

Arkansas Times

LRSD board makes slog-ress at long but enlightening work session

BY **Jim Ross** ON

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Tonight's Little Rock School Board meeting was a sober reminder of what systemic oppression has done to so many African American, Latino and special needs kids in our city. Over the decades, the district has forgotten that systems of instruction, building culture, and our economic investments were created to the advantage of white middle-class children.

Beginning in the 1980s the district learned the language of inclusion and opportunity, but time after time the words were just words. Into the 2000s, African American leaders took over the district, but the old systems remained in place.

At Thursday's meeting, **Superintendent Jermall Wright** and his team presented some startling data that shows this city continues to leave children of color behind. Wright wants to make significant changes. If he is successful he will destroy the old systems and create new ones. If he fails, I am not sure why the Little Rock School District should continue to exist.

REIMAGINING OUR SCHOOLS

The board heard a report from the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS), a consortium of urban schools that have come together to help one another educate all children. They sent a strategic support team to Little Rock between March 26-30, 2023.

The group's findings proved yet again that the state takeover of our schools was a tragic failure that actually led to further loss of learning among our most

vulnerable kids. When the state of Arkansas took over the Little Rock School District, there were six failing schools in our district. Two years later that number grew to 16 failing schools. If we look at math or literacy, we see the same story, the overwhelming majority of kids in Little Rock are falling further behind.

The new report commends Wright and his team for coherence across academic departments, an emphasis on literacy and support for principals. But it also identified uneven instruction quality and an over-reliance on curriculum materials and products. The report is scathing on this point: "Current content instruction appears to be mostly aligned to adopted programs and/or vendor resources with an over-reliance on scripted materials rather than rigorous grade-level standards. The team heard from staff and teachers that they were explicitly told to 'follow the script' when providing classroom instruction."

The evaluation group found that some reading texts lacked context and weren't of interest to students, making them less effective. Kids are advancing to middle school and high school with no background knowledge in science and social studies.

The evaluation team encountered students primarily working independently on low-level, fill-in-the-blank worksheets or online applications. Minimal direct instruction was observed in many classrooms, with little to no opportunities to foster academic discourse/oral language development or knowledge building. Often, the direct instruction that was observed was procedural and did not require students to engage in discourse to develop a conceptual understanding of the material.

Science and social studies lessons are extremely limited or non-existent in elementary schools, meaning students get little opportunity to address core competency, critical thinking or intellectual preparation that leads to a greater depth of knowledge across content areas.

Those of you who have suffered through my rants for the last 23 years have heard me address many of these issues. Those of you privileged to have

teachers as friends have heard about most of these issues, too. Teachers always know what is wrong, and usually they know how to fix it.

Secondly, the board heard a presentation from the Ignite Reading group, a vendor that aims to help boost LRSD literacy rates. The 2022 testing data shows some improvements over the 2021 testing data, but we have not returned to the 2019, pre-pandemic numbers yet. And we must not fool ourselves, those pre-pandemic numbers were horrific.

In the spring of 2023, Ignite Reading launched a pilot test of their program in a dozen LRSD schools. The company reported on the first semester of data after working with 1000+ students at Fulbright, Williams, Western Hills, Brady, King, McDermott, Baseline, Chicot, J. A. Fair, Stephens, Gibbs and Terry elementary schools. Diagnostic data collected shows that in these schools, first graders were .7 grades behind in reading. Second graders were 1.4 years behind. Third graders were 2.1 years behind, fourth graders were 3 years behind and fifth graders were 3.9 years behind.

As you can see, our systems, combined with high rates of poverty, are failing. The data also shows that even though we tested kids K-5, 82% of the students had skill gaps that placed them at kindergarten and first grade reading levels. After a semester of intervention, there was progress. In analyzing data for all 12 schools, there was more than two times the normal growth for students. Among students in grades 3-5 they saw even more growth.

This is exciting to see these kids receive the instruction they need to succeed. In just 7.3 weeks of instruction, 95% of students made at least a quarter year of reading growth, and 62% made up half a year of growth.

There is still so much work to do. The program needs about 75% attendance rate to really be fully successful, and in the sample for this pilot the average attendance rate was about 72%.

In other good news, the Ignite program shows no racial gap in growth. Black, white and Latino students all showed growth, as did special needs students and multilingual students.

The program is a 15-minutes-a-day intervention in which each student works online with a reading program and an individual tutor.

Going into the new school year, Wright and his team want to expand the program to cover 2,500 students in our D- and F-graded schools. The expansion will cost \$6,425,000, and for this next school year will come from federal covid funds.

Board members also heard about partnership plans with Life Skills for Youth, a program that provides meals, mentoring and a framework of programs to usher entire families successfully to their students' graduation. To participate in the program students and their families attend a parent academy, an after-school academy, summer programs, anger management classes, and time management classes.

Currently the organization is working at Mabelvale Middle School where it is working with kids on how to successfully transition from middle school to high school and at Southwest High School where it runs an ACT prep camp and a driving school assistance program. They are asking the board to help them expand at a cost of \$289,472.27, to be covered by federal covid funds. Board member **Vicki Hatter** asked to see data on the investments that we have already made in this group before moving forward.

Wright said he also wants to partner with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Arkansas at a cost of \$701,000. **Board president Mike Mason** asked where the money is coming from, but received no answer yet.

REBRANDING THE LITTLE ROCK SCHOOL DISTRICT

Wright is proposing a partnership with Apptegy, a Little Rock-based education technology company that specializes in improving school operations, to boost the district's brand. They would be hired to develop a new website, build an interactive district app, and add new marketing and communication tools. This partnership would cost \$135,000 annually, starting this school year. The company would develop, maintain and offer professional development on how to best utilize the systems to communicate to the public. The board will

vote on this during their regular meeting in June.

LITTLE ROCK SCHOOL DISTRICT FINANCES

Kelsey Bailey, the chief financial officer for the Little Rock School District, reported on the annual state-required legislative audit. The only issue discovered was overpayment to one former employee. The report also shows that we spent \$83,649,717 on new construction. This included a new roof at Brady, Forest Park, Jefferson, Mabelvale Elementary, Williams, Baseline, Metro and Dunbar.