



ARKANSAS EDUCATION MATTERS

OCTOBER 2008

Volume 1, Number 2

- [MESSAGE FROM THE COMMISSIONER](#)
- [ELEMENTARY PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLARIFICATION](#)
- [CHINESE TEACHERS ALREADY HAVE HUGE IMPACT IN SCHOOL DISTRICTS](#)
- [NOTES FROM TEACHER OF THE YEAR PAUL GRAY](#)
- [ARKANSAS SCHOOLS EARN A BLUE RIBBON](#)

MESSAGE FROM THE COMMISSIONER



It always helps when I hear from educators in the field, so I appreciate it when you send me notes or e-mails, call me on the phone or stop me at meetings to express your concerns or share good news.

Because my conversations with you are so valuable, I wanted to revive a more formal structure to get feedback about concerns at the district level. That is through my Commissioner's Advisory committee, which met in late September after a being dormant for about a year.

This committee of superintendents had no qualms in bringing up items to discuss – we covered 17 that day, in fact. Discussion ranged from PE staffing issues (you can read more about that below) to scheduling spring break. We had great dialog, and I know I came away from the meeting with a better understanding of some of the issues causing concern for you at the district level.

I thank the superintendents who are participating in this group. They are Frank Anthony of Pine Bluff, Bill Blackwood of De Queen, Daryl Blaxton of Pocahontas, Ted Hall of Batesville, Russell Hester of West Side, Kay Johnson of Greenwood, Ken Ramey of Siloam Springs, Jim Rollins of Springdale, Andrew Tolbert of Warren, Bob Watson of El Dorado, Linda Watson of Little Rock, Kim Wilbanks of Jonesboro, and Tom Kimbrell, executive director of the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators. Feel free to contact any of them or me if you have a topic you would like this group to address.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken James". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

ELEMENTARY PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLARIFICATION

One of the issues discussed during the September meeting of the Commissioner's Advisory Committee was how to handle the relatively new laws and rules regarding physical education and the teacher-to-student requirements at the elementary level for the 2008-2009 school year. Because many school districts received information regarding the new rules too late to incorporate them into their planning for this school year, the Standards Unit of the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) will consider this difficulty when monitoring this year. Also, it has been decided that regular elementary teachers who fall under the qualified listing of instructors may also teach their students physical education, though they cannot be counted toward the 1-to-500 mandate. "We believe

there is no good argument that would prohibit these teachers from teaching their own students the subject of physical education,” Dr. Diana Julian, ADE deputy commissioner, said regarding the decision.

CHINESE TEACHERS ALREADY HAVING HUGE IMPACT IN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

When the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) and the University of Central Arkansas’ Confucius Institute started planning for Chinese teachers to come to the state to teach Mandarin Chinese in Arkansas junior and senior high schools, the theory was that the instructors would need to teach mathematics in addition to Chinese in order to have a full teaching load.

That’s not the case.

“We are thrilled that all five of our teachers have a full day of Mandarin Chinese classes,” Beverly Williams, ADE assistant commissioner for human resources and licensure, said. “I think that says a great deal about the leaders and the students at these schools. Business is hungry for employees who can communicate in Chinese, and colleges are eager to recruit students who already have a basic understanding of the language.”

The five teachers – who all hold master’s degrees in teaching Chinese as a second language to foreigners from universities in Beijing or Shanghai – are in the Greenwood, Harrisburg, Hot Springs, Waldron, Wynne and Cross County school districts (the latter two are sharing a teacher.) Min Jie, who is in teaching in Hot Springs, is even offering a course for a number of interested faculty members.

Kevin Hesslen, principal of Greenwood’s Wells Junior High, said their teacher, Sophia Ma, “has done a good job of adapting to the cultural difference in our schools. She seems to be developing positive relationships with our students.”

Williams said that the ADE will continue with the program next year. One of the goals from the ADE’s standpoint, she said, is to generate enough Arkansas high graduates interested in continuing their studies of the language so that Arkansas universities will in turn create majors in Mandarin Chinese and ultimately produce graduates who can return to the state’s public schools to teach the language.

School districts interested in applying to participate in the program should contact Williams at beverly.williams@arkansas.gov or Barbara Culpepper, coordinator of the Office of Teacher Quality, at Barbara.culpepper@arkansas.gov.

NOTES FROM TEACHER OF THE YEAR PAUL GRAY

I was in a session with a group of very smart people. The smartest one was at the front of the room. That person was Mary Beth Blegen, the 1996 National Teacher of the Year. She had asked all of the 2008 State Teachers of the Year a question: “How do you find out the reasons that students are failing?”

Everyone sat around quietly pondering the complicated components of what the best answer would be. It turns out the answer was simple.

Mary Beth said, “If you want to know why students are failing – ask them!” Seriously.

Mary Beth went on to say that we try to answer complex questions in very complex ways. Sometimes, we need to keep things simple.

So, I am going to try to collect information about a complex issue in the most simple of ways. I am going to go to schools and ask teachers and administrators if I can talk to some of the students who are not succeeding in our schools. I want to meet with some of these students and let them tell me their problems and circumstances. But, the most important thing I am going to ask them is what they think they need to succeed.

I know it sounds simplistic. Or maybe to some it may sound naïve. But, maybe, just maybe, some of the answers for which we are searching can be gleaned from the very people that we are trying to help. It’s worth a try and I am going to do just that.

What do I need? I need teachers and administrators to invite me to come into their schools talk to your kids. I need to talk to students who are not succeeding. I want to sit down with them, over pizza, and just talk.

When I finish my journey, I plan to collate my findings and share them first with the teachers and administrators who want to study whatever it is I will learn. Then, I want to use these findings as a possible beginning point to solve at least a few of the problems our kids face.

I would love to hear your thoughts on this mission. If you have suggestions for questions to ask kids, please let me know. If you are interested in working with me on this, please email me or give me a call. You can email me at paul.gray@arkansas.gov or call me at 479-857-0901.

ARKANSAS SCHOOLS EARN A BLUE RIBBON

The Arkansas State Board of Education (ASBE) formally recognized the three Arkansas schools that won Blue Ribbon School designation as part of No Child Left Behind legislation this year.

ASBE Chair Randy Lawson praised each of the schools – Batesville High School, KIPP Delta College Preparatory Academy in Helena-West Helena, and William Jefferson Clinton Elementary School in Sherwood (Pulaski County Special School District) – during a special report before the regular board meeting in October.

The No Child Left Behind-Blue Ribbon Schools Program honors public and private elementary, middle and high schools that are either academically superior or that demonstrate dramatic gains in student achievement to high levels.

Two people from each school, the principal and a teacher, will be honored at a ceremony in Washington, DC, where each school receives a plaque and flag signifying their status. These schools will serve as models for other schools throughout the nation.

For more information, please visit the ADE's main Website, <http://arkansased.org>.