



## NEWS RELEASE

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### HELENA-WEST HELENA, MIDLAND DISTRICTS TO REGAIN SOME CONTROL

The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) sent letters to the Helena-West Helena and Midland school districts late last week notifying them that authority over the school districts would be incrementally restored to the districts' respective boards during the remainder of the year. The state took over operations of the Helena-West Helena School District in September 2005 and did the same with the Midland School District, which is in Independence County, in January 2006. Both schools were in "fiscal distress" under Ark. Code Ann. 6-20-1901 et seq. and had failed to develop adequate plans to improve their finances.

"I am pleased to inform the constituents of both these districts as well as all Arkansans that the state's actions, while necessitated by unfortunate situations, has had a positive effect on both these districts," said Dr. Ken James, Commissioner of Education. "The bottom line is that students in both Helena-West Helena and in Midland are able to attend schools in districts enjoying increased fiscal and administrative stability."

In a letter dated May 3 to Helena-West Helena Superintendent Rudolph Howard, Dr. James wrote that the Helena-West Helena School Board will be allowed to resume regular monthly meetings in July but will act in an advisory capacity only. ADE will monitor the activities of the school board from July 2007 through January 2008 to "ascertain if and when the Board should be restored to its full level of statutory authority."

In a letter also dated May 3 to Midland Superintendent Lynn Roe King and school board President Shirley Branscum, Dr. James said the state is returning administration of the school district over to a newly elected school board. All current members of the Midland School Board are to be removed and an election for an entirely new board is to be held in September.

The Helena-West Helena and Midland school districts are two of three that the state has taken over in recent years due to their being classified in fiscal distress and unable to develop plans to improve their fiscal situations. The other was the Eudora School District, which the state also took over by removing the school board in January 2006. Eudora was annexed into the Lakeside School District in Chicot County on July 1, 2006.

The Midland School District had been placed in fiscal distress due to a projected negative balance. The district is on target to end the school year with a positive ending balance. The school district remains in fiscal distress status until ADE recommends that the school district petition the Arkansas State Board of Education to be removed, and the State Board approves the removal.

The Helena-West Helena District also faced a projected negative balance as well as faced negative findings in a legislative audit. It also is on target to end the school year with a positive balance and has corrected items identified in the audit as problems. It also will remain in fiscal distress status until ADE recommends that the school district petition the Arkansas State Board of Education to be removed, and the State Board approves the removal.

At this time, five school districts are classified in fiscal distress in Arkansas: Helena-West Helena, Hughes, Midland, Omaha and Turrell.

"While no school district in the state wants to be placed in fiscal distress, this accountability measure has served as a needed wake-up call for many school boards and administrators who have for whatever reason let their finances get out of hand," Dr. James said. "The most frequent story surrounding fiscal distress is that, often with technical assistance provided by ADE, school districts are able to develop and implement plans that restore fiscal stability – a real plus for all involved."

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*The Arkansas Department of Education strives to ensure that all children in the state have access to a quality education by providing educators, administrators and staff with leadership, resources and training.*