school board members take the oath of office.

**Common Core concerns**

The private option clearly was the most controversial issue being considered by legislators. Also on that list is the Common Core, which has become a lightning rod in some states where Americans question the standards and consider them to be a case of Washington overreach.

Of particular concern to many is the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment, which would compare Arkansas with 11 other states and the District of Columbia. That number originally was 24 states plus the District of Columbia, but half have decided to drop the assessment.

The major piece of Common Core legislation so far is House Bill 1241 by Rep. Mark Lowery, R-Maumelle, which would postpone the PARCC assessment until 2017 and establish a task force to study it. ASBA is opposed to that bill and to any others that would delay the implementation of Common Core.
“We just feel like that it’s way too late to try to change ships in midstream, and we’re advocating that everybody just stay the course. If they need to study it in the interim, study it, but stay the course for now,” Watkins said.

Aware of the opposition to the Common Core, and occasionally expressing concerns himself, Gov. Hutchinson in February announced he was appointing a 16-member Governor’s Council on Common Core Review to consider the standards and make recommendations later in the year. Asked if Hutchinson supports the Common Core, spokesman J.R. Davis said, “I think the governor’s position on Common Core is what it’s been all along, is that we need to bring everybody into a room together, and let’s talk about the right way forward for Arkansas.”

Chairing the commission will be newly elected Lt. Governor Tim Griffin, who has not taken a firm stand for or against the Common Core. During an interview, Griffin said he is still formulating his opinion about the issue. He said it is important that students in Arkansas be compared with those in other states. He pointed out that he helps his daughter, a student in the Little Rock School District, with Common Core-based homework.

“I’m going to try to get as many facts as I can, and I’m going to listen to as many voices from all across the spectrum – parents, teachers, educators, business people, just citizens who have had experience with it,” he said.

The move echoes Hutchinson’s approach with the private option – study a controversial issue in a way that brings people together or at least turns down the heat a little. ASBA’s executive director, Dr. Tony Prothro, said the association has been pleased with Hutchinson’s pragmatic, inclusive leadership style.

“It seems like he’s trying to reach across the aisle. You know, that was a big part of his campaign, it being about Arkansas and not about party, and everything that we’ve seen so far has been along those lines,” Prothro said.

Hutchinson’s signature education-related campaign proposal, requiring public high schools to offer at least one computer science course, has passed and was being signed by Hutchinson. ASBA supported the bill.

Among the other education-related bills that have passed is Act 23 by Speaker Jeremy Gillam, R-Judsonia, which repeals a Department of Human Services requirement that school districts purchase liability insurance for pre-K students. The requirement was based on the agency’s interpretation of a 2009 law and was costing districts thousands of dollars annually, despite the fact that they typically enjoy tort immunity. ASBA supported the bill. Act 44 by Sen. Blake Johnson, R-Corning, reduced the amount of state-mandated staff professional development days from 10 to six, though school districts can choose to continue with the 10 days. ASBA supported that bill, also.

Still being debated is Senate Bill 179 by Sen. Alan Clark, R-Lonsdale, which would extend the school choice bill passed in 2013 with minor procedural changes. ASBA does not take a position on school choice because its membership is divided on the issue. House Bill 1263 by Rep. Bruce Cozart, R-Hot Springs, the House Education Committee chairman, would allow districts facing administrative consolidation because their average daily membership falls below 350 students to request an annual waiver from the Department of Education. ASBA supports the bill but is monitoring it to see if it changes.

Possibly still to come are various voucher-related bills that would funnel public dollars into private schools. ASBA has never seen one of these it could support, and likely never will. If this session is like previous ones, someone will file a bill to move school board elections to November to coincide with the general elections. ASBA is opposed to that idea because it would result in more politicized and more partisan school board elections.

Stay tuned.
Faulkner County is often known as the home of three institutions of higher learning – the University of Central Arkansas, Hendrix College, and Central Baptist College. Soon there will be a fourth – Greenbrier High School.

Twenty minutes north of Conway, the district was the state’s first to initiate a process where all qualified high school students can graduate with an associate’s degree by taking concurrent and Advanced Placement classes. Assuming the program is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, 8-10 students will graduate in May with an associate’s degree granted by the University of Arkansas at Little Rock that will transfer to any school in Arkansas. The cost? Fifty dollars per class to give them “a little bit of skin in the game,” said Scott Spainour, the district’s superintendent, unless they can’t afford it, in which case the district will pay for it.

Granting an associate’s degree is just the next step in a process that has taken about a decade. Years ago, Deputy Superintendent Lisa Todd began partnering with universities that agreed to accept Advanced Placement (AP) courses as concurrent classes because the district didn’t have enough students to offer both. The result was that a student would earn college credit for completing the class even without scoring a qualifying 3, 4 or 5 on the AP exam. Over time, the program grew so that eventually it was offering about 80 hours, AP and non-AP. Students were graduating with 60 hours, enough for an associate’s degree. Almost 40 percent of Greenbrier High’s students this year are taking at least one concurrent class, even though the district hadn’t really made the potential associate’s degree public until recently. Greenbrier grads attending college last year saved almost $700,000 in tuition costs as a result of the classes they had already taken in high school.

“We just had a really great faculty and great student body, and the further we took it, the higher everybody went,” said Susan Jackson, then the high school principal and now the district’s director of college and career readiness. “You know, the teachers started teaching better, the students started learning more, and we just continued to grow on rigorous instruction and student achievement.”

About two years ago, Jackson and Todd began asking why the school couldn’t offer a degree. The extra costs would be manageable because the district already had invested money where it matters most – in teachers. Concur-
rent course teachers must have the same qualifications as adjunct college professors – a master’s degree plus 18 hours in the content area – so they are harder to find and more expensive to hire. Greenbrier hired them anyway, paying them about $4,000 more per year to start and sometimes luring them away from the college ranks. With few extra costs and no downsides to offering the degrees, the school board approved the idea and supported it financially.

From there, the district had to find a partner, and UALR turned out to be a willing participant. Greenbrier already had what Karen Wheeler, the university’s associate vice chancellor for academic affairs, described as an “extremely good” track record of producing college-ready students. The university instituted many quality controls to ensure Greenbrier’s high school students are taught the same material as UALR’s college students. Students take college entrance exams in reading, math and writing before enrolling in the classes to ensure they meet the same minimum scores that UALR students do. Teachers use the same syllabi and course outlines as college professors. “They essentially teach our courses,” she said.

This kind of thing doesn’t just happen. Instead, it takes a culture of high expectations and a commitment to excellence by administrators, the school board, teachers, and students. The curriculum is aligned from kindergarten onward to prepare students for college courses in high school. Pre-AP courses start in the sixth grade, and students are encouraged to see how each class builds upon the next. Jeana Williams, Greenbrier High assistant principal and a former calculus teacher, would visit lower-level math courses to introduce calculus and explain why students needed algebra before taking her class. Her students tutored those in the younger grades. “There are no holes that the kids are going to fall through,” said Randy Goodnight the school board’s secretary-treasurer and ASBA’s Region 8 director. “They’re ready when they move to that next step every time all along the way.”

Williams held classes and prep sessions on Saturdays, before and after school, and during lunch. Other teachers would do the same. How did she teach college courses to high school students? By making connections and being creative, she said, pointing out that teachers must have content knowledge so they understand where a student is and can guide them where they need to go. Jackson, her former principal, saw how that worked firsthand. “I was not what you call a math person,” she said, “but when I sat in her class, I walked out of there, and I understood calculus because she made it that way. ... Whatever it takes, failure is not an option here. It helps our students who struggle, but it also propels our students who are already advanced, and it gives them confidence.”

Greenbrier district officials are waiting on accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission in Chicago, but they’re not worried. The University of Arkansas System and the Department of Higher Education both have approved
the program. While this is a new idea in Arkansas, it’s already being done in other states.

Will others follow the lead?

Greenbrier’s offerings are giving its students and its community a competitive advantage. The school board’s Goodnight, a semi-retired farmer, said friends have told him that the number of college hours the school offers is an incentive to move their families into the district.

But the long-term goal involves more than Greenbrier. Educators in that small town hope more districts adopt similar policies. They are well aware that Arkansas is 49th in the country, above only West Virginia, in its percentage of adults above age 25 who have a college degree. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, just 18.9 percent of Arkansans have reached that level of attainment. Greenbrier can set an example for the rest of the state, as was the case at the ASBA Annual Conference in December, when Gov. Asa Hutchinson bragged on the district.

“At Greenbrier, we want to lead, not follow,” Goodnight said. “I mean it’s that simple, and they’ve made that happen. ... If you expect more out of kids, they’re going to do more.”

This is the first time that UALR has attempted to award an associate’s degree to high school students, and it may not be the last. UALR’s Wheeler said other districts have expressed an interest in creating similar programs, but the university has not selected a second partner. Any partnership would require the district to have qualified teachers in place, like Greenbrier did.

The benefits of a college education are hard to argue. The Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco reported last year that average college graduates earn $830,800 more over the course of a lifetime than high school graduates, although it takes them until age 40 to “break even” on the cost of college. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the unemployment rate in 2013 was 7.5 percent for Americans with a high school diploma, 5.4 percent for those with an associate’s degree, and 4 percent for those with a bachelor’s degree.

Despite its advantages, a college degree remains elusive for many students. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported in 2014 that, during the last 20 years, 31 million college students have started school but not earned a degree. Complete College America, a nonprofit involving 35 states, reported in its 2014 study, “Four-Year Myth,” that only 5 percent of full-time students at community colleges nationwide earn an associate’s degree within two years. In Arkansas, 7 percent graduate in two years and 14 percent in three years, and those who do graduate take an average of 4.5 years to do so. Looking past the two-year degree, the six-year graduation rate nationwide for students seeking a bachelor’s degree is only 34 percent at “flagship” universities like the University of Arkansas and 16 percent at other colleges and universities, the report said. Only one in 10 students requiring remediation will graduate with a four-year degree.

The study also found that 62 percent of associate’s degree seekers who earn 30 credits during their first year graduate, compared with 10 percent with less than 12 credits. Meanwhile, 79 percent
of students at four-year schools graduate with a bachelor’s degree if they can earn those 30 credits, compared to 21 percent who have attained only 12.

Many Greenbrier students will earn much more than 30 credits, which is why UALR sees its partnership with Greenbrier as a win-win for everyone. It could be said that the university is cannibalizing its own market by helping students earn degrees at Greenbrier instead of charging them tuition to come to UALR. Wheeler said the university doesn’t look at it that way. Instead, it’s producing a school full of students who are better prepared for college, and therefore more likely to enroll and more likely to finish. Instead of being unprepared freshmen who statistically are likely to drop out their first year, Greenbrier High graduates will be halfway to a four-year degree. They might stay longer and get a second degree or an advanced degree.

“The students who are enrolled in our courses, we want to create that transition for them to college,” he said. “We know that students who take college courses in high school are much more likely to attend college, and so we want to increase our college-going rate as a state. ... We think of it as we are getting better prepared students who are more likely to graduate if we provide this opportunity, and some will come to UALR, some will go elsewhere.”

Among the problems cited by “Four-Year Myth” is an overwhelming number of choices in a college environment where only one adviser is available on average for every 400 students. With no help and overwhelmed by their choices, associate’s degree earners complete an average of 81 credits instead of the 60 they need. Greenbrier High students, in contrast, earn their hours in a friendly, supportive home environment before they go to college. That’s a big
advantage for students from rural areas and/or disadvantaged backgrounds, district officials point out. And even if students enter the workforce straight from high school, they will be more job-ready because of the classes they have taken.

In addition to the commitment of the district and its educators, the program also has required buy-in from another population – students. The district has tried to help them and their parents understand that a “C” in an AP class is more valuable than an “A” in a regular class. Many have grasped that fact, and many more will do so in the future when the reward isn’t just college credit but an actual associate’s degree. And with the opportunity to earn so many college hours while still in high school, students take a full load throughout their careers instead of falling victim to “senior-itis” and cruising through their last year.

Greenbrier educators are convinced their students can take advantage of this opportunity, and so far, they haven’t been disappointed. That’s what happens when student-focused educators believe a high school student really can do college work.

“It’s developed a professional culture,” said Todd, the deputy superintendent, “and I think it’s developed a place where it’s cool to be smart.”

Who’s next? Lakeside, Springdale, etc.

The opportunity to earn an associate’s degree in high school isn’t limited to Greenbrier.

Lakeside is embarking on a similar effort with its Lakeside Legacy Program. The Garland County district is partnering with nearby National Park Community College to offer an associate’s degree program on campus at no charge to students next year.

Superintendent Shawn Cook said he had been making the case for more college offerings during his last two annual reports to the public. Then Lakeside School Board President Karla Mouton embraced the cause after a family member in another state graduated high school with an associate’s degree. Shortly before this school year, Cook and school board member Will Maffit traveled to Greenbrier to learn more about what the district was doing.

When Cook heard Greenbrier officials discuss their plans during a superintendents symposium after the Christmas break, he immediately scheduled a meeting with National Park Community College’s Connie Poteet, who directs its concurrent classes. It turned out Lakeside already had laid a strong foundation to offer an associate’s degree. The school board quickly voted to fix the deficiencies, so next year Lakeside will offer 66 hours of concurrent credit from NPCC.

The classes won’t cost students a dime. NPCC, meanwhile, is charging Lakeside $50 per student per semester no matter how many classes they take.

The total cost to the district is only about $40,000 a year. Cook expects that more than 50 percent of his students will be earning 50-plus hours before long.

Like Greenbrier, the school district already had a strong concurrent program where many students were entering college with a semester of credit under their belts. The high school offered 14 Advanced Placement courses, and many teachers already had master’s degrees.

Cook said he shared news about the degree offering before a packed public meeting. Parents had questions, but they were grateful for the opportunity. They liked the fact that college classes would be taught by the high school teachers they knew and trusted. A number of teachers are expressing an interest in earning their master’s degrees, Cook said.

“Who’s next? Springdale’s School of Innovation was designed with associate’s degrees in mind. Eighth grade students attending the newly created school this year are working their way toward the later grades, when they will choose a major and take concurrent classes to earn an associate’s degree from Northwest Arkansas Community College and at least one technical certificate. To make that happen, the district won a $25.9 million federal Race to the Top grant and obtained a seat-time waiver from the state Department of Education.
Arkansas school districts have for many years been required by law to “have a written grievance procedure that provides an orderly method of resolving concerns raised by an employee.”

The law requires that the procedure be available for all employees and allow for appeals to the school board as a final step. Accordingly, all districts now have policies creating a formal grievance procedure. ASBA has an excellent model policy that most districts have adopted. Many school district administrators are very familiar with the grievance process.

To create a clear record, the response should include the name of the grievant, a concise summary of the factual background, a list of the laws, rules, policies or procedures claimed to have been violated, the remedy requested by the grievant, and the decision by the administrator in response.

At all stages, the administration should carefully review the grievance to determine if it is “grievable.” It is not grievable if it is not based on an alleged violation of contract, law, policy, rule, or regulation. Attorney General Dustin McDaniel in 2010 issued an opinion confirming that grievances about reprimands, evaluations or directives also are not grievable. Disciplinary issues are routinely not grievable unless the discipline involves a loss of pay such as a suspension. Denials should clearly state that the grievance is not grievable.

In order to properly evaluate and decide an issue raised in a grievance, the administration should know what the grievant believes the appropriate remedy would be. Many grievances fail to specify that remedy. The administration should not respond to the substance of any grievance that does not include the requested remedy and should instead explain that the response will not be issued until a remedy is offered.

When a grievance is appealed to the school board, the grievant will sometimes be represented by legal counsel. If so, the administration should also be represented by an attorney. Depending on the magnitude of the grievance, serious consideration should be given to engaging a hearing officer to preside over the grievance hearing and advise the board on matters of law and procedure.

If there is an issue of whether the grievance is grievable, the school board’s grievance hearing is a two-step process. The administration should begin the hearing and present its argument. The employee should respond with his or her arguments, and then the board should vote. If the board determines that the grievance is not grievable, the hearing is concluded. If the board determines it is, then a hearing on the substance of the grievance should proceed.

If the grievance involves a disciplinary action involving a loss of pay, the administration presents its evidence first because it has the burden of proving that its action was reasonable and based on facts developed in its investigation. In all other grievance hearings, the grievant makes the first presentation because he or she has the burden of proving the administration violated a law, contract, policy, rule or procedure.

The school board then has three options. It may sustain the grievance and impose either the remedy requested by the grievant or a remedy determined by the board. It may deny the grievance. Or, it may sustain the grievance in part and deny it in part, and then it must provide a detailed explanation of its decision. It should make its decision clear by completing a written form detailing its actions.

Grievance procedures aren’t fun, but they don’t have to be grievous. By following ASBA’s model policy or one like it, school boards can increase the chances they’ll make the right decision for all concerned. Of course, grievants probably won’t agree with decisions that are not in their favor, but they’re much more likely to accept them if they believe the school board has considered them thoughtfully and professionally. And if it becomes a civil case, your school district has a better chance of proving it made the right decision if it can demonstrate it was made using the right process.

Grievous-less grievances

Good process can lead to a just decision and keep you out of trouble

by Jay Bequette
ASBA General Counsel

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Students the center of annual meeting

Conference theme is ‘Student-focused Leadership: See Me, Accept Me, Teach Me’

By Steve Brawner
Editor

ASBA’s 2014 Annual Conference featured five legislators, an NSBA president, and a governor-elect. School board members had 30 breakout sessions from which to choose. But amidst all the busyness, this much was clear: It was all about the kids.

The conference’s theme: “Student-focused Leadership: See Me, Accept Me, Teach Me,” was personified by two speakers, Manny Scott and Pete Kelly. As students, the two had been hard to see or accept, but they had succeeded in life because of caring teachers. (Story, page 24.)

Anne Byrne, National School Boards Association president and a school board member from New York, spoke about the theme of her presidency, “Leading children to excellence.” Byrne said research has shown that student achievement rises when school boards have high expectations. “If (student achievement is) not the highlight of your board agenda, when will it be discussed or where will it be discussed? In the parking lot?” she asked.

Byrne’s parents were immigrants and were very patriotic. Her mother came to the United States alone at age 15 and walked door to door in Jersey City looking for work, and then she cleaned homes so her children could obtain a good education.

She had high standards. One day, Byrne came home from school with a grade of 96 on her test, and her mother asked what had happened to the other four points.

Byrne told participants that school board members are responsible for nurturing and protecting public education at a time when schools are facing criticism. She encouraged the audience to tell a positive story.

“We need to promote our successes, and we need to challenge the naysayers,” she said. “For too long, we have allowed the conversation about public education to come from others.”

Hutchinson discusses priorities

Making his first address at an ASBA meeting, Gov. Asa Hutchinson said the state needs to “reinvigorate” the depleteed school facilities fund and ensure that overall school funding is sufficient to prevent an adequacy lawsuit. He said he is “fully committed to making sure that we have high-speed broadband access in every school in Arkansas,” a remark that drew applause from the audience.

Hutchinson praised schools offering concurrent college credit courses, saying the courses make higher education more affordable and accessible. As a student at Springdale High, he completed a three-hour college algebra class at the University of Arkansas.

“What that meant to me as a student is saying, ‘Hey, I can compete at a college level.’ Secondly, it gave me a start so that I was able to do more whenever I got to college and have more options,” he said.
Hutchinson pledged during the campaign to ensure every Arkansas high school offers a computer science course allowing students to earn a math or science credit. He repeated an assertion he made often during the campaign that if 20 percent of high school students completed that course, the state would produce 6,000 students each year with those valuable skills.

Hutchinson said he will be working with education experts and the Arkansas STEM Coalition, a group of business and industry leaders, to create a curriculum that will teach skills such as coding, producing algorithms, analyzing data, and creating policies regarding issues such as protecting privacy.

The class will require significant investments. The day before his ASBA address, he had been told during a speech before the Arkansas STEM Coalition that few teachers have the skills to teach that class. He told school board members that he will work to provide extra money for teacher professional development. In order to help address that need, this class will be made available online through Virtual Arkansas to all high schools that choose to use it.

**Legislative panel talks issues**


The panelists discussed a variety of topics, including matching education with workforce needs, a passion of English’s. Murdock pointed out that his Delta schools face challenges, such as malnourished students, which are unfamiliar to many other legislators. Legislators also discussed current rules that forbid charter schools from being designated as schools of innovation or from receiving certain funding. Lowery said some public school districts are refusing to sell unused buildings to charter schools, and legislators may look to change that. Murdock said the Legislature has created an unhealthy competition between school districts for resources.

“The way we’re doing it, you guys, has made it where people are fighting against each other because the product is at stake,” he said.

Lowery told school board members that questions about local control will be asked during the legislative session. He said many teachers support the Common Core as long as they control the curriculum, but the PARCC exams that measure the results were not developed locally or by state officials. Meanwhile, legislators are questioning how some local districts are spending certain funding. Only a third of the dollars appropriated by legislators for technology were spent for that purpose, he said.

“There’s a number of issues that are causing legislators some angst,” he said.

“I don’t think we’re anywhere close to looking at the funding matrix and saying that it needs to be a spending matrix, but there are going to be some conversations about certain categories that we may have to pull out of the matrix.”

In response to a question about moving school board elections to November, Lowery, Clark and English expressed concerns about low voter turnout in the current September dates. Lowery said the biggest issue is not so much school board elections but school millage requests that occur at times when much of the electorate isn’t paying attention.

“You are producing what is probably most important for our state, which are quality citizens, those who are going to be part of the economic development, the drive of the state,” he said. “And because of that, we need more buy-in. We need the electorate not feeling like tax increases are being snuck by them.”

During a question-and-answer session, Jerry Don Woods, ASBA’s president, argued that school boards lack the resources to inform voters about school elections and that high voter turnout by itself is not the priority. “It’s an informed electorate that we want. It’s not a group of people who are willing to go check a box,” he said, his next words...
drowned out by a standing ovation. He later added, “We are nonpartisan. We pride ourselves in being nonpartisan. We reject partisan politics because partisan politics has to do with pitting a special interest group against the other, and we represent the children of Arkansas.”

In other news, by-laws were amended at the annual Delegate Assembly to allow Woods to again serve as president because the president-elect, Steve Percival of Fayetteville, resigned from ASBA’s board because of work responsibilities. Because that meant there would be no new past president, Pottsville’s Clint Hull, a previous president, was elected to that position. Brenda McKown of Beebe is now president-elect, Bryant’s Sandra Porter is now vice president, and Debbie Ugbade of Hot Springs is secretary/treasurer. Allan George of Russellville is Region 5 director, while Deborah Smith of Malvern is Region 10 director.

This was the first conference featuring the new boardsmanship program, which honors members for reaching the following levels of professional development: President’s Award – 500 hours; Platinum Award – 400 hours; Pinnacle Award – 200 hours; Master Board – 50 hours; Outstanding Board – 25 hours.

**Evaluation system not a ‘gotcha’**

Piloted process where boards will rate superintendents is meant to be collaborative

By Steve Brawner

Editor

The system helping school boards evaluate superintendents is meant to be a collaborative effort — “not a gotcha opportunity for boards,” according to one of the school board members who has helped develop it.

Gene Bennett, a member of the South Mississippi County School Board, said the goal of the Arkansas Superintendent Evaluation System is to help districts improve administrative efficiencies and learning opportunities for children.

Bennett along with Sandra Porter of the Bryant School Board described the system’s progress during a breakout session at ASBA’s Annual Conference Dec. 11. The two served on the Arkansas Superintendent Evaluation System Task Force, which helped create the system. Thirteen school districts are piloting the program this year. Eventually, all school districts are expected to participate.

The work on administrator evaluation began in 2009 when Act 222 was passed to create a system of leadership development for schools, beginning with principal evaluation, which became known as the Leader Excellence and Development System (LEADS). The State Board of Education approved rules and regulations for LEADS that expanded its work to evaluate building-level and district-level leaders. The LEADS evaluation rubric for building/district leaders is also based on the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards and functions. The superintendent evaluation system being piloted is an extension of LEADS and is also based upon the ISLLC standards. Arkansas teachers began being evaluated formally using TESS, the Teacher Excellence and Support System, this year.

A major difference between TESS, LEADS and the superintendent evaluation system is that with TESS and LEADS, professional educators are performing the evaluation. Because school board members usually are not professional educators, a different approach had to be taken.
"We wanted it to be an effective, useful instrument, something you could use," Porter told attendees. “We also wanted it to assist the superintendent to grow professionally, and I think that was the most important aspect of the evaluation is that we wanted it to be a collaborative effort between the board and the superintendent, and a very self-reflective process.”

Each superintendent will be evaluated by their board members and also will complete self-evaluations to determine how well they are leading the district to meet its vision, mission and goals. While the Department of Education and ASBA will be the primary trainer for participating schools, superintendents will play an integral role in helping train their school boards to do the evaluation, leading to focused and improved dialogue between the two. Under the system, school boards have the option of surveying staff and community members. The task force is creating a list of sample questions board members can ask. This is considered an “evidence-based” system, requiring that superintendents provide and boards review documentation of activity and outcomes for assessed areas.

The task force worked with the same consultant, Dr. Connie Kamm, who helped create LEADS for the principals. Other states that have created superintendent evaluation systems were studied. An important goal was creating an evaluation system that would be consistent district to district. Another was aligning the superintendent evaluation with TESS and LEADS, so ultimately the committee decided to use the same Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards used by those two systems.

Under LEADS, superintendents evaluate building level administrators under six broad standards and 34 more specific functions. School boards will focus only on the six standards, all based on student achievement.

The standards say school leaders will promote the success of all students by:
– Developing and implementing a vision of learning shared by stakeholders;
– Sustaining a culture supporting student learning and staff improvement;
– Through effective management, creating a safe and effective learning environment;
– Working with faculty and community members;
– Acting ethically;
– Responding to and influencing the political and cultural environment

A rubric developed by the committee explains different levels of superintendent proficiency. For example, on the first standard, an exemplary superintendent, among other qualities, uses data to establish goals and conducts ongoing conversations with stakeholders. A superintendent who doesn’t meet standards does not develop or implement a shared vision or a system of continuous improvement. “Progressing” and “proficient” superintendents are in between.

Thirteen districts representing a cross-section of Arkansas are piloting the program this school year: Bryant, Greenbrier, Jonesboro, Mountain Home, Pocahontas, Westside Consolidated, Wynne, Gentry, Mountainburg, Siloam Springs, Arkadelphia, Hope and Warren. ASBA is training school board members, while the Department of Education and the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators are training superintendents. Twenty more districts will participate next school year, with more added in 2016-17.

Porter and Bennett said the task force hopes districts will use the evaluation system year-round, not just at year’s end. While the goal is to have a common tool, boards may use the tool differently based on their local situations and the superintendent’s needs. A beginning superintendent, for example, might be evaluated more closely on school finance. The tool is meant to encourage the development of strategic plans to accomplish long- and short-range goals.

Because school boards will have a great deal of freedom in administering the system, Bennett said it’s inevitable that some school boards will be tougher on their superintendents than others. The goal was to produce a tool.

“What this does is provide us with an instrument that’s common across the

Continued on next page
state so that boards have an opportunity to evaluate one superintendent the same as the superintendent in the next district was evaluated on a similar level.”

Porter said the task force considered legislating training on the system, but ultimately decided to allow boards to receive training through ASBA and other resources. “It’s all going to come back to the board members,” she said. “It’s going to depend on what kind of board you want to have, what kind of accountability system you want to have for all, from the top to bottom, and it’s quite frankly your responsibility to do that, because if you don’t do it, who’s going to do it?”

School board members who want more information about this pilot project or are interested in having their district become part of the next group of pilot districts should contact ASBA Board Development Director Anne Butcher at 501.492.4814 or by emailing her at abutcher@arsba.org.

MORE THAN MOTIVATIONAL. Manny Scott, left, and Pete Kelly grew up in difficult situations – Scott in gang-infested Long Beach, California, and Kelly in poverty in Dardanelle. Both succeeded thanks in large part to teachers who believed in them and inspired their love of learning.

Caring teachers lift two lives

Manny Scott, Pete Kelly shared their stories at ASBA Annual Conference

By Steve Brawner
Editor

Manny Scott and Pete Kelly grew up in very different places – Scott in Long Beach, California, and Kelly in Dardanelle – but they have much in common. Both experienced difficult childhoods in rough neighborhoods, and both overcame their situations with help from caring teachers who believed in them.

The two men shared their stories Dec. 11 at ASBA’s Annual Conference, and it was a powerful one-two punch.

Scott, who spoke during the morning session, said he missed 60-90 days of school each year from the fourth through the ninth grade. His grammar was so poor that he was classified as an English learner and placed in a class with Spanish speakers. He earned a .6 grade point average as a first semester freshman, and during the second semester, he quit school after his best friend was murdered coming to visit him. Convinced that people like him simply couldn’t succeed, he began doing “stupid stuff.”
One day, he sat on a park bench and began thinking about his life and the people he had lost. He was convinced that his own end was nearing. Then a stranger, a cocaine addict, sat down next to him and begged him not to make the mistakes he had made. The talk made such a difference that Scott returned to school and earned five A's and two B's the next semester and continued making good grades until graduation.

Those grades happened, he said, “because of a community of people” in the school who helped him along the way. Those included a Greek immigrant lunch lady who told him, “You’re going to be great. It’s in your eyes.”

But the one who made the biggest difference was English teacher Erin Gruwell, a former law school enrollee from a well-to-do family who decided to become a teacher after the 1992 Los Angeles riots. At Woodrow Wilson High, she was assigned to teach Scott’s class, whose members scored on the bottom 25th percentile on state tests. Her first day of class, she walked in the room carrying an attache case that the students called “the rich bag.” She wrote her name on the board and then turned and greeted them like the cheerleader she had been in school. One student took the syllabus she had distributed, folded it into a paper airplane, and threw it at her. He asked her why she was making them read books by dead white guys in tights.

For weeks, nothing she tried reached her students. Her training had not prepared her for the students’ challenging attitudes, the school’s gang activity, and the fights that would break out in class. But she did not give up.

“Can I encourage you to keep showing up?” Scott said. “When your heart is heavy, when you feel like your work is in vain, when you’re ready to throw in the towel, keep showing up. But in the process of continuing to show up, humble yourself and ask yourself, what is it that I don’t understand? What is it about this group of people I’m serving that I don’t get? Is there anything in my life, is there anything in my background that’s blinding me from seeing them for who they are? Is there anything in my heart that’s robbing me of the opportunity to really connect with them? Is there anything that’s in my way that’s keeping me from building this bridge? If you’ll ask those questions and humble yourself and become a student of your students, something special could happen.”

Continued on next page

“Do you still believe that your kids can overcome all those obstacles and do something great with their lives? Do you really still believe? Because if you don’t believe, you’re not a bad person, but you’re definitely in the wrong room right now.” - Manny Scott
One day, Gruwell walked into the classroom and excitedly began demonstrating how rap musicians employ the same Shakespearian literary techniques she had been trying to teach. The lessons made sense, especially when Scott recognized iambic pentameter in the music he was hearing. Gruwell used rap music as a tool even though she considered it destructive and self-defeating, a fact she didn’t tell the students. The lesson to be learned? “You will never reach anyone if you vilify what’s important to them,” Scott said.

She told them to write in journals and to find their voice, so Scott wrote about the pain of his childhood and, eventually, his hopes. After reading his work, Gruwell told him he had a gift for writing and that he must go to college, an assertion he at first discounted. Then one day, she invited him and some classmates to her house and showed them a stack of applications for colleges, none of which he knew anything about. She eventually encouraged him to apply to the University of California at Berkeley – the school, she told him, where Jason Kidd played basketball. He responded by emphatically choosing that one, not telling her that he had never heard of Kidd. He chose that school because of her belief in him and because of the way she expressed that belief.

Going to Berkeley was not easy, but he graduated with two degrees thanks to Gruwell’s encouragement, and when she encouraged him to attend graduate school – to serve as an example for teachers in lounges who didn’t believe in kids like him, she said – he did that as well.

Now he’s working on his doctorate. He’s a nationally known speaker and a world traveler who knows Hebrew and Greek and has a pilot’s license. He’s also a husband and father of three. Many of Scott’s classmates also enjoyed great success. One was named teacher of the year at a school where he was once expelled as a student. A movie, “Freedom Writers,” was made about Gruwell and her students.

“Sometimes you have to believe in someone else’s belief in you until your own belief sets in,” he said. “Do you...
Siloam’s Thomas wins Dr. Dan Award

Louis Thomas Jr. of Siloam Springs, a 31-year educator and 13-year school board member, received the Dr. Daniel L. Pilkington Award at ASBA’s Annual Conference Dec. 11. The “Dr. Dan Award” is given each year in honor of a recipient’s lifelong contributions to public education, and the announcement is always kept secret. This year was no different.

“This is certainly a surprise. I consider it an honor to serve in my community and with you fellow board members in the great state of Arkansas. You know, together we change things,” Thomas said in his brief acceptance speech.

Jerry Don Woods, ASBA’s president, described Thomas’ lengthy biography before announcing his name. Thomas spent 31 years in the education profession teaching history, geography, physical education and residential carpentry. He served one year as assistant principal and assistant director of federal funds.

As a school board member, he received the Pinnacle Award for 200 hours of boardmanship credit and helped his district pass two millage increases totaling 12.7 mills. He is involved in community groups such as Habitat for Humanity.

“As a vo-tech instructor, he worked with kids with their own special challenges and turned them into productive young adults,” Woods said. “Many times, he put those kids to work outside of the classroom. Some of them had families to support, and he played a vital role in helping them work to provide for their families.

“He was not only a teacher to his students, but he was a mentor who believed in and trusted them. He listened to them when no one else would. His students learned what it meant to complete a task, to have responsibilities, and to be satisfied with a job well done. But most importantly, they learned that they had a friend and someone who was on their side.”
still believe that your kids can overcome all those obstacles and do something great with their lives? Do you really still believe? Because if you don’t believe, you’re not a bad person, but you’re definitely in the wrong room right now.”

Growing up poor in Dardanelle

Like Scott, Pete Kelly grew up in difficult circumstances – in his case, in a mobile home park on Dardanelle’s South Second Street, a place marked by drugs, alcohol and poverty. Four of his friends from there are now in prison. The culture, he said, was one of learned helplessness. For a time in high school, the family was homeless. “I know what it’s like not to have a meal,” he said during the conference luncheon Dec. 11. “I know the anguish of my mother when she sent me to the mailbox at the end of the month to see if our food stamps had arrived. I understand that. It’s difficult having nothing but mayonnaise sandwiches. It’s tough.”

Kelly’s journey out of that place started in kindergarten, where his teacher, Bessie Jo Mears, awakened in him a love of learning. In fourth grade, another teacher, Erma Montgomery, saw that he came to school hungry, so she subtly encouraged the other students to bring to school crackers and peanut butter, which...
were then shared among everyone in the class.

"Both teachers provided a loving atmosphere of learning," he said. "They made things happen. They provided encouraging words and snacks. They measured my intelligence in heart, not by my bank account, made me realize I could overcome my situation from poverty, made me unafraid to seek new ideas and go headfirst into knowledge.

They taught me to never back down from a difficult task, and to be my best when all around me appeared bleak and murky. They provided steadfast hope – steadfast – and they taught me never to give up."

The family had moved to Ola when he graduated high school. Kelly’s father was unemployed, so he planned to find a job to help the family, but his mother insisted he enroll in college. Lacking a car or lunch money, he walked, borrowed rides and hitchhiked 20 miles each way to Arkansas Tech University. The struggle was made easier by the help of others, including a banker who loaned him the money to buy his first car even though he had no collateral.

Still, not everyone was supportive. When he was about 20 years old, a man asked him in a grocery store parking lot Continued on page 31
MASTER BOARDS. Fayetteville, Pottsville, and South Conway County, were awarded the Master Board Award because all members have earned the Master Award. Top photo, Tim Hudson of Fayetteville poses with ASBA President-elect Brenda McKown of Beebe. Middle photo, members of the Pottsville School Board pose with their award. Pictured are, front row from left, David Potts, Blake Herren, Clint Hull, Tracy Taylor and Jim Huffman, with ASBA President Dr. Tony Prothro in the back row. The bottom photo is the South Conway County School Board. Pictured are members Buck Joyner and Michelle Cheek, ASBA’s McKown, and members John Gibson, Sue Spivey and Craig Mullins. Photos by Lifetouch.

MASTER AWARD WINNERS. The Master Award is presented to individual board members who accrue 50 hours of boardmanship credit. Top photo, top row, Susan Johnson, Quitman; Gloria Caldwell, De Queen; Donna Fincher, Cutter Morning Star; Susan McFerran, Fort Smith; Brenda Sellers, Fountain Lake; Allan George, Russellville; Blake Herren, Pottsville. Bottom row, Shannon Hobbs, Wynne; Brian Parrish, Marked Tree; Michael Ferguson, Bryant; Greg Frank, Fountain Lake; Edwin Boswell, Strong-Huttig; Laura Whilaker, Drew Central. Middle photo, top row, Michael Robbins, Dover; Tony Beardsley, Arkansas Arts Academy; Rickey Joyner, South Conway County; Trey Reaper, Pangburn; Brad Koen, De Witt; Kirk Scobey, Corning; Bryson Wood, Midland. Bottom row, James Pitts, Sheridan; Jeff Lisenbey, Sheridan; Arthur Berry, Earle; Tobey Johnson, Blytheville; Traci Farrah, Fayetteville; and Stacie Schlenker, Wynne. Bottom left photo, Stewart Morton, Des Arc; Rebecca Powers, Bentonville; and Johnny Reidhar, Des Arc. Bottom right photo, top row, Sherri Plumlee, Berryville; Josephine Griffin, Lake-side-Lake Village; Darla Privitt, Shirley; Brenda McGathery, Star City. Bottom row, Travis Collins, Lakeside-Lake Village; Sue Spivey, South Conway County; and Stan Rider, Highland. Photos by Lifetouch.
if he was a South Street boy and then told him he would never amount to anything. Kelly’s response: “Sir, thank you very much. I’m going to use that as motivation.”

Kelly now has two degrees and has been employed in various capacities at Arkansas Tech since 1996. His title currently is visiting instructor of health and physical education.

The message shared by both men was simple: Caring educators can help their students overcome their tough circumstances.

School board members don’t spend as much time around students as educators, but they set a district’s tone and vision. They hire the people that hire people like Erin Gruwell, Bessie Jo Mears, and Erma Montgomery, and then they make sure those teachers have the tools they need to succeed.

One day, Scott was at a conference in Rockwell, Texas, when he was asked about students who would not accept help, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink,” he started to say, but before he finished, a Texan in a cowboy hat corrected him. He said he was a lifelong rancher, and while it’s true that you can’t make a horse drink, “You sure as blank can slap some salt in its mouth and make it thirsty.”

A person’s love and expectations can be enough to change someone’s life, Scott said. He begged the audience of school board members and superintendents to renew their commitment to their students and parents, particularly those they don’t like. “Who you are is enough,” he said. “So go and be salty in a world that desperately needs it.”

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COMMERCIAL AFFILIATES. As always, ASBA's commercial affiliates visited with school board members at Exhibit Hall. Top left, Lisa Boone with Educational Benefits, Inc., visits with Shawn Halbrook, South Conway County superintendent. Top right, Connie Straw with the Trammell Piazza law firm shares her firm’s story with a visitor. Middle left, Susie Fortenberry with All-Clean talks with Carl Barger of Conway. Middle right, Liz Cox with Hight-Jackson, an architectural firm, visits with Chuck Hyde from Siloam Springs. Bottom left, Sam Hollis, president of Milestone Construction Company, and Kelli Gemmell of Milestone talk to Bryn Bagwell with the Fayetteville School Board. Bottom right, Patti LaFleur of Sport Court visits with Jerry Don Woods of Dardanelle, ASBA president.
MORE FROM EXHIBIT HALL. Top left, Chad Wessler, vice president of Van Horn Construction, left, visits with Allen George of Russellville. Top right, Sherry Weston of SubTeachUSA mans her booth in Exhibit Hall. Middle left, KLC Video Security’s Bill King, left, discusses his company with Buck Joyner of South Conway County. Middle right, Christina Lusk of East-Harding visits with Richard Ray of the Brinkley School District, left, along with another conference participant. Bottom left, from left, AdvancED’s Dr. Don Love, associate director, and Kenny Pennington, director, visit with James Caton, dean of students and assistant secondary principal for the Arkansas School for the Blind. Bottom right, Glen Woodruff with WD&D Architects visits with Michael Robbins of Dover.
Ruthie Mae Johnson grew up on her family’s cotton farm east of Winchester. Married at age 18, she helped her husband on their farm in Gould. They moved in 1965 to Star City, where she took a job at Byrd’s Manufacturing as a clothing inspector. Her husband and father both died within a year of one another, leaving her to raise her children alone. In 1970, she took a job as a prison security guard, which she did for 24 years until her retirement in 1994.

In 1981, the Grady School District, where Johnson’s children attended, needed one more board member. A friend told Johnson she should run and offered to manage her campaign. Johnson agreed. She would serve on the Grady School Board 23 years, watching her children and a few grandchildren graduate. After the Grady and Star City school districts merged in 2004, Johnson remained on the Star City School Board.

Johnson is now age 86 with 33 years of school board work under her belt. She was awarded the Platinum Award for more than 400 hours of board training with ASBA. Actually, she pointed out, that doesn’t count some of her training hours during her tenure on the Grady School Board.

Star City School District was one of the first districts in Arkansas to receive a grant in 2012 to join the Project Lead the Way network. The program employs hands-on teaching methods and focuses on STEM classes (science, technology, engineering, math). Eighty-two Arkansas schools are part of the national effort, but Star City was the first to employ it at all grade levels.

Johnson credits the school’s superintendent, Richard Montgomery, for moving the school district in that
direction. She points out that when Montgomery arrived, the board was meeting in an old house. Today, the board meets in an official boardroom within a district that now houses a new field house, indoor practice gym, and much more.

Report Card sat down with her in her house to discuss her years of service and to learn about her district’s experiences with Project Lead the Way.

What made you decide to first run for school board?
“Well, I really didn’t decide to do it. We really needed someone to run, and I had a friend who asked me if I would run. And I said, ‘Girl, I don’t know.’ She said, ‘Well, you don’t have to do anything, and I’ll be your campaign manager and everything.’ So, I said, ‘Well, O.K., then, I’ll go for it.’”

You recently earned the Platinum Award for 400 hours of board training with ASBA. Has that training been valuable?
“It’s been good. Really good. Because you have a chance to get with other school board members and bring back the good stuff they’re doing. They can get ideas from you, and you can get ideas from them. It’s really good.”

How do you think it could be improved?
“I guess anything you add to it. There’s always some improvement that can be done. We haven’t reached the top yet. It still could have some improvement.”

Star City was among the first school districts to join the Project Lead the Way network. What made you all decide to do that?
“We thought it was a good thing to get the students into. Dr. Montgomery, he had checked it out. And we all got together, and we decided it was a good thing.”

This is a part of the state that has struggled economically for a while. Did the school board and the community see Project Lead the Way as an opportunity to give Star City an advantage?
“Yes, it did.”

How difficult was it to implement something so unconventional?
“It wasn’t difficult for us. We are there for the kids. That’s our main concern, for the kids. We try to get the kids where they’ll be able to get a good job.”

As a longtime veteran school board member, was it difficult for you to support this kind of high-tech program?
“No, not at all.”

As a school board member, how do you monitor the students’ performance with Project Lead the Way in place?
“How do I check with the students to see how they’re responding?”

Yes, ma’am.
“Well, they seem to be dealing with it really well. All of the kids are not going to be interested, but we have so many of them that are trying. Some of them are not going to care or get it. But they are doing really well. They’re making pretty good grades. They can do better. I was looking at it (the test scores) the other day, and they’re not doing as well as they should be.”

When you visit Star City’s school now, what do you see?
“I see the kids at work. When you visit, they aren’t running up and down the hallways. When visitors come in, they always give us good reports about the kids. Even when I was in Grady, the people would come and visit, and they would ask, ‘Where are the students?’ They’re in the classroom where they’re supposed to be, not running up and down the hallway. They’re supposed to be at work.”

Your superintendent who has implemented Project Lead the Way, Richard Montgomery, worked in New

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You hear the kids fussing, because it’s so much of a change. They have a lot of work to do that they didn’t have, and they were fussing a little about it. But they have to get with it, you know. We had to explain to them what it’s going to take for them to make it through life. You’ve got to try to get the best you can because this technology thing is taking over, and we need to get all we can get."

York at one point. Did you all hire him from there directly?
“No, he came in from Texas. We had a superintendent search. We hired, I forget the name of the company that did the search, and they brought him into us for an interview. And he was the top that we interviewed.”

Did the board have any hesitation in hiring a superintendent to come to Star City who has an out-of-state background?
“No, because we had his background, you know. They had all of his records. Everything we had on paper looked good to us, so why not try it and see? And I know we’ve made the right decision because the people from around this area that we interviewed, they weren’t really what we wanted.”

How did the community accept him?
“At first they did (hesitate). But then he had meetings with them in the community. He had meetings with all of the (local community) groups. He had meetings on different days and different times. He would call the community in and had meetings with them. And I think that was a good thing. He didn’t just come in as the superintendent. Before he started to work, he would always have a meeting with different focus groups.”

That is very good.
“Mm-hmm. He did that.”

How did the community accept Project Lead the Way? Was there any opposition? Did you kind of have to convince them of it?
“Yes, you know, a lot of people don’t want any change. ... But we were all for it. It’s a good change, nothing bad.”

Do you think this style of education will equip the students to achieve more as adults, possibly get better jobs?
“I think so.”

As a school board member, your primary responsibility is to take care of the students.
“Right.”

But you also serve the community.
“Yes.”

Are you worried that you’re training your students to move away and get jobs somewhere else?
“Am I worried about that? No, because if it’s not here, you have to go where the jobs are. And we have to, and we try to, get things to improve, so we can get jobs to come in. We’ve been putting out flyers and different things advertising about what’s happening in Star City, trying to gain people to come in, try to get business going. Because, if there’s nothing happening here, they’ll say, ‘Why go to Star City? There’s nothing happening there. We don’t need to be there.’ But... that’s what we’re trying to do now.”

Star City was the subject of a big Democrat-Gazette story Dec. 26. What was it like seeing southeast Arkansas treated as a leader?
“It’s great. It’s something we can brag about. They’re seeing that we have improved quite a bit. We have. Our band is invited to Atlanta in, I think it is December. So, we’ve got to try to get them down there. And you know, we’ve got a good girls’ basketball team. ... Our girls go to state every year. They don’t win, you know, but they go every year. They’re good.”

If you could talk to other school board members about Project Lead the Way, what would you tell them?
“I would tell them that it’s one of the greatest things that I’ve been in contact with, and they need to try to do the same thing. It’s good.”

Are the students learning more?
“I think so, yes. You hear the kids fussing, because it’s so much of a change. They have a lot of work to do that they didn’t have, and they were fussing a little about it. But they have to get with it, you know. We had to explain to them what it’s going to take for them to make it through life. You’ve got to try to get the best you can because this technology thing is taking over, and we need to get all we can get.”

Do you think the end result for the students will be that those who are willing to do the work will be able to get maybe farther along or have better jobs than they would have in the traditional system?
“I know they will.”

You do? Why do you think that?
“Because they’ll be better prepared. Don’t you think?”

Yes, ma’am.
“Because we were just sitting still. We weren’t implementing too much. But I’ve seen that we’ve had a great change since Dr. Montgomery has been there. It’s a big change.”
A ‘partnership for improvement’

Tony Wood, education commissioner, says state will work with Little Rock School District

By Steve Brawner
Editor

On Jan. 28, Tony Wood, the state’s education commissioner, effectively became the Little Rock School Board as a result of the State Board of Education’s takeover of the district.

What’s in store for the district and what is the state’s role? Wood, a former LRSD deputy superintendent and superintendent at Searcy, sat down Jan. 30 to answer those questions.

What changes now?
“We’re actually in ... day two. ... Both yesterday as well as today, I have just come from the district. It’s a time period of analysis and trying to have an understanding of different facets operationally of the district.

“As far as fundamental change, there is no fundamental change that has occurred other than the governance of the district, and that’s simply and clearly defined that, as opposed to operationally being under the guidance of that elected board ... the commissioner’s office sits as their board. ... If there’s something on a level that would normally go to the school board, it will now come to me.”

School board members are trained to have limited roles and let the educators educate. But you are an educator, so will the department be more engaged?

“So interesting that you ask that. I just had that discussion within the last hour, and I’m struggling with that. ... Is there a higher degree of involvement that is my responsibility as the board per se for the Little Rock School District than there would normally be for board involvement? ... I have discussed with (superintendent) Dr. (Dexter) Suggs that clearly the ongoing day-to-day operation of the district will continue to be administered in his role as superintendent. I just simply asked, ‘It is a judgement call when there is an item that you feel that your board needs to be informed, (and) I’d appreciate you sharing that information with me.’”

So what actually has happened is there’s no school board and Dr. Suggs is free to do what he wants to do?

“The term ‘free to do as he wants to do,’ and I think the meaning that you have in the way you phrased that, in the general sense, I think that’s correct.”

That he has more freedom.

“He clearly, he is not responding to seven different individual board members. He’s dealing with me. Yes, I think that translates to more freedom.

“But I also think from his perspective of what professionally he feels needs to be brought to me for input into decision-making, that that freedom is tempered by the fact that he does still have, quote, a ‘board’ in the form of the commissioner’s office. ...”

“I want to be very clear that my perspective on this is that we are, as the state, as the commissioner’s office, are partnering with the Little Rock School District for the improvement of academic achievement for their student body as well as other areas. There are fiscal matters there that we will be involved in carefully giving consideration to the future of Little Rock School District from a financial perspective.

“I don’t want it to be viewed, and it is not factually the case, that it is a situation of the state coming in and saying, ‘Hey, man, we’ve got this degree of authority, it’s in code, and we are now going to exercise it in a heavy-handed manner.’ That’s not the case. The two days time that I’ve spent with him, about two-and-a-half, three hours yesterday and whatever this morning, is starting to have an understanding and the evolvement of a partnership for improvement.”

Do you have any early indications of what needs to be done first, or at least what needs to be done at some point in the future?

“When the right teacher is in the classroom to meet the needs of that group of children, then I think the opportunity is there for them to receive an educational foundation that they

Continued, next page
need. And are there some instances, perhaps, that that’s not as it should be? There are some wonderful teachers in the Little Rock School District, and there are some areas of tremendous high achievement. I mean, it’s clear foundationally that when you look at National Merit finalists, there are wonderful educational opportunities.

“In the same vein, are there isolated pockets or instances where perhaps the delivery is not as it should be? Possibly so, and I think that fundamentally, you have to – and I’m not even sure that you start there as opposed to looking first at the instructional leader in that building. And I make that comment based on my 43-44 years of experience.

“The foundational comment is that this does not occur overnight or over one year or over two years. And I know there’s a sense of urgency now, for good reason, and we are going to try to foster that environment of improvement, but it’s not going to happen tomorrow.”

So will the state have a little more ability to get rid of or reassign, add teachers than the district did?

“I think that’s an area that’s going to require additional study. It would be real simple for me to reference back into the code in regard to the takeover of individual schools under academic distress. You can disband the school as we know it. You can remove staff. But I think there are other confines that may come into play that consideration has to be given to if you were to reassign staff. How does that reassigning align with components of a (professionally negotiated) agreement, and I’ve not read Little Rock’s negotiated agreement.”

Is there anything else that you know needs to be done?

“I really like it when people work together. I like to find common ground. I think in most instances that compromise is appropriate. What I think we need to do as a community, as a professional staff of teachers, administratively, I think we need to understand that we have an opportunity here to work together, and to try to foster improvement, and I think we need to enter into that time with careful reflection and consideration and try to get better.”
The United States should turn away from the “factory production model” that has been created by the federal No Child Left Behind law and instead follow the lead of Heifer International, the president of the three million-member National Education Association said at the Clinton School of Public Service Feb. 2.

Lily Eskelsen Garcia, a former lunch lady who became Utah’s Teacher of the Year, said lessons from the Little Rock-based international development agency apply to schools. Heifer focuses on assets, not deficits; it includes, not excludes; and it seeks to find answers within communities instead of trusting in the advice of outside experts, she said. The organization is constantly monitoring its programs to determine if they are accomplishing their mission.

“That’s an important lesson for us because we have spent 12 long years under ‘No Child Left Untested,’” she said, referring to No Child Left Behind, passed in 2002, which was written to use standardized test scores to measure school district performance and penalize districts that fail to meet targets.

Under the law, all districts would have been required to ensure all students were testing appropriately this past year had they not been granted waivers by the Obama administration – a statistical impossibility, she said. She said that No Child Left Behind was “the most absurd bipartisan mistake that Congress has ever made.”

“It requires now 100 percent of human-type children to be above average as measured solely on math and reading standardized tests that we’re going to give once a year,” she said.

No Child Left Behind has created what Garcia called a “factory production model” that she compared to the famous “I Love Lucy” episode where the characters cannot keep up with a conveyor belt at a chocolate factory. She said the model wastes too much time and resources and disproportionately affects children of color and children in poverty.

“You’ve standardized the production model,” she said. “You’ve got quotas to meet. You manage your workers by rewards and punishment. You hit your number. There’s no evidence anywhere in this world that this model works for real live children.”

Garcia said that the United States has remained stuck in its ranking on the PISA international exam while other countries that do not use the factory production model are moving ahead. Singapore does test a lot but doesn’t set targets, she said. Canada gave educator professionals increased autonomy. Finland has a unionized teacher force, no standardized testing, and a commitment to educational equity.

“None, none, not one of those top-ranked countries are using those factory school pillars,” she said. “They don’t use cut-throat competition, standardization, prizes for winners, shame for losers. They care for the whole child and they care for every child. They have given every child the human and civil right to that education.”

Congress is considering reauthorizing No Child Left Behind. Garcia called on audience members, many of them NEA members, to get involved. The one good thing about No Child Left Behind is that it required disaggregation of data, she said. What’s needed is more useful data, such as evidence explaining why opportunity gaps exist between schools.

Garcia did not mention the Common Core State Standards in her speech. Afterwards, she was asked in an interview what she and the NEA thought about the Common Core. She said her association believes the standards are good. The concern, she said, is how they are being implemented.

**Opposed to state takeover of Little Rock schools**

Garcia did take a strong stand during her speech against the State Board of Education’s takeover of the Little Rock School District. She said the track record of those efforts has not been good.
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“School takeovers by those experts, those outsiders who don’t know your children, will not solve the problems in Little Rock,” she said. “What we find on all those takeovers, it usually gives the illusion that you’re doing something. People come for four or five or six years. It usually costs a lot of money, and then they leave, and nothing has changed. We see it time and time and time again. The history of school takeovers is miserable, and they fail.”

The board voted for the takeover and dismissed the school board because of continued low achievement at six schools. Under the terms of the takeover, Tony Wood, the state’s education commissioner and a former Little Rock deputy superintendent, essentially takes the place of the elected school board. (Story, page 37.)

Garcia also spoke in favor of increased spending for public education. “I taught elementary school for 20 years, and I never walked into a classroom any day of my life when I did not know in my bones what my purpose is,” she said.

“My purpose is to open a child’s mind to its infinite possibilities, and that means that it’s going to cost you something.”
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TIPS/TAPS now partners with city, county groups

The Interlocal Purchasing System (TIPS/TAPS) has created partnerships with the Arkansas Municipal League and the Arkansas Association of Counties to offer its services to those members — just as it already has a partnership with ASBA. TIPS/TAPS has well over 1,000 vendors offering services at a discount to its members. One of those vendors, White River Services in Batesville, is offering HP and Dell computers. For more information, go to www.tips-usa.com or call 866.839.8477.

Beardsley Public Finance shows how to refinance

Low interest rates are beneficial to school districts financing new construction and renovation projections, as well as refinancing existing debt.

According to First Security Beardsley Public Finance, in order to refinance a bond issue, the refunding must achieve a total savings of more than $100,000 or 5 percent of the outstanding principal and interest. Local school boards can approve this “savings” refunding with a simple vote of the board. Straight refundings may not increase the existing millage rate or extend the maturity date.

School districts’ financial advisors should be monitoring bond issues and bringing potential refundings to their attention.

For more information, contact First Security Beardsley Public Finance at 800.766.2000, or go to www.crewsfs.com/beardsley.

Womack visit marks opening of gym built by Van Horn

The new Russellville High School gymnasium, built by Van Horn Construction, recently received a visit from a former Cyclone, U.S. Rep. Steve Womack, for a brief walkthrough. Athletic Director Johnny Johnson and Superintendent Randall Williams updated Womack on the progress of the facility and its potential upon completion.

“VHC is proud to be working on this project that will be a part of our community’s future,” said Chad Weisler, Van Horn vice president.

The $12.5 million, 64,000-square-foot facility is expected to be completed by Oct. 25. For more information about Van Horn Construction, call 479.968.2514 or go to www.vanhorn-construction.com.
Stephens to advocate for schools during legislative session

During the 2015 General Assembly, Stephens is committed to working with ASBA to advocate on behalf of school districts on matters related to public school funding and debt financing. Stephens is dedicated to protecting and bettering the financial creditworthiness of the Arkansas school bond market. As bills are presented that may impact Arkansas school funding, Stephens will keep its local school board clients apprised of these legislative activities, and as necessary, take proactive steps to address any concerns.

If you would like to learn more about how Stephens can represent your district, please contact Paula Morehead of Stephens Public Finance at 800.643.9691.

SubTeachUSA announces new schools for spring

The following schools began using trained, professional substitute teachers through SubTeachUSA during the spring of 2015: Bryant, Caddo Hills and Clinton in Arkansas, and Marion County, Tunica County, and Western Line in Mississippi.

With the addition of these schools, SubTeachUSA now serves 154 public school districts in Arkansas, seven in Mississippi and two in Missouri.

For more information about SubTeachUSA, go to subteachusa.com, email at info@subteachusa.com, or call 800.641.0140.

Clark Contractors is working on Heber Springs auditorium

Work continues on a new 1,000-seat auditorium at Heber Springs High School that CLARK Contractors began constructing last year. In addition to the auditorium, CLARK Contractors is enlarging and renovating the cafeteria, adding and renovating elementary classrooms, and finishing out four new occupational/physical therapy classrooms. The project is on schedule, within budget, and is expected to be completed in December.

For more information, go to clarkcontractors.net or call 501.868.3133.

ACS digital speaker systems enable ‘steerable’ sound

Recent advancements in electronics and digital speaker processing allow sound to be more precisely aimed directly where it is required. This is especially useful in highly reverberant spaces, meaning they have background echoes.

The sound system reduces activation of the echo reverberation before arriving at the listeners’ ears. Speech especially is more easy to understand without the loud echo attached.

These systems can be a good alternative to expensive acoustical room treatment in existing buildings.

For more information on purchasing these systems, contact Gene Bosche with ACS at 870.243.3100 or gene@arkansascommunications.net.

Crafton Tull can help schools with summer projects

Crafton Tull is reaching out to schools concerning the benefits of using summer break to implement campus maintenance projects. The firm is experienced in working with school districts on improvements to traffic and pedestrian circulation, athletic facilities, drainage solutions, HVAC operations, lighting updates and other needs. Its knowledge of the requisite pre-construction requirements allows for a streamlined process. For more information, contact Crafton Tull at 501.664.3245 or 479.636.4838, or go to www.craftontull.com.

Modus Studio helps Flippin with planning, millage

Modus Studio was asked to design a master plan for the future of the Flippin School District and was honored to assist in its recently passed millage. Since the completion of the master plan, Modus has continued its work with the district and is now preparing to bid the first project planned for Flippin Schools. This new FEMA shelter is a 4,500-square-foot facility located in the heart of the Flippin Schools campus that will house 900 students and faculty during natural disasters. For more information please visit www.modusstudio.com or call 479.455.5577.
Federal Surplus Property to host donor discount day

Federal Surplus Property will host its 11th annual Donee Appreciation Day May 7. This is a day to thank donees for their continued support. Property on site more than 30 days (excluding overseas items) will be discounted on this date. Lunch will be served, door prizes will be awarded, and winners of the refurbished contest will be announced. Please RSVP by April 24 by calling 501.835.3111.

A+ Schools hosts workshops; filing period still open

Arkansas A+ Schools fellows have led workshops at Clarendon Elementary, Booker Arts Magnet, Boone Park Elementary, Indian Hills Elementary, Cross County Elementary Technology Academy, and Arkansas Arts Academy. The workshops have focused on arts integration, enriched assessment, collaboration and experiential learning.

The application process is open for new schools wanting to join the A+ network of schools that integrate arts and personalized learning into all areas of the student experience. Applications are due by early March. Details can be found at www.arkansasaplus.org.

Dardanelle installs Musco lighting systems on field

The Dardanelle School District recently installed Musco’s innovative Light-Structure Green™ lighting system on its football field. Musco’s Constant 25™ product assurance and warranty program eliminates maintenance costs for 25 years. This lighting solution will bring an estimated energy and maintenance savings of more than $35,000 over the next 25 years. Light-Structure Green’s advanced light control reduces spill light and glare by 50 percent, helping improve playability for athletes and the viewing experience for spectators.

For more information, visit www.musco.com or contact Jeremy Lemons at 800.825.6030.
School choices shouldn’t hurt schools

Alternatives are good to have, but only public schools seek to serve all students regardless of circumstance.

Choice in education has been a reality as long as I can remember. Parents in my community who desired another learning environment for their children simply enrolled them in a private, parochial school. For many years some of my friends were educated that way up through the sixth grade and then joined us in public school.

Later would come magnet schools, the forerunner to today’s charter schools, and homeschooling. All of these options represented an opportunity for parents to choose what they thought was best for their children. And throughout all of this, public school districts, under the leadership of a locally elected board, continued to provide education opportunities for all students, regardless of their ability to pay, language, or other challenges to learning. Most school board members that I know welcome alternatives as a way for parents to be engaged in their children’s education by deciding what they think is best.

For some policymakers, that’s not enough. They want public dollars to fund private schools, one way or another. Others want to allow parents educating their children in alternative environments to be able to pick and choose public school services.

Let’s examine these viewpoints.

School choice creates a set of challenges for students whose parents exercise their choice. These challenges include participation in extracurricular activities, accountability for students who are admitted to public schools from alternatives that have not served the students effectively, and others. More often public schools are being required to allow students from private parochial, private charter, and homeschool environments to participate in extracurricular activities, creating logistical challenges that can compromise the extracurricular experience for both sets of students.

Some students who enter public schools from choice alternatives must be remediated.

**Alternative providers are not obligated to provide all services as those required by public schools.** These services include transportation, meals, and special services including physical, occupational, and speech therapy. Public schools must provide all of these services and sometimes others if determined to be educationally necessary for the student.

**A major issue of school choice is funding.** Some who advocate for school choice believe that students whose parents choose private parochial schools and home schools should receive funding through the public tax system, either in the form of tuition tax credits or vouchers. This would provide public tax money to privately operated schools that may not be obligated to provide special services, meals, or transportation. These same schools are also not obligated to meet the same level of fiscal transparency as are public schools.

When tax credits or vouchers are issued, this money will be taken from the same source of funding as public schools, thereby reducing funds for public schools. Since many students with special needs require more money to serve than is provided by state and federal funds, any excess from students who do not have special needs is critical for the fiscal survival of public schools.

Choice alternatives, on the other hand, draw students without special needs, and thereby would be allowed to profit off the excess foundational funding. Although parents should have a choice in their children’s education, one parent’s choice should not be allowed to challenge the education services for other students.

Many of you have heard me tell the story of Eleanor Roosevelt and Cardinal Francis Spellman. In 1949 Congress was discussing measures to aid federal support for public education when the nation’s former first lady objected in her “My Day” column to the use of public funds to support private parochial schools. This comment drew sharp criticism from Cardinal Spellman, who said her columns were “documents of discrimination unworthy of an American mother.”

Mrs. Roosevelt’s comments were right in “her day” and are still right today. Public dollars have always funded public K-12 education, while private K-12 education has always been funded privately. Let’s make sure lawmakers make the right choice and keep it that way.

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