

Minutes

Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind Board of Trustees Meeting

August 18, 2026

Present: Dr. John McAllister, Chair; Cary Smith, Secretary; Robert Fagan; Philip Powell; Nicole Walsh, Superintendent; Jacob Oliva, Secretary of Education; Courtney Salas-Ford, Chief of Staff to Mr. Oliva; Alysson Tate, Board Liaison; Caitlynn Cochran, Attorney

Call to Order

The Board of Trustees for the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind (The Board) met Tuesday, August 18, 2026, in Woolly Auditorium. Dr. McAllister, Chair, called the meeting to order at 5:06pm. The student of the month led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Public Comments

None

Consent Agenda

1. Minutes
2. Financial Statements
3. Personnel Matters

A motion to approve the Consent Agenda was made by Rob Fagan, seconded by Jerry Belew. The motion unanimously passed.

Key Updates & Remarks by Secretary Jacob Oliva & ADE Leadership

Start of the School Year & Student Achievement

- School Year Launch.
- Academic Performance Gains: Highlighted significant progress resulting from the *Arkansas LEARNS* and *Arkansas ACCESS* initiatives over the past three years:
 - Announced a 6.5 percentage points increase in English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency, 7 percentage points in math proficiency, and 8 percentage points in science proficiency.
 - An overall 20% increase in statewide academic achievement, moving Arkansas up to 36th nationally in recent educational rankings (e.g., *U.S. News & World Report*).
 - Vision for the Future

Support for the School for the Deaf and Blind

- Facility & Resource Upgrades
- Campus Construction Support

ADE Support Team & Operations

- Alysson ("Aly") Tate: Board and Commission Liaison; responsible for coordinating board logistics and direct lines of communication with Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) leadership.
- Caitlynn Cochran: ADE Staff Attorney; serves as the legal and procedural support liaison (handling motions, and statutory questions).

Executive Session Laws & Governance Standards

- Statutory Limits on Executive Sessions
- Superintendent Evaluations & Personnel Matters
- Alternative Evaluation Process
- Legislative Priorities

Teacher Compensation, Staffing & Position Classifications

- State Educator Pay Disparities
- Job Classification & Contracting Flexibility

Board Purview & Regional Outreach

- Scope of Board Authority
- Governance vs. Operations (Macro vs. Micro)
- Bifurcating Business Meetings and Workshops
- Vacant Board Positions
- Teacher Preparation & Special Programs

Closing Remarks

- Emphasized a unified front among ADE staff, board members, and school leadership, ending with optimism for the 2026–2027 school year as a benchmark year for student outcomes in Arkansas.

Action Agenda

26-DB-82. Request for Approval of Resubmission of AR App for Final Approval

26-DB-82 – Nicole Walsh explained that there were a small number of revisions needed in the AR App that needed to be resubmitted for final approval by the Arkansas Department of Education. A motion was made to approve the resubmission by Rob Fagan, seconded by Cary Smith. The motion unanimously passed.

26-DB-83. Board Member of the Month

26-DB-83 – Nicole Walsh asked for recommendations on the next Board Member of the Month for September. Cary Smith nominated Vice Chair Jerry Belew, seconded by Rob Fagan. The motion unanimously passed.

Superintendent Report

- Construction of the perimeter fence is currently underway following delays caused by the bridge removal; project completion is anticipated for October.
- Several student withdrawals occurred due to transitions to homeschooling.
- With an active admissions pipeline, additional enrollments are anticipated throughout the year.
- The Welcome Back Registration and Open House events were highly successful with strong attendance and engagement.
- The majority of faculty positions opened over the summer have been successfully filled; active recruitment continues for an Agriculture teacher.
- Approval has been granted to establish an internal security team, which will significantly reduce operating costs compared to external contracting.
- Formal introductions for new teaching faculty will take place at next month's meeting to allow time for onboarding and settlement.
- Nicole Walsh completed classroom walkthroughs across both departments alongside respective principals, reporting high levels of teacher and student engagement.
- Beginning in September, members of the leadership team will serve as classroom substitute teachers one day per month to support faculty operations.
- Kurt Swartzlander, Director of Operations, identified and resolved a contract oversight, effectively reducing monthly waste management costs from \$3,900 to \$1,500.
- To bring transportation capabilities in-house and reduce external expenses, the school is purchasing two new vans, with plans to evaluate a third vehicle for the following academic year.
- Student transportation service bids received exceeded allocated budget limits; the contract will be rebid, with our former contractor planning to submit a proposal.

Adjournment

26-DB-84 Motion to Adjourn

Rob Fagan made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Philip Powell. The motion to adjourn passed unanimously.

Dr. John McAllister, Board Chair

Cary Smith, Board Secretary