

ARKANSAS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

May 29, 2025

9:01 A.M.

A P P E A R A N C E S

BOARD MEMBERS:

DR. SARAH MOORE, Chair (via Zoom)
MS. KATHY ROLLINS, Vice Chair
MS. ADRIENNE WOODS
MS. LISA HUNTER
MS. LEIGH KEENER
MR. KEN BRAGG (via Zoom)
MR. RANDY HENDERSON
DR. GARY ARNOLD

NON-VOTING BOARD MEMBER:

MR. JACOB OLIVA, Secretary of Education

ALSO APPEARING:

MS. STACY SMITH, Deputy Commissioner
MS. SHEILA WHITLOW, Associate Deputy Commissioner

ADE LEGAL COUNSEL:

MR. DANIEL SHULTS

LOCATION:

BLYTHEVILLE HIGH SCHOOL AUDITORIUM
600 N. 10th Street
Blytheville, Arkansas

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AGENDA:

I. Call to Order.	3
Presenter: Kathy Rollins	
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III.1. Blytheville School District Level 5 - Intensive Support Hearing	
Presenters: Stacy Smith, Deputy Commissioner and Sheila Whitlow, Associate Deputy Commissioner	
Description: The Division of Elementary and Secondary Education recommends that the State Board of Education classify the Blytheville School District as in need of Level 5 - Intensive Support in accordance with Ark. Code Ann. 6-15-2916. The Blytheville School District has appealed this classification and requested a hearing.	
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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. KATHY ROLLINS: Good morning.

AUDIENCE: Good morning.

MS. ROLLINS: Glad to see all of you here. If there is anyone that wants to give testimony that hasn't signed in, you'll need to do that, so if you can do that now, that would be good. Before we get started, we're going to go ahead and do a moment of silence, please.

(MOMENT OF SILENCE)

MS. ROLLINS: Okay. Thank you very much. So glad to see a room full of people here. I know all of us that are here care about our children here in Blytheville. And this is such an important meeting for us, for our community, and I just ask that everyone give each other some grace this morning. I know this can be a very emotional meeting, but we are here for the children, and let's just keep that in mind.

Let me introduce Secretary Oliva, who is with us this morning. Secretary?

SECRETARY JACOB OLIVA: Thank you. And I want to echo the sentiments from Ms. Rollins. Thank you, everybody, for coming out and being

1 part of our conversation, which is what we're
2 going to be engaging in today.

3 Just to kind of give some historical
4 perspective, many of you may have been here
5 just over a year ago when we had a joint
6 meeting with the State Board and the local
7 school board and talked about some concerns
8 that we were seeing in declining enrollment,
9 fiscal sustainability, kind of the long-term
10 projections for the Blytheville School
11 District, and most importantly student
12 performance.

13 So at that time we engaged in a partnership
14 where we agreed to provide some additional
15 support, and we've asked the Blytheville School
16 Board to provide frequent updates to our State
17 Board, and they've done that in Little Rock
18 over time.

19 But we've gotten to a point where we need
20 to make some maybe more robust or long-term
21 decisions about the future of what is our
22 agency's role, what is the support role from
23 outside folks and what does the governing
24 structure look like for Blytheville.

25 So this morning we're going to kind of

1 follow along with that conversation that's been
2 going on for over a year, to keep this dialog
3 at the forefront, making sure we're doing
4 what's right for our students.

5 So what's going to happen is this is a
6 formal noticed meeting where the Board has the
7 authority to take action and take a vote on any
8 possible recommendations that are made by our
9 agency. We're going to do an overview of the
10 journey, of some of the topics of where we've
11 been for the last year and a half historically
12 and then talk about what we're seeing now for
13 future projections.

14 And after that presentation, the local
15 school board will have the ability to respond
16 and provide an update to this Board and engage
17 in dialog. It will be a formal response where
18 anybody that wants to speak on the board's
19 behalf will be sworn in so that it will be an
20 official oath and an official testimony.

21 And then our Board is going to open in a
22 public forum and discuss amongst each other
23 some of the information that was presented to
24 them, and they may ask some additional
25 questions of our agency or of the school board

1 here locally.

2 And then before they take any action,
3 they're going to allow public comments, so
4 we'll set some time aside to hear from people
5 that signed up that want to address our board
6 as well.

7 So it's going to be a robust and
8 informative morning, and we look forward to
9 engaging in that conversation.

10 I do want to recognize that we have some
11 local elected officials that are here today,
12 because they know how important this
13 conversation is to the community. So I know I
14 saw Senator Wallace. If you don't mind
15 standing. Thank you for being here.

16 (Audience claps.)

17 SECRETARY OLIVA: Also Representative Joey
18 Carr is here as well.

19 (Audience claps.)

20 SECRETARY OLIVA: And I believe we have
21 some representatives from Representative
22 Crawford's office joining us as well. I don't
23 know if you're here. If you could stand and be
24 recognized. If there's any other local -- the
25 mayor is here. Okay. I was like, I'm looking

1 around. It's like I may have missed some.
2 Thank you for being here.

3 (Audience claps.)

4 SECRETARY OLIVA: If there's any other
5 local elected officials, and if you want to
6 address this board, we would welcome that as
7 well. But if I've missed anybody, it's not on
8 purpose. I just want to give you a chance to
9 stand and be recognized, and thank you for
10 being here. And just thank you.

11 I know there's a lot of school
12 administrators, teachers, local school
13 employees, as well as parents and business
14 folks and concerned citizens that are here as
15 well.

16 So without further ado, Ms. Rollins, I'd
17 like to invite Stacy Smith from our team to
18 come to the podium, and then provide some
19 remarks and get some overview.

20 MS. ROLLINS: If I may take a little
21 privilege, I believe everyone -- I'd like to
22 introduce our board. I know we can't really
23 see name tags from back there. So Dr. Sarah
24 Moore, our chair, is with her family today, but
25 she is joining us by Zoom, and we're always

1 glad to have her expertise.

2 We have Adrienne Woods, Randy Henderson.
3 On the other side we have Dr. Gary Arnold, Lisa
4 Hunter, and Leigh Keener with us this morning.

5 (Audience claps.)

6 MS. ROLLINS: And our member Ken Bragg is
7 also joining us by Zoom this morning. So we're
8 glad to be here and have everyone's interest
9 and valuable comments this morning. So thank
10 you. Go ahead, Deputy.

11 MS. STACY SMITH: Good morning. So this
12 morning is considered to be a hearing because
13 the school district has appealed the Level 5
14 classification, and so the Department of
15 Education will have a presentation of no more
16 than 20 minutes, probably be less than that,
17 and then Blytheville has 20 minutes also to
18 present.

19 And so at this time I'll ask you to go
20 ahead and do the oath for anybody that's going
21 to present during this testimony part, during
22 the hearing.

23 MS. ROLLINS: I'll go ahead and swear
24 people in that are going to be part of the
25 testimony this morning. So please stand and

1 raise your right hand, please. Okay. Do you
2 swear the testimony you're about to give is the
3 truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the
4 truth?

5 (Affirmative answer is given.)

6 MS. SMITH: Good morning. Stacy Smith,
7 Deputy Commissioner with the Division of
8 Elementary and Secondary Education. I'm
9 actually excited and happy to be in Blytheville
10 this morning. We've had a team working in
11 Blytheville all year. Our team has made some
12 great relationships with teachers and staff and
13 the community here. Blytheville is a great
14 place to be, and Blytheville does have a bright
15 future ahead of them.

16 So at this time, there are several things
17 that we have concerns about that we feel like
18 they need additional support in. And so those
19 are some of the things today that I'm going to
20 walk the Board through.

21 The first of the slides that we've seen
22 more than once, this just shows the declining
23 enrollment that the Blytheville School District
24 has faced. All right. This is not something
25 that's uncommon to this area of the state.

1 We've seen multiple school districts in the
2 area having declining enrollment. All right.
3 But this is also an opportunity where industry
4 is coming in, bolstering, and we've got to make
5 sure that our school systems are prepared to
6 provide what we need in terms of attracting
7 industry here.

8 And as we walk through some of the data
9 today on the school system, we're going to see
10 that that's not necessarily the case, all
11 right? At this time they're down 102 students
12 even from last year's enrollment numbers.

13 On academics, this was the simulated letter
14 grades that were recently released on last
15 school year's ATLAS testing, okay? Not the
16 tests that were just given here a few weeks
17 ago, but last year at the end of the year.

18 So you can see for '23-'24, the primary,
19 the elementary, and the high schools all have
20 simulated letter grades of Fs. The middle
21 school does have a letter grade of a C, and
22 that's something worth celebrating, all right?
23 But we still have three schools that have Fs,
24 and we still have some concerns about the
25 achievement, academic performance happening in

1 all of the schools.

2 This shows an overview of the academic
3 performance of Blytheville students from last
4 year's assessment. And what I want to show
5 here is, when you look at that for like the
6 elementary school, third through fifth grade,
7 and it says ELA, and it says, first percentile,
8 that doesn't mean they're number one, okay? In
9 a percentile ranking, you want to be at the
10 hundredth percentile. You want to be the best
11 performing out there; that is 100.

12 Blytheville's scoring in the first
13 percentile, on the lowest range of districts in
14 the state. That is all districts in the state.

15 For ELA in elementary school, for math,
16 also, less than the first percentile. It
17 wasn't even a full percentile point. It was
18 like half of a point.

19 Science, first percentile. So of all the
20 districts in the state, they are in the lowest
21 achievement level you could be in.

22 For the middle school achievement, you see
23 third, fifth, and eighth. Again, the lowest in
24 the state. The middle school is where you saw
25 a C letter grade, and we're going to talk about

1 why they have a C. But we still have the
2 overarching concern that their achievement is
3 exceptionally low.

4 High school, again you see ELA and
5 mathematics in the fifth percentile. Biology,
6 you had a jump in that one. It's at the 18th
7 percentile. But all of them are well below,
8 making Blytheville School District one of the
9 lowest performing school districts statewide.

10 The growth scores, again, for the
11 elementary school, you're seeing that they're
12 in the lowest percentile. And we talk about
13 growth. Growth is measured by individual
14 students. Each student is predicted to make a
15 year's worth of growth, all right?

16 And so when you look at this, you see like
17 for elementary, when it says 116 out of 306 or
18 37 percent, that means 37 percent of the
19 students in third through fifth grade, in
20 English language arts met their expected year's
21 growth. Only 37 percent. That means more did
22 not.

23 And to emphasize this a little bit more,
24 they're already behind. For kids to catch up,
25 they need to be making more than their year's

1 worth of growth, all right, because we have
2 catching up to do because we are scoring so
3 low.

4 SECRETARY OLIVA: If you could make sure
5 that people understand, and if you could, just
6 go deeper on what is an expected growth target.
7 So when we talk about students performing at or
8 above grade level, we use a term called
9 proficiency. And when we look at proficiency
10 rates, when students graduate from high school,
11 are they going to be able to read on grade
12 level and be able to be ready to obtain what we
13 like to call our three Es. Are our students
14 going to be ready to be employed, enlisted, or
15 enrolled?

16 Well, there's some basic skill that you
17 would expect students to have with an aptitude
18 to meet one of those destinations of those
19 three Es, with every student being on their own
20 individual pathway.

21 So if we're in the first percentile, and
22 that's just of all the students in the state
23 meeting what we call proficiency, that's a
24 problem.

25 Now, we know that kids come to us from all

1 walks of life, and our schools are going to do
2 the best they can to take the child from where
3 they are and get them to move along the
4 continuum of learning as much as they can. And
5 so that's where we establish an individual
6 learning growth target. So those students get
7 a snapshot of, okay, you started day one of
8 school here. Your growth target is
9 individualized to the student. Every student
10 has their own individual growth target.

11 So if we start here at the beginning of the
12 year to demonstrate at least a year's worth of
13 growth, we expect you to finish here. It may
14 not be on grade level, but you can still be
15 productive towards grade level.

16 So when we say that only 37 percent of the
17 students met their individual growth target,
18 that means those students will never reach
19 grade level. Because you've got to exceed your
20 growth target to get to grade level.

21 So we're setting up two-thirds of the
22 students in this district to never achieve
23 grade level work. That's why that's a big deal
24 when we talk about individualized -- setting an
25 individual learning target.

1 MS. SMITH: Yeah, when you're looking at
2 the growth thing here, and I do want to
3 highlight the middle school ELA, 78th
4 percentile. So then you saw more kids meeting
5 their growth or exceeding, and on science you
6 had 82 percent. So that's what you want to
7 see, but we need that number in all of those
8 categories to be well over 50, 60, 70 percent
9 of students meeting their growth.

10 So I think if anything, it shows, in ELA
11 and science, a lot of times when you get into
12 situations from the Department of Ed, a lot of
13 times we hear, you don't understand our
14 students; you don't understand our community.
15 It shows right there that these students can,
16 and it shows that staff can. We just have to
17 get our systems aligned so that we see this
18 across the board.

19 Another category in our performance rating
20 that actually helps create the A to F letter
21 grade is growth of the lowest 25 percent, which
22 for most districts, when you talk about growth
23 of the lowest 25 percent, you're talking about
24 the students that are scoring level one on the
25 assessment, okay, which is the lowest you can

1 perform on our state test, and it means that
2 you are behind grade level.

3 So for most districts, when we say the
4 growth of the lowest 25 percent, it's taking
5 into account the kids who scored level one, and
6 then maybe some kids that scored in level two.
7 For this district, they have more students in
8 level one than in any other group. So the
9 lowest 25 percent, that doesn't even cover all
10 the students in level one that are behind grade
11 level.

12 So again, you're seeing math in elementary
13 in the first percentile, the 19th percentile,
14 the 12th percentile. These numbers have got to
15 get well over 50 percent, 60 percent, 70
16 percent.

17 You see some highlights there in the middle
18 school where they did achieve those. You see
19 some highlights over there in the high school.
20 So this does speak to intervention that is
21 working, all right, but we've got to get it
22 where we're getting more kids pulled into that
23 so that we get more kids moving achievement.

24 Again, growth is something that we measure
25 and we value in our state, but that does not

1 undermine the fact that achievement is what the
2 goal is. We want every student to achieve
3 grade level proficiency, and this school
4 district at this point in time is not doing
5 that.

6 Graduation rate from the previous year was
7 77 percent. Again, that's in the fourth
8 percentile, the lowest performing district in
9 the state. The average graduation rate in
10 Arkansas is 88, almost 89 percent graduation
11 rate. So again, we're behind here. We're not
12 graduating our kids.

13 And when we talk about this readiness
14 towards merit and distinction, that's actually
15 new. And that's building on career pathways,
16 all right? And this area is booming with
17 industry opportunities for kids and building
18 career pathways. You have interested colleges
19 and interested partners to work with.

20 This is an area in which we believe that
21 this school district could excel in and create
22 some really strong pathways where kids are not
23 only graduating with their high school degree,
24 but they're graduating with industry
25 certifications that can take them straight into

1 a job, a high-paying job. That also brings
2 value to the community, value to the business
3 partners, value to our students, and it changes
4 lives.

5 So when we talk about support for the
6 district this year, they had some outside
7 contracts. They had TNTP, which works with
8 teachers on less internalization and
9 supervision. They had really great reading,
10 which is again worked with K3 leadership and
11 teaching/coaching, and they also did an RFP and
12 brought in a group called Educational
13 Directions. This is something that the
14 department folks worked with the district staff
15 to put together an RFP in which they solicited
16 outside help to come in and support
17 administrators within their school district.

18 Educational Directions have been on site at
19 least from the time we did this presentation,
20 65 on-site visits, 51 virtual interactions, 115
21 documented touch points, and this is for the
22 last month's presentation. So if they've been
23 here since then, it's increased.

24 I think that the support for this group has
25 been positive. I think the district has

1 enjoyed working with this group, and that is
2 something we'd probably like to see continue.
3 That's a positive.

4 Intensive Support provided by -- directed
5 from people at the Department of Education.
6 On-site support, over 100 days of direct on-
7 site support from the OCFS team led by Ms.
8 Whitlow. We've had -- we've facilitated
9 multiple school visits to the Academy of Math
10 and Science in Little Rock with the board.
11 We've engaged in governance engagement with
12 their board. We've done facilitated meetings
13 with the School Boards Association.

14 We've brought in the board president from
15 Pine Bluff under their school board, which --
16 where they had had some systems issues before
17 and governance issues, to come in and talk
18 about what they had to do in their district.
19 We've worked on operational support trying to
20 provide financial and staffing assistance
21 through multiple different offices in our
22 agency.

23 So this support is reflective of Level 5
24 support, which is what we're recommending
25 today. And I'll compare this in a minute with

1 another district that we've seen come before
2 you guys in the last year.

3 Another example of Intensive Support that
4 our department has provided is on-site visits
5 for safety. Office of Educator Effectiveness
6 has been on site at least three times helping
7 figure out how to get teachers on pathways or
8 making sure that they're coded correctly.

9 We've had Division of School Academic
10 Facilities and Transportation come on site.
11 We've done numerous visits with our learning
12 services team reviewing literacy plans, doing
13 site visits to the primary elementary buildings
14 to ensure that the high-quality structural
15 materials are being used effectively.

16 We've provided K3 literacy support through
17 the really great reading program that we talked
18 about earlier.

19 The Educational Cooperative has provided
20 Intensive Support. They've documented 185 on-
21 site visits. The director regularly meets with
22 the interim superintendent. She has led dialog
23 and had conversations with the board about
24 contracts, about best financial practices.
25 They've actually contracted with their business

1 office for additional financial support. They
2 have content teachers and specialists that are
3 on site providing mentoring.

4 So there is lots of support happening at
5 the school. I want to thank the Blytheville
6 teachers, and I want to thank the Blytheville
7 principals and administration. They have been
8 receptive. They have been open to the
9 assistance and the help. We have people who
10 are showing up to work, to work.

11 And they love their community, and they
12 love their kids. And I know this board loves
13 their community and loves their kids. So
14 people are showing up.

15 But this is a district that is in need of a
16 lot of support to be able to get them out of
17 the hole that they're currently in.

18 And I want to kind of compare this with a
19 district earlier that we kind of saw had
20 systems failure, and that was Watson Chapel.
21 They had coding issues. They had some finance
22 issues. We went in, directed by this board to
23 go in, still level four support, kind of
24 mirroring almost some of the same support we
25 saw provided here.

1 The difference was at some point Watson
2 Chapel was able to maintain without us directly
3 standing there saying, you've got to do this
4 next; have you done this yet; have you checked
5 that yet.

6 They were able to maintain and continue to
7 make progress with the outside contracts that
8 they brought in. What we're seeing here is,
9 we've got lots of support here, but we're still
10 having to do lots of reminders, lots of
11 assistance. At this point in time, we get more
12 calls, our OCFS team gets more calls and work
13 -- to work in Blytheville than we do all the
14 other schools under state authority. We spend
15 more time right now in Blytheville than any
16 other place.

17 Again, that just shows the amount of
18 support that is needed to get this school
19 district on track.

20 SECRETARY OLIVA: If I can add, when we
21 were before this community over a year ago, we
22 made a commitment as an agency to say enough is
23 enough. We can't leave these children in
24 limbo. We've got to support these teachers.
25 We've got to support these administrators. And

1 we had to bring in some outside help and work
2 with local help, like Education Partners.

3 Those numbers you saw, hundreds of on-site
4 visits, was our agency sticking to the
5 commitment we made.

6 What we're going to hear more about is the
7 frustration of how much we have to babysit the
8 people that are elected to govern the district.
9 The teachers are being receptive. The students
10 are learning. The administrators are getting
11 in the classrooms. They're doing everything we
12 need to do. But when the elected officials who
13 represent this community are derived to make
14 paths and decisions, it's like we have to pull
15 them along. And that's what we're seeing in
16 making recommendations to this Board, some of
17 the frustration.

18 MS. SMITH: So on supervision of
19 instruction, promising practices that we've
20 seen this last year is we've seen
21 administrators in the classroom doing more
22 observations.

23 We do believe that the quality of feedback
24 needs to improve, and again that's some of the
25 contracted work and the support that needs to

1 be provided to improve instructional practices
2 in the classroom.

3 But you see the change over the years of
4 documented observations or feedback in
5 classrooms to what we currently have. So that
6 is an improvement.

7 Human capital, at the beginning of the
8 school year, the 2025, the green was the number
9 of licensed teachers. The yellow, 14, was
10 partially licensed, and the red was unlicensed.
11 Currently we went back and pulled the numbers
12 at the end, and again, we've had our staff on
13 site at least three times working directly with
14 teachers to get teachers on a pathway.

15 At the end of last year, we had --
16 especially in the primary grades, you had
17 virtual instruction happening, which was a
18 concern. That's been alleviated. They have
19 classroom teachers working with students.

20 High school, we're still struggling in
21 areas of licensure area and working on that,
22 but they have improved in that area, but it's
23 with direct support, but they still have a long
24 ways to go.

25 I will tell you, we don't have complete

1 confidence in the data that we're pulling. So
2 when we're pulling these data numbers, it's
3 data that's been entered, right, from district
4 folks.

5 And again, that's where the governance part
6 of our staff, we're not in there entering the
7 data or coding things, all right? So part of
8 our recommendation today of authority is to be
9 able to get in there and really get into those
10 systems and make sure that the data is
11 accurate.

12 When looking at interim assessments, we're
13 seeing promising data about interims throughout
14 this school year. Again, folks are teaching;
15 folks are working; folks are in classrooms.

16 We're hoping to see improvement in ATLAS
17 scores from a test that was taken just in the
18 spring. But again, we're talking about a
19 district that is so low that we're not
20 expecting to see high achievement levels out of
21 this last testing. We're hoping to see better
22 growth scores, but we're not expecting to see
23 large numbers on the achievement data.

24 So concerns related to governance, lack of
25 coherence in leadership. Again, they've had

1 six superintendents in eight years. Lack of
2 fiscal oversight, some fiscal inefficiencies,
3 lack of internal control with some of those
4 data elements I just talked about, and
5 currently providing -- we're currently
6 providing Intensive Support without governance
7 oversight.

8 So human capital and leadership. This is
9 probably one of the biggest concerns that we
10 have. This is kind of the time line for this
11 last year. In June of last summer, Ms.
12 Blankenship was appointed as interim
13 superintendent. In August, the previous
14 superintendent was terminated. November they
15 posted the position, but not until November.
16 So they terminated the superintendent in August
17 but didn't post the position until November.

18 In November, they reviewed some -- they had
19 some applicants that they reviewed, but a
20 decision was made to stay with the current
21 superintendent. They didn't feel like they had
22 enough quality candidates.

23 And at that point we were like, don't
24 settle. Get the right candidate. We wanted to
25 support the district in that decision.

1 February they decided to do a consultant
2 firm. But again, they let their previous
3 superintendent go in August. They didn't hire
4 a consulting firm until late February. And
5 again, a lot of this has to do with our staff
6 asking, what are you doing? Have you done this
7 yet?

8 In April the firm brought two of the 12
9 applicants to the board. The board declined to
10 interview the two applicants.

11 On April 28th, the superintendent position
12 was re-posted. April 29th, they had a special
13 board meeting to discuss an excess regarding
14 the superintendent. No action taken.

15 And May 8th is when we came to you and
16 said, we have concerns. They don't have a
17 superintendent. Since May 8th, they have -- on
18 May 22nd, they called a regular board meeting
19 and decided now they're going to interview
20 three applications. They're literally going to
21 interview this week. They have an applicant
22 here today, which personally I would be
23 embarrassed that I'm interviewing for a
24 superintendent on the same day that the State
25 Board of Education is coming to your district

1 to consider whether or not you're going to be
2 the governing board.

3 (Audience claps.)

4 So again, this shows a lack of urgency in
5 determining leadership, coherent and simple.
6 It's constant. This right here, if anything, I
7 think reflects more of -- all right. Per pupil
8 expenditure report. So this is another thing
9 that we have some concerns about that we want
10 to talk about, the fiscal integrity or
11 efficiency of the district. There are some
12 things here that are raising some red flags and
13 some concerns that if we continue to stay on
14 this path the district will become in fiscal
15 distress. They're not there right now. And I
16 don't want -- we're not saying that anybody has
17 purposely misused money. But there is
18 inefficiencies occurring, okay?

19 When you look at the state averages
20 compared to the district spending in certain
21 categories, there are questions to be asked
22 here. So pointing out some pieces here, when
23 you look at like custodial, the average state
24 cost per pupil is about \$111. For this
25 district, it's about \$618.

1 When we compare that to -- because
2 Secretary Oliva, when I was reviewing this data
3 with him, he pushed back, because he wants to
4 make sure what we're saying is accurate. And
5 he said, well, Stacy, they're a smaller
6 district. So how does that compare with
7 districts that are like five? You know,
8 they're in a rural community. How does that
9 compare?

10 And so I actually went and pulled data from
11 districts their like size, and in most of the
12 cases on this page, they're overspending per
13 pupil amount in these areas than districts in
14 their like size.

15 And the custodial for districts their like
16 size, where we have up here the state average
17 is 111, for districts their like size, we saw
18 some districts that were maybe around 300 and
19 some that were less. But they're still, again,
20 sitting at that 600.

21 Where they were comparable, the only two
22 areas I could really find where they were
23 comparable to districts in their size was the
24 sanitation one and accident insurance. And
25 everything else that was on here in districts

1 compared to their own size, they were over. So
2 again, this is an opportunity for savings in
3 this district and going back and look at.

4 And it also is the question of are we
5 coding correctly. Like there could be some
6 serious coding issues that maybe is telling a
7 different story. But when we pull the data
8 from what they've entered, this is what it
9 shows.

10 When you're looking at district operations
11 overall, their current operating budget is
12 required to be turned in to DESE on September
13 30th. That budget is supposed to be approved
14 by the board. That did not occur. The board
15 did not approve their budget until October.

16 The district has spent, according to data
17 they've entered, 1.5 million that was not
18 budgeted. So when you look at their overall
19 budget, they have lots of areas in which are
20 red or negative. That means the budget that
21 they submitted was not very accurate.

22 For fiscal year '25, revenue is down
23 significantly, about 15 percent. They're
24 losing students. When you lose students, you
25 lose funding, all right? And so adjustments

1 have to be made. The district has not
2 reconciled their bank statements since April of
3 2024.

4 So when we contracted to work with the
5 Educational Service Cooperative to come in and
6 assist with finances, this is some of the work
7 they're doing, is getting everything
8 reconciled. So again, that leads to overall
9 concerns.

10 In fiscal years '22 and '23, they actually
11 had surpluses. They were putting 2.3 to 3.5
12 million into their building fund, all right?
13 Since then, they've actually had to go into
14 their building fund and expend money. So in
15 fiscal year '24 they had to spend 2.1 million,
16 where before they were actually saving money,
17 and this current year to date, they're almost
18 at a million dollars. At this moment they are
19 spending a lot more money than they previously
20 had in the past, and they're losing students.

21 Their ending fund balance right now is not
22 a huge concern, okay? We calculated it at
23 about 18 percent. But it's gone down. It's
24 down 15 percent than it was previously. That
25 is a concern.

1 So when you stay on this trajectory, you
2 can see where it's heading, all right? So
3 these are things right now that we need to
4 catch now before it becomes a problem.

5 Other things that, as we're looking at
6 this, additional pay in the form of bonuses or
7 stipends today is over \$200,000. This --
8 again, it's about -- this just raises
9 questions. When you have a job description
10 that says you're -- let me give an example. If
11 I were the curriculum and instruction person in
12 a district or the assistant superintendent, I'm
13 being paid for that job and that's my job
14 description.

15 What we see happening here is a lot of
16 times those roles then have additional stipends
17 put on top of them to arrange PD. Well,
18 arranging professional development is probably
19 within that job description.

20 When asking for a specific job description
21 on the stipend, we've not seen those yet. It
22 doesn't mean they don't exist. But at this
23 moment we don't have them.

24 When we see federal funds for homeless
25 money, we have stipends that are given out for

1 homeless services. That's federal funding that
2 has to be documented, especially when it's
3 paired with an employee who's being paid with
4 state dollars. You have to have time sheets.
5 You have to document how you're providing
6 services to those students or that population,
7 right, or you end up having audit findings.

8 So they have lots of stipends in excess of
9 over \$200,000 that we just need more
10 information about. We need to clarify. We
11 need to make sure that their salary schedule is
12 set and job descriptions are clear.

13 So they're projected to end the year with
14 2.9 million net legal balance. Again, that's
15 down 18 percent from previous, a difference of
16 about \$600,000.

17 Board-related expenses. So one of the
18 questions that was specifically asked from one
19 of the State Board members was has this board
20 received training. And the answer is yes.
21 One, we've organized training, okay? And then
22 so we started looking at, well, what are the
23 expenditures that we could show that they've
24 actually had training. And I'll tell you, we
25 were surprised.

1 We know that we have board members who have
2 traveled to Atlanta. We have board members who
3 have traveled to Biloxi. We've had board
4 members who have traveled to Little Rock
5 numerous times for lots of conferences.

6 I'm not saying that training is not needed,
7 because it is needed. But at this moment right
8 now, we can calculate up to \$56,000 on board
9 expenses, and some of those items are listed on
10 the board. You have reimbursement to
11 individual board members, and they're ranging
12 from \$700 up to over \$7,000.

13 You also have a line item in the budget
14 that has non-district employees, all right?
15 For a lot of districts, non-district employees
16 are board members. Hey, that budget here in
17 this district is like at \$30,000. But we can't
18 tell who those people are right now, because we
19 haven't gone in and been able to dig into the
20 audit part of it and look at the receipts. It
21 just raises questions about the use of funding
22 and what we've got going on here.

23 We've got \$12,000 in credit card
24 expenditures. Until we see the receipts, we
25 don't know what those are for, okay? Legal

1 services to six firms from the board. Again,
2 we know that they've fired a superintendent.
3 We know they did some internal research on
4 practices there. But again, we've got six
5 firms there. We have the superintendent search
6 firm of \$7,500, which at one point they
7 rejected to even interview any candidates that
8 that search firm put forward.

9 So again, it's lots of questions about what
10 we're spending our money on and what the
11 governance section is in this area.

12 So our recommendation in this is going to
13 be -- the last slide from my presentation this
14 morning is our recommendation is that the State
15 Board classify this district in need of Level 5
16 - Intensive Support, because to be blunt, we
17 are providing Level 5 - Intensive Support right
18 now.

19 (Audience claps.)

20 MS. SMITH: We'd also recommend that the
21 State Board remove the authority of the local
22 board and authorize the Commissioner to assume
23 the authority of the local district board of
24 directors.

25 (Audience claps.)

1 MS. SMITH: And we would recommend that the
2 State Board direct the Commissioner of
3 Education to appoint a superintendent and
4 pursue the possibility of a transformation
5 contract.

6 (Audience claps.)

7 SECRETARY OLIVA: And Board, just so you
8 know, I think the state's inner team should be
9 also commended for their commitment to making
10 sure that we're providing those Level 5 -
11 Intensive Supports. We're providing more
12 support --

13 (Audience claps.)

14 SECRETARY OLIVA: -- to these teachers, to
15 these school leaders, to these students
16 probably almost than any other district. But
17 when I think about what is the school board's
18 role, right, what are their primary
19 responsibilities, and you look at governance
20 and operations, right? Part of that governance
21 is overseeing the budget, which we have a lot
22 of questions about, and I don't want to have to
23 come back to this board and say, we're in
24 financial urgency because we're spending money
25 and it's not budgeted, and we're not able to

1 balance the spreadsheets.

2 We can't even turn in a budget and meet the
3 statutory deadlines, when that's one of their
4 number one functions is to make sure that the
5 district is financially stable.

6 And governance, one of their jobs is to
7 hire a superintendent, which we've been asking
8 them to do for a year, and they still haven't
9 done it. It wasn't until last month all of a
10 sudden, well, we'll start interviewing folks.

11 Where is the urgency on the board's behalf
12 to make sure that the systems are going to be
13 supported and sustained? And I feel like when
14 we came here a year ago, we said, we have to
15 act with urgency. These students are going to
16 be in third grade once. We've just had high
17 school seniors graduate. That was their senior
18 year. Are they going to be ready for the next
19 phase of their lives? We can't sit around and
20 wait for people to figure it out that are never
21 going to figure it out, and that's why we're
22 coming to the Board with this recommendation.

23 (Audience claps.)

24 MS. SMITH: So that concludes my
25 presentation. Because this is a hearing, the

1 Blytheville School District has up to 20
2 minutes, and then the Board can ask questions
3 to whoever you want to ask.

4 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you. So at this time,
5 I want to ask the district, who is going to go
6 ahead and make your comments, to come forward,
7 please. If you would please identify yourself
8 before you start speaking.

9 MS. JENNIFER BLANKENSHIP: Good morning. I
10 am Jennifer Blankenship, serving as the interim
11 superintendent of the Blytheville School
12 District.

13 MR. DESMOND HAMMETT: Good morning. I'm
14 Desmond Hammett, serving as the board president
15 of the Blytheville School Board.

16 MS. BLANKENSHIP: Let me just say that when
17 I was in this position and spoke before you
18 guys back in August, I did not think that I
19 would still be here, but we know it's about the
20 students, and we needed someone to fulfill this
21 role, so I was thankful that the board chose me
22 to do this, because this is our district. We
23 care about the district. It's all about the
24 students.

25 So our commitment, my commitment is about

1 the urgency of improving students' outcomes,
2 providing equitable, high-quality education for
3 all of our students -- all means all -- and
4 accountability through collaboration and
5 partnership.

6 We have had some increases in our number of
7 licensed teachers, waived teachers and
8 partially licensed. That number has gone down
9 since we've even put this on here. We've had
10 one aspiring teacher.

11 Our virtual instruction we're looking at
12 next year. We have our building principals.
13 They've been hired. They've worked hard with
14 the support from Educational Directions,
15 getting some coaching. We all have. It's been
16 our mission to make sure that we give our
17 students what they need, to give our teachers
18 and the principals and everybody the support
19 for their particular position.

20 You've seen this slide before, but we've
21 just increased the amount. When we partnered
22 with Educational Directions, they brought us
23 some great coaches, even one for me to guide
24 and support and give ideas, and it just was a
25 great partnership, and that the board decided

1 to continue their particular partnership for
2 the next school year.

3 Yes, our academic performance. Dr. Smith
4 spoke to that. We have historical challenges,
5 and we acknowledge those. But however, we do
6 know that progress is on the way. We're using
7 data informed instruction, increased coaching
8 support. Benchmark assessments indicate early
9 size of growth, especially in K3 literacy.
10 Some of the information that she just went
11 over, that's been shared with you. We've
12 highlighted some of our gains and our growth
13 where we're trying to move our students.

14 We've implemented evidence-based
15 instructional practices, curriculum
16 improvement, getting everybody high-quality
17 instructional materials, leverage training,
18 i-Ready Wonders. We're trying to do all those
19 things to make sure that teachers are
20 supported, that they can support our students
21 and grow our students, and then move them as
22 well.

23 Most of our students were at level one and
24 two. We know that growth has occurred. If you
25 looked at the data I sent you earlier, within

1 level one we've moved some students out of that
2 into level two. There's room, definitely, for
3 improvement, and we know that we have to move
4 the needle. We have to push our teachers, to
5 push our students, and have those data
6 conversations.

7 As we're looking here, just some of the
8 fourth grade data, how the students dropped
9 from level one, moving to level two. And these
10 are just still some of the things that Ms.
11 Smith spoke to earlier, also for math. She
12 spoke about the growth that was shown over a
13 year's time at the middle school.

14 And so we're still using those
15 interventions. Every campus has targeted
16 interventions with their students.

17 We're doing our best to make sure that they
18 take it seriously, know that it's real, and we
19 have to move our students. We have to teach
20 our students. We have to deliver to them the
21 content and give it to them on grade level. We
22 know grade level is really huge. And although
23 they may -- you know, it's going to take some
24 time. But our point is we have to do the work.

25 Enrollment update that she talked about,

1 our decline in students is a big deal. We're
2 trying to do some recruiting to get those
3 students back. We've had some issues here, but
4 we can't make excuses. We've lost students,
5 and we want them back.

6 It's not due to dissatisfaction alone.
7 Just rural flight people move into bigger areas
8 for more things to do, but maintaining student
9 support services despite our reduced numbers is
10 what we're trying to do. That's what we want
11 to maintain and make sure we support the
12 students that we do have and try our best to
13 bring those other students back.

14 At this time, I am going to let Mr. Hammett
15 address the board issues and speak on some of
16 those things. But do know that the district
17 has taken into account everything that's been
18 shared from our local cooperative, to the
19 Office of Coordinated Support, to Educational
20 Directions so that we could do the work to move
21 our students, to grow our students, because
22 without students, there's no school. And we
23 know parents are sending us the best they have,
24 and it is our job to educate all of them, and
25 that's what we're trying to do.

1 (Audience claps.)

2 MR. HAMMETT: Good morning. I'll first
3 start with the legal memoranda and our position
4 of the Level 5 classification. This memoranda
5 presents factual, legal, and policy arguments
6 opposing the Arkansas Department of Education's
7 recommendation to classify the Blytheville
8 School District as in need of Level 5 -
9 Intensive Support.

10 It also serves as a rebuttal to the letter
11 issued by the Mississippi County Chamber of
12 Commerce dated May 27th, 2025.

13 Blytheville School District has complied
14 fully with the ADE guidance, achieved
15 measurable academic gains, and acted in good
16 faith to ensure systematic improvements.

17 Pursuant to DESE Rule 8.09.2, Blytheville
18 School District was afforded 20 calendar days
19 from the receipt of the May 14th, 2025, notice
20 to appeal the Level 5 recommendation. However,
21 the hearing was scheduled for May 29th, only 15
22 days later, depriving the Blytheville School
23 District of its full legal window to prepare
24 its appeal. This procedural error undermines
25 due process as guaranteed under the Arkansas

1 Code Annotated 25-15-201, Administrative
2 Procedures Act.

3 Blytheville School District's full
4 compliance of measurable progress. We know
5 where we were a year ago. Some of the same
6 information is being brought to us again. We
7 knew Blytheville was a -- this would be a heavy
8 lift. We accepted every avenue of help and the
9 resources to improve our district.

10 Blytheville School District has engaged
11 with the Arkansas Department of Education
12 recommendations to consult Mya Graham, ex-
13 superintendent. She's been in position for the
14 past two months working with our finances.

15 Blytheville School District contracted with
16 Educational Directions and adopted its
17 recommendations. They came to us as an
18 external partner. We knew we needed leadership
19 support, enforced guidance around our
20 administrative practices, and they've been here
21 on the ground. The district has met them, and
22 we've accepted every recommendation that they
23 brought forth.

24 Blytheville School District has also
25 welcomed the Transformation Partnerships. We

1 put our piece for administrative support,
2 instruction and curriculum, hiring,
3 recruitment, and retention.

4 We've engaged with the leadership of the
5 Academy of Math and Sciences to get those
6 services to Blytheville School District. There
7 has been some delay in some of the responses
8 from the district pertaining to this particular
9 information. Those barriers and obstacles have
10 been removed.

11 With myself working with Ms. Whitlow and
12 the Arkansas Department of Education, we've
13 collaborated with the Academy of Math and
14 Sciences. We've toured the Academy of Math and
15 Sciences twice, and the superintendent of the
16 Academy of Math and Science was invited by me
17 to the Blytheville Elementary School, and we
18 spent a day in the district here.

19 We're looking for changes. We're looking
20 for something new to help improve our district.
21 We have not closed the door to any opportunity
22 to improve our district.

23 Blytheville School District has assigned
24 mentors to our novice teachers. Blytheville
25 School District has increased the number of

1 licensed teachers and implemented licensure
2 pathways for non-licensed personnel.

3 One school, as mentioned earlier, has
4 improved from an F to a C in one academic year,
5 demonstrating progress in student achievement.

6 We can improve. We've shown improvement.
7 This has been a year. We knew we had issues
8 coming into this school year, but the
9 Blytheville School Board has taken it very
10 serious, and we have worked to remove barriers
11 and obstacles.

12 Up until May the 8th, I was in direct
13 communication with Sheila Whitlow weekly.
14 Weekly. For some -- I thought this was my job,
15 as many text messages and phone calls that I
16 was receiving, to help remove obstacles and
17 barriers to progress in the Blytheville School
18 District. I met their challenge. I answered
19 every call and every text message.

20 Blytheville School District followed ADE
21 advice to retain its interim superintendent and
22 retain a professional search firm. Back in
23 November, in the words of Secretary Oliva, if
24 no one meets that threshold or the best
25 candidate, rise to the cream of the crop, don't

1 settle. We're not going back.

2 We then, in good faith, accepted Jennifer
3 Blankenship to continue in that role.

4 Through the next couple of months, January,
5 February -- I'm sorry -- December, January, and
6 February, we knew that this would be a heavy
7 lift for Mrs. Blankenship, that she was trying
8 to step into that role and do the best, and
9 she's done the best that she could. She had a
10 voice and vote of confidence from Secretary
11 Oliva at that time.

12 However, we knew we needed to get a
13 superintendent, a credentialed, qualified
14 superintendent for the Blytheville School
15 District.

16 We voted to get -- go with McPherson and
17 Jacobs for our superintendent search.
18 McPherson and Jacobs brought us two candidates.
19 The board unanimously -- one of the members of
20 the State Board of Education asked about a
21 vote. It was brought to you that the
22 Blytheville School District's Board was
23 dysfunctional; we had split votes. We have not
24 had a split vote in over four years.

25 The Blytheville School Board -- the board

1 unanimously said, hey, we didn't get the pool
2 of applicants that we were -- we desired, so we
3 didn't deny or decline to interview the
4 candidates that were brought forth. As a
5 matter of fact, the timing of this, with the
6 extension of the two weeks window to get more
7 applicants, get a pool of applicants, just
8 expired, and we moved quickly to get those
9 interviews scheduled for this week. While it
10 may be embarrassing to some, we have a
11 challenge, and we had to continue to work.

12 When we reviewed and heard of the May 8th
13 State Board meeting and what was presented, it
14 was disappointing and discouraging. However,
15 the board rose to the challenge. We still need
16 to lead and guide and help move the district
17 forward.

18 We didn't tuck our tails. We didn't run
19 away from the challenge. We became more
20 committed, more engaged to show that we're not
21 dysfunctional, that we're willing to do the
22 work, and that -- Blytheville School District
23 operates under the model policies of the
24 Arkansas School Board Association. Legal
25 advice is consistently sought from ASB counsel

1 Lucas Harder and the Blytheville School
2 District Robert Dale Coleman.

3 The board is governed by a court-mandated
4 eight-member structure under the 1993 Voting
5 Rights Act Order. Despite the votes are
6 consistently unanimous, one dissenting member
7 does not reflect the board's general cohesion
8 for effectiveness.

9 The Chamber's May 27, 2025, letter
10 advocates state takeover based on perceived
11 failures. However, none of the Chamber board
12 members have children in Blytheville School
13 District. No Chamber board member has attended
14 a Blytheville School Board meeting since August
15 2024.

16 This letter overlooks Blytheville School
17 District's recent academic and administrative
18 progress. Blytheville School District's
19 improvements, especially F to C school
20 turnaround, contradict claims of dysfunction.

21 We can and will make progress. It's been
22 one year. We were here last August,
23 terminating the -- going through the
24 termination process of a superintendent. We
25 didn't get here last year. This year didn't

1 culminate all of these breakdowns or failures.
2 This has been a pattern over the last five to
3 six years, that we've addressed, we've
4 identified, and we take accountability for
5 those things.

6 Blytheville School District is worthy and
7 deserving of an opportunity to continue this
8 journey of improving our schools together. It
9 takes the community. It takes all of us,
10 parents, teachers, and administration. And I
11 commend the teachers and the principals for
12 this last year's work. We've welcomed in
13 Educational Direction, the Co-op. We've
14 welcomed every resource in. And we as a board
15 have made changes. We've adopted policies and
16 accepted recommendations to improve.

17 The frustration that was brought to you May
18 8th was more in regard to us tabling Action
19 Item K at that time to interview Dr. Andrew
20 Curry and Dr. Ryan Huff. With the State
21 Department officials very frustrated, leaving
22 the meeting saying, the State Board will take
23 care of this, out of frustration. Those two
24 candidates have been -- are -- one is here
25 today, and one was interviewed Tuesday along

1 with another candidate that was interviewed
2 last night.

3 We are trying to get there. We're working
4 hard to get there. This should not be a
5 recommendation out of a favor of frustration
6 because we didn't hire a preferred candidate at
7 the time.

8 But just to give us a fair chance to do as
9 Secretary Oliva asked us to do back in
10 November, get the best candidate possible. By
11 extending the application period for two weeks,
12 that's what we wanted to do, to get a fair pool
13 size of qualified people.

14 At the time they brought the two
15 recommendations to us, they did not have the
16 scoring rubric of those candidates compared to
17 the other candidates that had applied.

18 How did we get to the final two was the
19 question that was asked. And once again, I
20 referred back to one of the State Board members
21 saying, what was that vote, since we had a lot
22 of split votes. And the question was answered,
23 that was a unanimous decision.

24 We didn't see the scoring rubric. We
25 asked, hey, how did we get to these two

1 applicants? Dr. Keith Williams said, I know
2 them personally, and I gave them a call. So
3 yes, we paid -- we're paying \$18,000 to a
4 search firm for an individual from McPherson
5 and Jacobs to tell us that no, these applicants
6 didn't apply, that I called them; I knew them
7 personally.

8 Two of those applicants, Ms. Whitlow has
9 told me, before we even knew who the applicants
10 were, hey, I talked to two guys; you've got two
11 great candidates coming; get out of their way
12 and just let them do the job; I know them
13 personally.

14 Dr. Andrew Curtis said, hey, I know Sheila
15 Whitlow personally, during his interview
16 Tuesday night, that I talked to her about the
17 school district.

18 Let me give you some historical background
19 on this superintendent process. An interim
20 superintendent that we wanted to get was Sally
21 Bennett. Sally Bennett was dead-set on coming
22 in, meeting our administrative team. She was
23 going to do a day in the district. And she
24 said, hey -- I said, well, what I would like
25 you to do is talk to Sheila Whitlow and get a

1 perspective of the State Department on some of
2 the challenges that they're seeing. And she
3 said, oh, yeah, great; give me her number and
4 I'll give her a call.

5 The next morning, the day that she was
6 scheduled to do a day in the district, she
7 changed her mind. That hurt. Sally Bennett
8 would have been a great interim superintendent
9 at the time that we needed it.

10 There's another superintendent out of over
11 near Paragould, Jonesboro area. She's retired.
12 She was helping her daughter run a clothing
13 store. Made a call to her on a reference, a
14 referral. Hey, would you be interested in
15 working as an interim superintendent for the
16 Blytheville School District? Sure, that would
17 be great. Let me make sure that I can get away
18 from my daughter's store and come spend some
19 time with you guys. She agreed. I sent --
20 Teresa Whatley at the time sent out memos and
21 informed the board, we're going to do a day in
22 the district. Come meet my administrative
23 team, the team that we have in place, the
24 people that you'll be working with. Yes, yes,
25 yes, sir, yes, sir. Well, I would like for you

1 to talk to Ms. Whitlow of the State Department.
2 You want to guess what happened the next day?
3 She cancelled. Oh, I'm not interested at this
4 time.

5 I'm not understanding how, when I
6 approached those people, those candidates,
7 they're eager and up for the challenge to come
8 to work as an interim superintendent in our
9 district. And there are several others that
10 have had interest and then declined. I'm not
11 saying that there's any red flag there, but
12 we've tried to get credentialed and qualified
13 leaders in the interim spot before while this
14 process of us looking for a full-time
15 candidate. We've done the work.

16 A Level 5 classification at this juncture
17 would unfairly stigmatize a district showing
18 measurable improvement. This is one year. One
19 year.

20 Educational Directions, some of the funding
21 that we were talking about, how we went in and
22 got some funding, do you know what that's for?
23 Those external partners that we've reached out
24 to at Directions.

25 Labeling the Blytheville School District as

1 a failing factory undermines morale, hampers
2 recruitment, and alienates stakeholders.
3 Blytheville School District's performance
4 satisfies the accountability intent of the
5 Arkansas Educational Support and Accountability
6 Act.

7 And in conclusion, the Arkansas Department
8 of Education has board discretion under
9 Arkansas Code 6-15-2916. But such authority
10 must be exercised in alignment with facts and
11 procedure.

12 Blytheville School District respectfully
13 requests the State Board reject the Level 5
14 recommendation, affirm the district's progress,
15 and continue constructive partnership. We are
16 here to work with you and move the district
17 forward. Thank you.

18 (Audience claps.)

19 MS. ROLLINS: At this time we will open it
20 up for Board questions. Would you mind
21 standing at the podium? We may have some
22 questions, in other words. Board to my left,
23 is there anyone there that would like to ask a
24 question this morning?

25 MS. LEIGH KEENER: I do. I'd like some

1 clarity on the time line of the procedures that
2 you mentioned, the 20 days that the board is
3 saying they were not given.

4 MR. HAMMETT: I'll defer to our school
5 attorney on that matter.

6 MS. KEENER: Thank you.

7 MR. ROBERT L. COLEMAN: The letter --

8 MS. KEENER: Would you go to the podium?

9 MR. COLEMAN: Sure.

10 MS. KEENER: Thank you. I appreciate it.

11 MS. ROLLINS: We'll also need you to
12 identify yourself.

13 MR. COLEMAN: My name is Robert L. Coleman.
14 I'm attorney with the law firm of Reid, Burge,
15 Prevallet, and Coleman, and I represent the
16 Blytheville School Board. If you'll look at
17 the letter that was sent to the Blytheville
18 School District, you'll see that the letter
19 itself, on the second page, says that we have
20 20 days to respond. And if you'll then turn to
21 the first page of the letter, you will see that
22 the letter is dated May 14th. So it's very
23 evident that since today is May 29, that's 15
24 days.

25 And the rule that's cited says we have 20

1 days, and the letter says we have 20 days. But
2 we're here on day 15. That seems like kind of
3 a rush.

4 MS. ADRIENNE WOODS: Thank you. Can we hear
5 from the Department as well?

6 MS. SMITH: Yeah. So correct, we scheduled
7 the meeting on this date. They requested their
8 hearing within seven days of receiving their
9 letter, okay? So our time line of having this
10 hearing was okay. If they wanted to ask for an
11 extension they could have. If they had filed
12 their letter tomorrow after we had this
13 hearing, it would have been a problem.

14 If we wouldn't have heard from the district
15 or known that they were going to ask for the
16 appeal as late as yesterday, day before, we
17 might have regrouped. But they asked for their
18 appeal within seven days.

19 MS. WOODS: Okay. Thank you for that.

20 MR. COLEMAN: I will have to dispute that.
21 You can look at the letter. You have it. It
22 doesn't say you'll be given more time if you
23 ask for it. I mean I would just challenge her
24 to show you where we were told that.

25 It says that we've got to respond, and we

1 have 20 days to respond, and we were given 15
2 days before the hearing. It says a hearing is
3 going to be held today. It doesn't say if you
4 respond, then the hearing will be delayed; if
5 you ask for more time the hearing will be
6 delayed. It says that there's going to be a
7 hearing today.

8 And in light of the fact that a hearing was
9 going to be held today, we did not want to go
10 unheard on the merits of some of these
11 arguments that were made.

12 So we strongly object to this. We believe
13 that it's a denial of due process. It's a
14 denial of your own rules and a violation of
15 your own rules and a violation of our due
16 process rights under the Arkansas
17 Administrative Act.

18 MS. KEENER: So you were given 20 days to
19 respond, and you responded seven days later?

20 MR. COLEMAN: No, we were given 20 days to
21 respond, and were told that there's going to be
22 a hearing on the 29th, and so the response was
23 filed on the -- well, I believe it was filed on
24 the 21st, seven days later, which we felt was
25 out of necessity. We didn't want to be

1 unheard, come in here and, they don't care,
2 they don't object to this action.

3 MR. DANIEL SHULTS: Thank you, ladies and
4 gentlemen. Daniel Shults, counsel for the
5 Department. The Board's counsel is correct.
6 The letter does reflect the time line he laid
7 out. However, what it says is that a special
8 meeting has been scheduled for May 29th. The
9 letter further, later down, says, if they
10 choose to file an appeal, which is
11 discretionary on the part of the Board, they
12 may file an appeal. If they do, we're prepared
13 to -- we will conduct a hearing today.

14 Now, as Deputy Commissioner Smith pointed
15 out, they could have raised an objection to the
16 time line. Hearings get rescheduled; meetings
17 get rescheduled. No objection was made. This
18 is the first the Board -- the Agency has been
19 made aware of, of a timing of the hearing
20 objection.

21 But the rule sets out they have 20 days to
22 appeal. Once appealed, we have 60 days to
23 conduct a hearing. Both of those requirements
24 were complied with. They appealed within seven
25 days, which is inside the 20. Again,

1 discretionary on their part. And then this is
2 -- we have held the hearing within 60 days
3 following them posting their notice of appeal,
4 then the appeal was filed on this issue.

5 MS. KEENER: Thank you. I appreciate that
6 clarity. I feel confident that we're within --
7 we followed everything appropriately.

8 MS. ROLLINS: Further questions from the
9 Board?

10 MS. KEENER: I had another question for the
11 Board president -- or the Board chair, excuse
12 me. You mentioned a couple of candidates that
13 you were interested in that were -- after you
14 spoke with them they were later discouraged.
15 But both candidates you mentioned you were
16 looking into them for interim positions,
17 correct?

18 MR. HAMMETT: Yes. That's what they had
19 agreed to, because at the time -- this was
20 early on after the termination of our previous
21 superintendent, that one was retired; she was
22 eager to come help work with the Blytheville
23 School District on an interim basis until that
24 position was filled.

25 MS. KEENER: When you say early on, can you

1 give me a time line?

2 MR. HAMMETT: This was September, October-
3 ish, after the State Board meeting in August of
4 last year.

5 MS. KEENER: So the superintendent --
6 previous superintendent was fired in May -- or
7 excuse me -- put on paid leave in May?

8 MR. HAMMETT: Correct.

9 MS. KEENER: Ms. Blankenship stepped in and
10 so we're talking five to six months later
11 you're still looking for an interim?

12 MR. HAMMETT: Well, five to six months
13 later? August, September. About two months
14 that we were there at the point of getting an
15 interim in for the year.

16 MS. KEENER: Thank you.

17 MS. LISA HUNTER: I'm just going to follow
18 up on that question. So you had an interim in
19 place --

20 MR. HAMMETT: Yes.

21 MS. HUNTER: -- and you were continuing to
22 search for an interim. What was the rationale
23 for that, as opposed to spending your time and
24 effort in finding a permanent superintendent?

25 MR. HAMMETT: Well, we were getting ready

1 to start the school year in August, September,
2 and October. It was brought -- you know, it
3 was our knowledge that Ms. Blankenship didn't
4 have the credentials or qualifications at the
5 time, so she was going to apply for a waiver.

6 So during that time we were under the
7 guidance of Ms. Blankenship saying, hey, I can
8 complete a waiver, apply for the waiver with
9 the State, and we would be good at that time.

10 However, we needed someone in the seat to
11 start the school year. Ms. Bennett said, I
12 will come in on an interim basis to get you to
13 the next superintendent, not putting a specific
14 time line for six months or a year or to finish
15 out the school year. But it was understood
16 that she would be with us until -- and then we
17 were also getting information on the
18 transformation partnership as well during that
19 time. Also looking for support and leadership
20 through an RFP as well. We had two options
21 that were presented to us that we were
22 considering at the time.

23 MS. HUNTER: Okay. Thank you.

24 MR. HAMMETT: Yes, ma'am.

25 MS. SMITH: One of these that I want to hit

1 on was the fact that multiple times in their
2 rebuttal they talked about Sheila Whitlow
3 discouraging. Their rebuttal with that
4 statement just shows why this board needs to be
5 dissolved. We have spent --

6 (Audience claps.)

7 MS. SMITH: -- thousands of dollars and
8 invested hours of ADE people's time driving to
9 Blytheville, spending hours upon hours, days
10 upon days with these schools, working with the
11 teachers, working with the administration,
12 asking people to be -- to consider to come to
13 Blytheville.

14 What this Board doesn't realize is that
15 when we're talking to these folks, they don't
16 want to come to Blytheville because of this
17 Board.

18 (Audience claps.)

19 MS. SMITH: He referred to Sheila Whitlow
20 as a red flag. Sheila, stand up. There's not
21 a red flag on this woman.

22 (Audience claps.)

23 MS. SMITH: She spends countless hours in
24 this district, and if there -- this is the
25 example of why they need to be dissolved. We

1 cannot do our work here and get this district
2 where they need to be when we have opposition
3 like this, that literally in their reply for
4 why their students are the lowest-performing
5 students in the state, blame Sheila Whitlow,
6 who hasn't been here but this year.

7 They did say in their statement one thing I
8 do agree with. This didn't happen overnight.
9 And it by surely didn't happen because Sheila
10 Whitlow showed up. If anything, they've
11 received more support; they've received more
12 guidance.

13 We are asking tough questions. And let me
14 be clear. They don't like the fact that Sheila
15 Whitlow is here. Because we're asking
16 questions, and it's about time that somebody
17 came down here and asked some questions.

18 (Audience claps.)

19 MS. ROLLINS: Ms. Leigh Keener, do you have
20 another question? We need to have quiet,
21 please, in the audience.

22 MS. KEENER: Can I get -- there we go.
23 There we go. I appreciate that, Ms. Smith.
24 Thank you so much for that. I think you
25 articulated what I was thinking in my head much

1 better than I could do. There is something
2 else that the Board chair said that I agreed
3 wholeheartedly with, and that is that
4 Blytheville School District deserves to
5 continue moving forward together. And I
6 believe at this time if the board is
7 unanimously resistant to moving forward, it
8 might be time that the state and the district
9 move forward together without the board.

10 (Audience claps.)

11 MS. ROLLINS: Are there any further
12 questions? Okay. We're going to go ahead and
13 -- go ahead.

14 MS. WOODS: I'm sorry. I have a couple of
15 questions. I want to talk about the
16 superintendent search still. We're talking a
17 lot about the interim superintendent and I --
18 let me back up. What you are having to do is
19 very hard. It is hard to sit in a room with a
20 bunch of people that are mad at you, and defend
21 actions when not everybody always has the full
22 picture. So I want you to know that I
23 acknowledge that.

24 But I also know that you are an elected
25 official, and that has responsibilities. And

1 you made a statement that it kind of took me
2 aback. You said, acting like this is my full-
3 time job with as many text messages as I was
4 responding to and I was answering every call.
5 This is your job.

6 MR. HAMMETT: Uh-huh.

7 MS. WOODS: You were elected for this.

8 (Audience claps.)

9 MS. WOODS: There are months that you will
10 not do anything to the extent that you had to.
11 But your job to these students in this district
12 is to find them a superintendent and to balance
13 the budget.

14 So I want to talk about you've got two
15 people brought in, in April. You decided --
16 you declined to interview them, but now
17 suddenly we're here and you're interviewing
18 them. So what had happened since April?

19 MR. HAMMETT: Well, we didn't -- I'm sorry.

20 MS. SMITH: You can pull it up.

21 MR. HAMMETT: I'm sorry. We did not
22 decline to interview at that time.

23 MS. WOODS: Okay.

24 MR. HAMMETT: We asked questions for the
25 rubric --

1 MS. WOODS: Which were what? The rubric?

2 MR. HAMMETT: The rubric of the scoring,
3 how we got there, and comparable to all of
4 that, which we didn't have all of the
5 information that was brought to us at that
6 time. There were some other disturbing
7 statements made --

8 MS. WOODS: Okay.

9 MR. HAMMETT: -- to the board from some of
10 the representatives that --

11 MS. WOODS: Representatives from the agency
12 --

13 MR. HAMMETT: Yes.

14 MS. WOODS: -- the controlling agency?

15 MR. HAMMETT: Yes.

16 MS. WOODS: Yes.

17 MR. HAMMETT: Yes. Encouraging us not to
18 -- hey, don't disqualify this candidate. He's
19 a good friend of mine. I'll mentor him if you
20 give him a chance. Overlook the DWI that's on
21 his record. And we were like taken aback,
22 like, whoa, wait. So there's a time line of
23 things that had happened.

24 MS. WOODS: But from April --

25 MR. HAMMETT: Yes.

1 MS. WOODS: -- the 24th or the 25th --

2 MR. HAMMETT: We did not decline to
3 interview those two applicants.

4 MS. WOODS: But you now brought them back?

5 MR. HAMMETT: They were brought -- we
6 extended it to get more applicants in. The
7 search firm brought those two candidates back
8 as the top candidates that they still deemed to
9 be their top --

10 MS. WOODS: Candidates?

11 MR. HAMMETT -- candidates. The board
12 asked, was there anyone close or comparable,
13 just to have three applicants to interview at
14 that time. So all three have been scheduled
15 interviews. Two have taken place, and one is
16 scheduled for tonight.

17 MS. WOODS: But you just said that you have
18 objections to one of them because of a DWI?

19 MR. HAMMETT: We didn't have objections.
20 The search firm said, please don't throw this
21 person out. We just said, can we open it up to
22 get more applicants in? We never declined to
23 interview them.

24 MS. WOODS: So but why didn't you interview
25 them before now? I mean a whole month has

1 passed.

2 MR. HAMMETT: We wanted a larger -- more
3 time for applicants to apply.

4 MS. WOODS: I understand. But here's the
5 optics of the situation.

6 MR. HAMMETT: Okay.

7 MS. WOODS: April 24th, you have two
8 candidates. It's now May the 29th, and we're
9 just now interviewing them. You could have
10 reopened the search and still interviewed those
11 people.

12 MR. HAMMETT: Yes.

13 MS. WOODS: You could have showed some
14 movement. So that's what I'm trying to figure
15 out. What have we done for a month? And I'm
16 not -- I know I'm ramming on you and I know --

17 MR. HAMMETT: No, that's --

18 MS. WOODS: -- that there's --

19 MR. HAMMETT: I understand.

20 MS. WOODS: -- I mean other people here on
21 your board. Who was responsible for saying, I
22 will set up this interview?

23 MR. HAMMETT: I took that opportunity to
24 set up --

25 MS. WOODS: Okay. Why haven't we --

1 MR. HAMMETT: -- the interview.

2 MS. WOODS: -- done anything for a month?

3 MR. HAMMETT: We extended the search for
4 two weeks --

5 MS. WOODS: But why didn't we interview
6 those two candidates in the interim? That
7 would have just shown -- that would have given
8 this room of people a feeling that you're
9 moving forward on something.

10 MR. HAMMETT: I understand.

11 MS. WOODS: Let's also not mistake the
12 fact, we're at year end in a school that we
13 still haven't made an interview.

14 MR. HAMMETT: We had three interviews in
15 November.

16 MS. WOODS: Back in November?

17 MR. HAMMETT: Yes.

18 MS. WOODS: Okay.

19 MR. HAMMETT: We had three interviews, and
20 we were prepared to move on a superintendent.
21 The candidates weren't desirable at that time
22 to be of high quality. So we've made traction
23 with interviews and seeking out a full-time
24 superintendent. We have not just been sitting
25 back kind of massaging ourselves.

1 MS. WOODS: Doing nothing till this week?

2 MR. HAMMETT: Yes. Yes.

3 MS. WOODS: Okay. Let's talk about the
4 budget. Why didn't the budget get approved?
5 Because you're a million and a half dollars
6 over. Who is on your finance committee?

7 MS. BLANKENSHIP: Would you repeat that
8 question? I'm sorry.

9 MS. WOODS: Sure. I wanted to go back to
10 the budget and --

11 MS. BLANKENSHIP: Okay.

12 MS. WOODS: -- I'm sorry, I can't find my
13 slide. We have expenditures of a million and a
14 half dollars that were not budgeted for. So
15 who was responsible for setting the budget? It
16 didn't get approved until I think you said
17 October, Secretary, or November?

18 MR. HAMMETT: October.

19 MS. KEENER: October?

20 MS. WOODS: Okay.

21 MS. BLANKENSHIP: Our finance director, but
22 I don't know if she's quite prepared to answer
23 that, because we didn't know we were going to
24 be discussing and going that far in-depth in
25 the budget. But she --

1 MS. WOODS: We're here for a hearing.

2 MS. BLANKENSHIP: Yes. She was hired in
3 October -- August or September and --

4 MR. HAMMETT: She did.

5 MS. BLANKENSHIP: She's here.

6 MS. RHONDA SUTHERN: I started --

7 MR. HAMMETT: She needs --

8 MS. WOODS: Hang on. Yeah. We need you to
9 -- can you raise your hand and be sworn in?

10 MS. BLANKENSHIP: Be sworn in, yes. And
11 you can come up to the mike.

12 MS. ROLLINS: I need to swear you in before
13 you speak. Raise your --

14 MS. BLANKENSHIP: Before you speak. Raise
15 your right hand.

16 MS. ROLLINS: -- right hand. Do you swear
17 the testimony you're about to give is the
18 truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the
19 truth?

20 MS. SUTHERN: Yes, ma'am. My name is
21 Rhonda Suthern. I started as the director July
22 1 of this year. I came from Rivercrest. I was
23 there for 20 years as district treasurer. So
24 when I was asked to fill this void, that was
25 because -- I started in April as accounts

1 payable. Shortly after that, the
2 superintendent was gone. So was the director
3 of finance. So I was there by myself, flying
4 by the seat of my pants, doing whatever was
5 necessary to keep everything afloat.

6 Shortly after that we hired a new payroll
7 specialist. She and I worked together until
8 July 1, when they asked me to take over. At
9 that point I felt I had some sort of authority
10 to make decisions. However, I have tried, in
11 my opinion, and tried. I've seen many, many
12 things that are not correct, that are not
13 right. We got with -- this district only has
14 private audits, which is one reason a lot of
15 things were not caught.

16 I spoke with her after July, when I stepped
17 in, and I said, have you seen this, this, and
18 this, some things that I felt were very
19 uncouth. She said, yes. So we were -- I
20 believe that was one reason that some of those
21 things were changed because of audit and not
22 because of me asking.

23 I have asked and I have brought up the
24 stipends. I have brought up and asked several
25 things that I felt were not done correctly.

1 As far as the budget is concerned, we did
2 put together a budget, but we had very -- I was
3 not -- I've done budgets for 20 years, but I
4 was not, shall I say, versed on this district.
5 The only thing I -- the only support I had was
6 the budget I had from the year before. So
7 that's what we went on.

8 I have questioned many expenditures, but I
9 had no one to stand in behind me to say no.
10 I've said no plenty of times, but I don't have
11 that backing to say no. I've asked questions
12 on why this was spent and why that was spent
13 and what was going on, and I just feel like I
14 personally have not had the support -- well,
15 there hasn't really been anybody there. There
16 is no superintendent.

17 And I spoke with Ms. Perkins on a few
18 occasions. But then she was gone. And we had
19 an interim, and I do believe that Ms.
20 Blankenship has done her best, but I mean she's
21 not versed in the finance, and there's so many
22 things that are done in the finance that is not
23 what I'm used to.

24 Because when you have a state audit,
25 everything gets brought up, and at that point

1 things are able to be changed. This district
2 has not ever had a state audit, to my
3 knowledge. It's always been a private audit.
4 Private audits are great, I guess, but they
5 don't know the school finance. You see what
6 I'm saying? They don't know, okay, this has to
7 be coded here; this has to be coded here; this
8 person can't be paid that; that person can't be
9 paid that. And I have been trying to bring
10 that to the forefront.

11 But how many times I've -- I've heard it so
12 many times, but this is the way it's always
13 done. And I've said, well, that's why this
14 district is where they are, because it's done
15 -- always has been done. And it is not
16 correct.

17 MS. BLANKENSHIP: That's the narrative
18 we're trying to get away from.

19 MS. SUTHERN: Right.

20 (Audience claps.)

21 MS. BLANKENSHIP: And then that's the -- I
22 was saying that's the narrative we're trying to
23 get away from. We've reviewed all of those
24 stipends. We've gone through some things.
25 We've gone through contracts, found things that

1 could be taken out, things that might have been
2 overcharged, and we've just gone through a lot
3 of those things. So Ms. Myron has been really
4 great in showing things --

5 MS. SUTHERN: Uh-huh.

6 MS. BLANKENSHIP: -- showing Ms. Rhonda how
7 to go through, look at this, take this out,
8 question this, ask questions about this. So
9 there are a lot of things from the previous
10 year that we've tried to work out that we've
11 gotten worked out, and still working on those
12 kinks. And so that's where we are in this
13 progress. Just still trying to move forward
14 and taking the advice and the collaboration and
15 putting it to work.

16 MS. KEENER: You mentioned that -- you seem
17 very frustrated. But you tried to put your
18 foot down, tried to change some things --

19 MS. SUTHERN: Can I say --

20 MS. KEENER: Sure. Just a second.

21 MS. SUTHERN: Okay.

22 MS. KEENER: What -- you're standing there;
23 you're in the position of financial leadership
24 for the district. You've got the
25 superintendent standing behind you agreeing

1 with you. What more did you need that you
2 didn't get to put your foot down and to make
3 those decisions and have that authority?

4 MS. SUTHERN: I don't feel like that we had
5 -- that I had the support to say that they
6 would tell -- you know, I just don't feel like
7 we had the support to go through it because of
8 the back knowledge wasn't there.

9 MS. KEENER: The support from whom? What
10 more did you need?

11 MS. SUTHERN: Well, as a whole, we don't --
12 I mean I don't feel like -- Ms. Blankenship --
13 I don't want to say anything badly about her,
14 but as far as finance as what I'm used to doing
15 is through like the handbook and these things,
16 what is legal or what I call legal and what is
17 not. I don't feel like she's well-versed
18 enough to say, okay, no, we're not going to do
19 this, or yes, we're going to do this. But when
20 Ms. Myra come in, then I felt like, okay, this
21 is some --

22 MS. BLANKENSHIP: They're knowing what
23 they're doing.

24 MS. SUTHERN: Yeah. Right. And when Ms.
25 Myra come in, I felt like, oh, okay, then you

1 know, now we can move forward, because I felt
2 like if she said we can't do this and we can't
3 do that, then I felt like, okay, this would be
4 -- that we would go forward and change some
5 things. There's some things now that even on
6 the -- that was approved by the board as far as
7 the stipends and as far as some of the
8 contracts, I don't approve. I don't agree
9 with.

10 MS. KEENER: So --

11 MS. SUTHERN: We have classified people
12 being -- getting stipends when they should not
13 be. I've raised my concerns about that. It's
14 not that I'm trying to be mean toward that
15 person getting the stipend. I am not -- that
16 is not me. But ethically you can --

17 MS. BLANKENSHIP: It's learning the rules.

18 MS. SUTHERN: -- not do that.

19 MS. KEENER: Well, that was my question, I
20 guess --

21 MS. BLANKENSHIP: And I think --

22 MS. KEENER: -- what I was trying to get
23 at.

24 MS. SUTHERN: Well, I've tried to bring it
25 up.

1 MS. BLANKENSHIP: Right.

2 MS. KEENER: Is there -- I couldn't figure
3 out whether it was insubordination from those
4 who were spending unethically --

5 MS. SUTHERN: I don't think it's
6 insubordination.

7 MS. KEENER: -- or --

8 MS. SUTHERN: I think it was lack of
9 knowledge.

10 MS. BLANKENSHIP: Right.

11 MS. SUTHERN: And then me being there, like
12 the first day I was here, the very first day in
13 this district, I was hired to do accounts
14 payable. She brought me in a stack of bills.

15 MS. BLANKENSHIP: Say who she is.

16 MS. SUTHERN: Shy was the previous director
17 of finance. At this point I was accounts
18 payable. She come in, and she said, do you
19 know how to do the job? I said, yes, I know
20 how to do accounts payable. I've been doing it
21 for a long time. And I said -- she brought me
22 the stack of bills, and I went through it, and
23 I asked questions. And I said, okay, how do I
24 approach the superintendent on signing off on
25 these bills? She said, oh, we don't do that

1 here. Red flag. I'm accounts payable. I felt
2 like I had no -- and I raised that as a
3 concern, but it never changed.

4 MS. BLANKENSHIP: And she's speaking of the
5 last school year.

6 MS. SUTHERN: Right.

7 MS. BLANKENSHIP: So -- and part of that
8 frustration, I think, is because she finished
9 the year -- or started the year, and some of
10 those people were not in places when she needed
11 questions. We've done a lot of digging into
12 things and invoices that came that we didn't
13 have the background knowledge, so a lot of her
14 time was spent, and my time, trying to find
15 previous information. So when she's referring
16 to she and last year, she's thinking of
17 previous people.

18 MS. WOODS: Right. And I wanted to talk,
19 though, about the budget that was set for this
20 year.

21 MS. BLANKENSHIP: Okay.

22 MS. WOODS: Was that just based on the
23 previous year?

24 MS. SUTHERN: It was.

25 MS. WOODS: Okay.

1 MS. SUTHERN: It was just based --

2 MS. WOODS: When was that presented to the
3 board to vote on?

4 MS. SUTHERN: I never knew it was not
5 presented to the board to be voted on.

6 MS. BLANKENSHIP: I don't remember the
7 date.

8 MS. WOODS: Was it at the September
9 meeting? That's what I'm trying to figure out.
10 Where did we miss it?

11 MS. SUTHERN: Because it is due in
12 September.

13 MS. BLANKENSHIP: Yeah.

14 MS. SUTHERN: I never knew the board did
15 not approve it.

16 MR. HAMMETT: Well, it was --

17 MS. KEENER: Bottom line, it sounds like a
18 lot of dysfunction --

19 MS. SUTHERN: Uh-huh.

20 MS. KEENER: -- among those that are in a
21 positions of power.

22 MS. SUTHERN: Uh-huh.

23 MS. KEENER: This is appalling.

24 MS. SUTHERN: But I came here -- I felt
25 like I could bring it up and out. I felt like

1 we could -- I could, okay, July 1, we're going
2 to move forward. We're going to do this; we're
3 going to do that.

4 Every day there has been something come up,
5 I'm going to say from the previous year, that
6 we have spent countless hours on trying to fix.
7 And I'm going to be honest. And people that
8 come in to help have seen the same thing. Ms.
9 Myra has been in here working with us, and I'd
10 just look at her daily, I said, do you see what
11 we're dealing with, what I'm dealing with. We
12 can't move forward because we're trying to put
13 out fires from the previous thing, because
14 there's something every day --

15 MS. ROLLINS: Okay.

16 MS. SUTHERN: -- that comes up.

17 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you.

18 MS. SUTHERN: Okay.

19 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you. I know Dr. Arnold
20 has a question.

21 DR. GARY ARNOLD: Comments, actually.

22 MS. ROLLINS: Comments?

23 DR. ARNOLD: Yes. Thank you. It seems to
24 me, when sitting through the testimony, that
25 the district is spending a lot of energy and

1 working very hard at climbing the wrong
2 mountain.

3 As Secretary Oliva has said, you know,
4 we're looking for systemic change. We're
5 looking for system alignment. We're looking at
6 the bigger picture. Anecdotes are informative,
7 but again, at the same time, Chairman Hammett,
8 you had mentioned that you are looking for
9 change.

10 And I'd like to re-frame the whole phrasing
11 of Level 5 to see that as the change that the
12 district is looking for, that we're at that
13 point. And because the data sets on the slide
14 deck are really a desperate cry for help. And
15 when we're at that point, it seems to me that
16 there would be welcome arms to the help
17 offered. There has been plenty of open arms to
18 the help previously offered, but this is just
19 an extension of the need for help.

20 And then finally, you mentioned the fact
21 that you're concerned about the stigma that it
22 would leave upon the district, and I hate to
23 say that it's really less of a stigma upon the
24 district and indeed a stigma, and please
25 forgive me, on the board for their lack of

1 governance in this situation.

2 (Audience claps.)

3 DR. ARNOLD: And so that's personal stigma
4 versus a better future for the district.

5 MS. ROLLINS: Dr. Moore, who is online,
6 have you got any questions?

7 DR. MOORE: None at this point in time.
8 Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

9 MS. ROLLINS: Okay. Thank you. I think my
10 concern goes to the loss of your students. And
11 I know you've continually said this morning
12 that you were going to work at getting them
13 back. And we know how difficult that is. I
14 mean do you have a plan to do that --

15 MR. HAMMETT: Yes.

16 MS. ROLLINS: -- that's in place?

17 MR. HAMMETT: Yes. Just in the month of
18 April, we've come up with some initiatives that
19 we're going out to the community marketing,
20 selling different programs to get our students
21 back in. We've met with a third party student
22 recruitment to take our messages to the homes,
23 make touch points, make visits to get those
24 students back.

25 We are working to show the good that's here

1 in the Blytheville School District to those
2 parents of students that are bringing their
3 students back. We have seen an increase for
4 the upcoming school year of students returning
5 to the district, and we're working hard to get
6 the message out, to market our school district,
7 tell our programs, to tell our teachers that we
8 have high-quality teachers and instruction
9 taking place and our building leaders are
10 leading that campaign as well for each of their
11 schools, and they have the support of the
12 board.

13 MS. ROLLINS: When is your registration?

14 MS. BLANKENSHIP: Registration for this
15 school year, the principals are working on
16 setting those dates. I think primary may have
17 already set theirs to start next month.

18 MS. ROLLINS: I mean this is so urgent that
19 --

20 MS. BLANKENSHIP: It is.

21 MS. ROLLINS: -- this gets completed. And
22 it's a beautiful community. You've got
23 industry here. Your students need a strong
24 district and to get them back home to learn
25 here, as you know, is so important. It seems

1 kind of late to be starting this now, but we're
2 glad to hear that you are.

3 MS. WOODS: Are you-all familiar with
4 transformation contract?

5 MR. HAMMETT: Yes.

6 MS. WOODS: Do you-all know what a -- so
7 has there been any discussion by the board to
8 approach the state about entering into a
9 transformation contract?

10 MR. HAMMETT: Yes.

11 MS. HUNTER: So Ms. Rollins, was there a
12 followup on that information?

13 MS. ROLLINS: No. Go ahead.

14 MS. HUNTER: So I think we all acknowledge
15 this hasn't happened overnight. And my
16 question -- and so much in question is a
17 question about leadership. So can you tell me
18 a little bit about the tenure of your board?
19 Is everyone new or is there some tenure, that
20 people have seen this happen along the way?

21 MR. HAMMETT: Yes, we have four tenured
22 members, Mrs. Wells, Mrs. Langston, myself, and
23 Mrs. Johnson. We have four new members within
24 the last two years, Mrs. Nichols, Ms. Palmore,
25 Mrs. Lewis was elected this year, and Mr.

1 Jefferson as well within the first one to two
2 years.

3 MS. HUNTER: Okay. Thank you for that.
4 I'm just going to make a comment about how I
5 view the role of the school in the community.
6 And you know, I am not an educator. I am in
7 the private sector. And so I believe that your
8 customers or every school's customer is the
9 business community. What you are asked to do
10 is, you know, produce students who are ready
11 for either, you know, to enter the workforce or
12 the military. And so that is how you're
13 measured.

14 And to me, the letter from the local
15 Chamber spoke volumes. They believe that
16 you're not producing a product, and I'm not
17 trying to, you know, use that in any type of
18 demeaning kind of way. But your product is not
19 sufficient for their needs. So we all, I
20 think, need to take notice of that. And it is
21 the responsibility of leadership to recognize
22 that and meet the expectations of your
23 customer.

24 So you know, having tenure on your board,
25 you know, you should be in tune to what your

1 business community needs. And the fact that
2 you have such a booming opportunity here with
3 industry just off the charts here is, I think,
4 very telling.

5 MS. ROLLINS: Mr. Henderson?

6 MR. RANDY HENDERSON: Yeah. I purposely
7 didn't really have any questions, just more
8 comments, allow my peers to ask, you know,
9 different questions.

10 My comment is, I know it's been brought up
11 several different times. The industry jobs,
12 the opportunities that we have here in
13 Mississippi County, in the city of Blytheville.
14 You know, when I think about that, I think
15 every student in Arkansas deserves a fair
16 education, and that applies to Blytheville as
17 well.

18 And you know, talking with the state
19 Chamber, you know, males the age of 25 to 54,
20 there are 65,000 males not working in the state
21 of Arkansas right now. They either have
22 checked out, not looking for a job, or is out
23 of work. And when you crop that down to 1.3
24 percent, which represents Mississippi County,
25 there's 800 males at the age of 25 to 54 not

1 working, not looking for a job, or has checked
2 out.

3 And when I think about that, I think about
4 the unfilled jobs in the industry sector. I
5 think about how hard it is to create pathways.
6 I think about the students, the industries, the
7 pathways. I think every student deserves an
8 opportunity, if they do not decide to go to
9 college, they should have an opportunity to
10 make six figures. We've got to create a
11 pathway of this broken system that we have.

12 You know, when there's lack of education in
13 many areas, there's crime. And you know, when
14 I think about crime, I think about weapons.
15 And you know, one of my favorite quotes by
16 Nelson Mandela said, education is the most
17 important weapon, which we can use to change
18 the world.

19 (Audience claps.)

20 MR. HENDERSON: We've got to fix this
21 broken system. And it is systemic. These
22 problems just didn't start within the last
23 year. So we've got to fix it.

24 MS. ROLLINS: Board, are we ready for
25 public comment? Anything? Okay. At this time

1 we will start with public comment, and we'll go
2 off the sheets that you signed when you came
3 in. I will call three names. We're going to
4 ask you to come down this aisle, because this
5 is blocked off, and we don't want anyone
6 getting hurt. So come down on this right-hand
7 side. Come up to the podium. And you have
8 three minutes for your comments.

9 We're going to start with Ross Thompson,
10 Nicole Eskin, and Paula Pitts. You want to
11 come and line up, please? And we ask that you
12 state your name before you start.

13 MR. THOMPSON: Good morning, everyone. My
14 name is Ross Thompson. A lot of people know me
15 here. I was a police officer here for 30-plus
16 years. My wife was also a teacher here for 30-
17 plus years. But we've both recently retired,
18 but we are still very active in the community.
19 We live here, worked here, actually went to
20 school here, stood on that very stage and sang
21 in the choir on occasion.

22 I want to thank Ms. Blankenship, the
23 teachers, and the staff that are working under
24 these conditions. That's asking a lot of them.
25 This is a workforce. This is a workplace. And

1 they have endured a lot over these last few
2 years here. I want to thank the State Board
3 for being here and being blunt and direct with
4 us. We need to hear that.

5 Mr. Hammett spoke, and I applaud his
6 efforts, but he failed to acknowledge the
7 indefensible massive failure that the
8 Blytheville School District has become.

9 I personally know many of these board
10 members, and they are good people. I know
11 they're hurt by this disgusting and appalling
12 and unacceptable performance of the Blytheville
13 School District.

14 I can only speak for myself, and I don't
15 know if there was some type of vote that was
16 taken. I heard something about earlier what
17 their positions were. But I can only speak for
18 myself, but I would venture to say that a
19 majority of the board members probably agree
20 it's time to dissolve the board and start all
21 over again. Thank you.

22 (Audience claps.)

23 MS. ESKIN: Hello, you-all. How are you-
24 all doing today? I know it's a little heavy in
25 the room. I just came in later. Had to help

1 with one of the attendants for the
2 superintendent.

3 COURT REPORTER: What is your name?

4 MS. ESKIN: Oh, I'm sorry. Nicole Eskin.
5 Yes. And I was wanting to just have a little
6 encouragement. I know the place we're in. It
7 is what it is. Whatever just happened it is
8 the past.

9 But I do want to thank Ms. Blankenship for
10 sacrificing, for leaving one position to be a
11 help in another. Thank you, and you are
12 needed. You are needed.

13 (Audience claps.)

14 MS. ESKIN: To the board, to our teachers,
15 to everyone in this place, to this wonderful
16 community, thank you. Thank you for showing up
17 today. Thank you for supporting everybody.
18 Now, we know we can't help, like I said, the
19 things that happened. It is in God's hands,
20 and we're going to let his will be done.

21 So my thing is, what are we going to do
22 now? Yes, whatever decision that's made, will
23 our community step up and do what's needed to
24 help our school? It's about our children; you
25 know what I'm saying? Regardless of what, we

1 have to come together with the Chamber. I am a
2 member of the Chamber board, and as I've stated
3 to Ms. Liz, we're going to do what we've got to
4 do to work together.

5 There might have been some division before.
6 I don't know of what other division we had. We
7 have to put our personal things to the side and
8 think about what is best for our school, for
9 our children, and for our community.

10 So I'm just here today just to encourage
11 you all. Thank you for taking the time to come
12 here to help us, how ever needs to be helped.
13 So with that being said, I love you all, and
14 we're going to move forward, and there is power
15 in togetherness.

16 (Audience claps.)

17 MS. ROLLINS: The next three names, Robin
18 Freeman-Barnes, Carolyn Rollins. It's hard to
19 read handwriting. Sorry. And Vera James,
20 please come forward.

21 MS. FREEMAN-BARNES: Good morning. I'm
22 just making sure that it's still morning. It's
23 been a while since we've been here. My name is
24 Robin Freeman-Barnes. Initially I wanted to
25 throw up my laptop and do a couple of slide

1 shows to the public from a teacher's
2 perspective. I'm a fourth grade teacher here,
3 and I commute to Blytheville every day. I come
4 from Proctor, Arkansas. I signed on to be a
5 teacher.

6 COURT REPORTER: Ma'am, please turn around.

7 MS. ROLLINS: Can you speak into the
8 microphone?

9 MR. HAMMETT: They can't hear you.

10 MS. ROLLINS: Will you face forward?

11 MS. FREEMAN-BARNES: Yes. Thank you. I
12 signed on to be a fourth grade teacher here. I
13 commute from Proctor, Arkansas, every day. Did
14 I know what I was going to face? No. I was
15 not briefed. I was not prepared. But due to
16 the time constraint, I'm going to talk about
17 the teacher's perspective from me, just for the
18 board.

19 My background is not in teaching, but I
20 came to teach. I'm passionate about this
21 community. I have a toddler. I have a 3-year-
22 old. So teaching was conducive to those
23 initial years with me being a 37-year-old
24 first-time mother. And I empathize with the
25 parents here in the community. There are some

1 big steppers here. They step for their
2 children. They show up, mother and father,
3 single mothers, homeless mothers. I see the
4 parental side as a married woman.

5 And I feel for the community, despite the
6 board being scrutinized for whatever has
7 occurred. I just would like to say that
8 personally, I put in an application for
9 director of public relations March 29th. I
10 never heard back from anyone. I'm not here to
11 get that job, right? I could be not wanting to
12 speak again, because I'm signing up to be a
13 teacher.

14 But I have a master's in communication,
15 master's in business, and I wanted to convey
16 that message, because I was looking at the
17 bottom up communication. And when the bottom
18 up communication is strong and the top down
19 communication sucks, you really have no way to
20 fix the burning candle that's at both ends.
21 But I spoke with Mr. Jenkins, and he let me
22 know that someone would get back with me.

23 So on with my personal life. I kept
24 putting one foot before the other. I have
25 students with exceptionalities, disabilities,

1 dyslexia, who have shown great growth.

2 MS. ROLLINS: You're at three minutes. You
3 need to finish up with --

4 MS. FREEMAN-BARNES: Yes, ma'am. I've had
5 those students with exceptionalities show great
6 growth from October to now, and I feel very
7 great. But the thing is about these meetings
8 is you can't get a full depiction of what's
9 going on in the community when you limit
10 teachers. Teachers should get the most time to
11 speak at interventions like this. This is an
12 intervention for the community.

13 I'm not bullying the board or trying to
14 take over the school board's perspective, but
15 there are two different things that I would
16 have liked you-all to understand from the
17 teachers' perspective. Because if I'm driving
18 an hour and I'm willing to be a teacher here
19 for 15, 20 years, there has to be an outlet for
20 a teacher to say what do you feel. Because
21 it's the parent and then it's the teacher. And
22 then it's the custodian and it's the janitors.
23 It's everybody who's hands on.

24 So to finalize this talk, I would like all
25 district members to make sure that if you ever

1 get into the position where you are an elected
2 official, you're sworn under oath and you have
3 to do the work, you need to come out and be a
4 big stepper. Even if you get a third party
5 differentiating the problem, you have to come
6 into the classroom to see what the peers feel,
7 what the teachers feel. You can't theorize
8 what we're going through at the board meeting.

9 (Audience claps.)

10 MS. FREEMAN-BARNES: I've watched you on
11 YouTube and I've had to cut it off because I've
12 had a headache. But I just want to be
13 transparent to say, I've done this kind of work
14 as the director of public relations for
15 Rockefeller Institute, Agriculture Department,
16 but as an educator, I care about the black
17 community and the white community and the --

18 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you.

19 MS. FREEMAN-BARNES: -- Hispanic community
20 --

21 (Audience claps.)

22 MS. FREEMAN-BARNES: -- and I just wanted
23 to be clear that I don't know your decision,
24 but I really, really, really want this
25 community to come together.

1 MS. ROLLINS: Your time is up. Thank you.

2 MS. FREEMAN-BARNES: Thank you so much --

3 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you.

4 MS. FREEMAN-BARNES: -- for this outlet and
5 opportunity. Have a blessed day.

6 (Audience claps.)

7 MS. JAMES: Hello. My name is Vera James.
8 I am the wife of the late Willie James who
9 spent 50-plus years in the Blytheville School
10 District. And my concern, it was mentioned in
11 this meeting today getting rid of the school
12 board, abandoning it, probably.

13 And first I want to go back for a second.
14 I hear all the complaints and know a lot of
15 things about what teachers go through being
16 teachers in the public schools. But my concern
17 is, and my main thought is, we're pointing the
18 fingers at everybody, but I'm pointing my
19 fingers at the parents. My point is that it's
20 how our children behave when they're being
21 trying to be taught in the classroom they're
22 doing this and they're doing that. And one of
23 the biggest problems, I think, is that you need
24 to take the telephones from the kids out of the
25 classroom so they can concentrate more --

1 (Audience claps.)

2 MS. JAMES: -- on what's going on. And my
3 question would be if you eliminate the board
4 and the State Department of Education takes
5 over, then are you going to be in this city as
6 often as the board members now? Are you going
7 to be working with the parents, directly with
8 the parents?

9 And I think that parents need to attend the
10 meetings to see what's going on, because the
11 school board meetings are open. You get your
12 name on the agenda, you can talk about what's
13 going on. And if a child is dealing with
14 issues at home, if Dad is a drug dealer,
15 Momma's a whatever, then they're going to have
16 some problems and they're not going to have the
17 ability to learn, because they're concentrating
18 on what's happening at home and what they're
19 going to return to when they leave school
20 today.

21 And some of those kids, we thank God that
22 we do have breakfast for the kids. But some
23 have to deal with not being fed properly, not
24 being taken care of properly, and most
25 important, I cannot stand it; I'm 77 years old,

1 soon will be 78; it's the parent calling their
2 own children stupid, dumb, and crazy. That has
3 an effect on how that child behaves when he or
4 she enters into the classroom.

5 And so I just want to say thank you-all for
6 these meetings, and I just wanted to say what I
7 feel like. But I'm still holding the parents
8 accountable for their children. Thank you.

9 (Audience claps.)

10 MS. ROLLINS: The next three, James -- Tony
11 Hollis, Michelle Turner, Teresa Miner, please.

12 MS. MINER: Good morning, My name is
13 Teresa Miner, and I'm the homeless liaison for
14 the district. Ma'am?

15 MS. ROLLINS: Can you speak into the
16 microphone?

17 MS. MINER: Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am. I'm
18 the homeless liaison for the district. And my
19 question is a question to ask them how do we
20 deal with the challenges implementing the
21 McKinney-Vento Program, like we're trying to --
22 affordable housing and providing that allowable
23 -- making sure that we are spending allowable
24 on there with our funds.

25 Ms. Mill had said that she had spoken

1 something about the McKinney-Vento Program as
2 far as the -- yes. And I was just wanting you
3 to know that we only started trying to get --
4 oh, about the stipends. Yes. About the
5 stipends. And the stipends only started this
6 year. We've only been able to pay one time out
7 of the stipends, so I was just trying to get an
8 understanding about the McKinney-Vento as far
9 as the stipends, because we've only paid out
10 one time on those stipends. Okay. Okay. So
11 that was my question. Thank you.

12 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you.

13 MR. HOLLIS: I'd like to say hello to
14 everyone. My name is Tony Hollis. I also want
15 to apologize for not knowing that there was
16 someone from the State here somewhat working
17 with, I guess, our staff. I think they
18 mentioned the lady, Ms. Shelly, and I guess my
19 concern is that where is the breakdown in
20 communication with the representative from the
21 state? I mean what is going on there?

22 We in the community, you know, we'll -- me
23 for one was not even privy that this was going
24 on. And so I'd like to know, where is the
25 breakdown in communication in terms of the

1 representative working with the administration?
2 Because it seems like from seeing the back and
3 forth with the attorney and on this side, it
4 seems like there's something going on there.
5 And so we need to fix that.

6 We need to find out what is going on there,
7 because it's about trying to get our students
8 to become efficient, correct? And if we can't
9 have representatives working with the school
10 district administration, then, you know, I feel
11 like that's where the failure is at right
12 there, okay?

13 Now I want to close on this here. I want
14 to speak about finances as well. I'm one of
15 the persons in the community that I do send
16 FOIs out to the superintendent. I want to say
17 I did see a figure where it spoke about legal
18 fees. I think I saw a figure of \$84,000 or
19 something like that. My thing is that we have
20 spent a lot of money on attorney fees. When I
21 send out an FOI, I don't specifically get
22 exactly what I ask for. For example, I may
23 send an FOI out asking what do we pay our local
24 attorneys here in Blytheville, Arkansas.

25 They'll send me a whole bunch of

1 information that is co-mingled with a lot of
2 other stuff that I didn't ask for. But I never
3 get the specific documentation in my hand that
4 I asked for. Either we're paying an attorney
5 or we're not paying an attorney. I'm sure he's
6 not working free.

7 So if I can send out an FOI specifically
8 asking what dollar figure are we paying our
9 local attorney, I should get something in my
10 hand. I shouldn't get a bunch of crap that I
11 don't know what I'm looking at.

12 And so I would just like more transparency
13 on providing documentation, legal documentation
14 in terms of attorneys' fees, you know, I asked
15 for. And so that's pretty much all I have to
16 say. Thanks a lot.

17 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you. The next three
18 people, Stephanie Benson, Tommy Coleman, Collin
19 Robinson. Okay. They may have left. Rebecca
20 Robinson, Sonya Lucas-Moduca, and Carissa
21 Williams, please. While she comes down, I'll
22 go ahead and call Lasharia Will Smith and
23 Melody Webb. Come forward. That's fine. Just
24 identify yourself, please.

25 MS. WEBB: Hello. I'm Melody Webb. I'm a

1 parent. I want to address that me and my kids
2 -- I've got a daughter, she got AIP, and we've
3 been homeless. And I go to Ms. Miner over at
4 the school board to get help. Me and my kids
5 been sleeping in a car, all type of stuff. And
6 she asked me where -- what do I do. So I tell
7 her what I got to do to go, you know, make sure
8 my kids lay down, you know. I don't think that
9 was appropriate for her to do that.

10 And another thing, the stuff they send home
11 for kids on weekends, which me and my kids
12 don't have a proper place to stay, and that's
13 been three months ago, and I've been asking
14 her, calling for help. I'm not getting any
15 help. But people drive around in new cars,
16 church members, everybody is living good, but
17 me and my kids is in this program, and we're
18 still living on the street, because me and my
19 kids' father had a bad falling out. So I got
20 me and my kids and left.

21 So I go to them for help. I get none. She
22 wants me to sign for any little thing she gives
23 me, and it's not nothing. I meant to bring the
24 little food bag that they send home every
25 Friday. There's nothing in there. My kids are

1 still hungry after. Whatever little she gives
2 that day, that's for that day. They're
3 spending money. They're spending money on
4 themselves and not helping the community.
5 That's what I wanted to say.

6 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you. Please identify
7 yourself.

8 MS. LASHARIA SMITH: My name is Lasharia
9 Smith. I am a mother of three children
10 attending school in Blytheville School
11 District. I've been reaching out to bring
12 urgent attention to the serious incidents that
13 have affected my children's safety, emotional
14 well being, and rights as students.

15 My second grade son has a diagnosed bladder
16 condition. Despite providing medical
17 documentation to the school, he has repeatedly
18 been denied access to the restroom by his
19 teacher, resulting in multiple accidents
20 throughout the school year. These repeated
21 incidents have caused him distress and
22 embarrassment, yet no corrective action has
23 been taken.

24 My kindergarten son has an IEP for
25 development delay in speech therapy at school.

1 Recently the same school bus driver involved in
2 other incidents got in his face and yelled to
3 him for not hearing the command to sit in the
4 front. Multiple students reported that he
5 grabbed him by the shirt and dragged him to the
6 front of the bus. While the transportation
7 team denies the grabbing, she admits the driver
8 got aggressively in his face and yelled, which
9 is entirely inappropriate, and especially for a
10 child with developmental needs.

11 In a separate incident my daughter was
12 dropped off at an outdated address without my
13 knowledge or consent. The same week, my
14 daughter was confronted by an unauthorized
15 adult who was allowed to board her school bus
16 by the same driver.

17 I have contacted the principals,
18 superintendent, school board, even the Arkansas
19 Department of Education in Little Rock, but no
20 resolution has been offered. These events show
21 a clear failure to protect and support my
22 children, especially those with documented
23 medical and developmental needs.

24 My family is also enrolled in the McKinney-
25 Vento Program, yet the support we received was

1 elective and dismissive. The district's
2 McKinney-Vento shows favoritism and made me
3 feel ashamed for asking for help, which goes
4 against the purpose and requirements of the
5 program.

6 I am asking for a formal response from the
7 district and a full internal investigation into
8 each incident and an assurance that policies
9 will be followed and staff will be held
10 accountable to ensure the safety and the
11 dignity of every student in this district.
12 Thank you.

13 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you.

14 MS. LUCAS-MODUCA: Good morning, everyone.
15 My name is Sonya Lucas-Moduca, and I'm a bus
16 driver for Blytheville for 16 years. I just
17 want to say that -- I'm kind of nervous -- but
18 anyway, I just want to say that as a bus
19 driver, I love the students. I don't know.
20 But anyway, I just thank everyone for accepting
21 me in this community as a great bus driver, and
22 I'm embarrassed, so embarrassed. This is a
23 great school district, and we are crying out
24 for help. I know as a bus driver, we're crying
25 out for help.

1 They have -- you know, since the new people
2 have been in, it's like we have went down as a
3 bus driver, you know. We try to stick
4 together, but at the same time -- we used to
5 make \$21 an hour driving, sitting. Now they
6 done took us from 21 to 12 as we sit, and I
7 don't think that's right, because we still have
8 a family to feed. And that's all I want to
9 say.

10 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you.

11 (Audience claps.)

12 MS. ROLLINS: The next three -- I'm not
13 sure I understand this first name, but Ms.
14 Leachman. Is it Leachman or Loachman? Sharon
15 Coburn and Bradley Ballard, can you come
16 forward, please?

17 MS. LEACHMAN: How you doing?

18 MS. ROLLINS: Please introduce yourself.

19 MS. LEACHMAN: My name is Meshala Leachman.
20 I'm here in Blytheville. I just moved from
21 Atlanta, Georgia, about a year ago. I enrolled
22 four children into the Blytheville School
23 District. Since I enrolled my kids into the
24 school district, I have also all four children
25 to have a 504 Behavior Act Plan.

1 My children have been denied their rights
2 under the 504 Behavior Plan because my kids are
3 repeatedly sent home, repeatedly sent home for
4 what they have written in their active plan.

5 I have contacted Ms. Walker. I contacted
6 Ms. Blankenship. I also contacted two school
7 counselors. I contacted Ms. Jackson. I
8 contacted the middle school, Ms. Bennett.

9 I had a daughter that was sat in a -- when
10 we first moved here, I had a daughter that was
11 sat in a -- they said it was a conflict
12 resolution. She was sat in a room with 25
13 students. 25 students to intimidate her. She
14 was being transferred to ALE. There was
15 students standing outside of my house fighting
16 my children.

17 And basically my main concern is that my
18 children have a 504 Plan. There are federal
19 plans. I'm also enrolled in the McKinney-Vento
20 Program. Ms. Miner has been nothing but help
21 to me. As I told Ms. Miner, I said, Ms. Miner,
22 it takes a team. When I get ready to contact
23 Ms. Walker or I need to contact somebody from
24 the school, Ms. Miner, she contacts them for
25 me. When she contacts them, if they haven't

1 contacted me back in a certain amount of time,
2 she reaches back out to them. Like I told her,
3 you only can do so much.

4 My thing and my problem is with Blytheville
5 School System, and I'm going to say this,
6 because I have behavioral problems, and I went
7 through Blytheville School System. They are
8 very uneducated. Half of the students that is
9 in here, which is my four students, have been
10 suspended numerous of times to where they had
11 an appointment with -- three of my students are
12 about to fail. How are they about to fail if
13 you-all say that out of 52 percent of the kids
14 that pass the high school test, that two of my
15 -- my two children was out of that 52 percent.

16 I never had these problems in Georgia. Now
17 that I have my kids in Blytheville School
18 District, now I'm at risk of me feeling that my
19 kids are going to fail. How are they going to
20 fail with active IEPs? How are they going to
21 fail with 504 Behavioral Plans? The plan
22 that's supposed to be reinstated every year but
23 have not been reinstated in this year.

24 Like I said, I have talked to Ms. Walker.
25 I've talked to Ms. Blankenship. I've called

1 principals. I have talked to staff members. I
2 have got the paperwork myself and emailed it
3 over to the school officials. I'm not
4 understanding why that either my kids has been
5 here just only four years, because I'm ready to
6 get them up out of this school system at a risk
7 of failing, and then also friends that my kids
8 have and counseled with have been kicked out of
9 school this year.

10 How are you going to get some students back
11 if you're kicking them out of school? Every
12 day you kick them out of school. I mean it's
13 proper protocol. If you're going to send my
14 child home from school, then I'm going to get a
15 phone call, not a resource officer bringing my
16 child home. What is a resource officer doing
17 taking my child home? Not only mine, there was
18 another lady that got up here and said she
19 wanted to hold accountability to the parents as
20 well. The parents, the mayor, the school
21 officials, the school board --

22 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you, ma'am.

23 MS. LEACHMAN: -- the teachers, every last
24 one of us --

25 MS. ROLLINS: Your time is up.

1 MS. LEACHMAN: -- should be held
2 accountable for when it comes to these
3 children. Ma'am, I'm sorry. I understand that
4 my time is up, and I hope that you please let
5 me say one more word, because when I came into
6 this school, when I came to the school board
7 and I came to everybody, I was treated as an
8 aggressor. I was approached by uniformed
9 officers, you know, when I came as a concerned
10 parent for my child.

11 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you.

12 MS. LEACHMAN: So and part of being in this
13 community, I hope that you listen to me,
14 because as you want our board to stand up and
15 us to listen to you-all and go into the office
16 and stuff like that, we should be your team --

17 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you.

18 MS. LEACHMAN: -- we all should be a team.
19 We be all standing there in judgment should be
20 a team with us as well. And I thank you, too.

21 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you.

22 (Audience claps.)

23 MR. BALLARD: Good morning. My name is
24 Bradley Ballard, and I was born and raised
25 right here in Blytheville. My family has lived

1 here for generations. And like so many others
2 in this room I've stayed because I believe in
3 this city. I believe in its potential, and
4 most of all I believe in its children.

5 But today I'm standing here not just with
6 belief but with urgency. This school district
7 is in crisis, and it's time for bold action.
8 And I'm asking you with full conviction to
9 dissolve the Blytheville School Board and take
10 control of this district before more damage is
11 done.

12 (Audience claps.)

13 MR. BALLARD: We're watching a system
14 collapse in real time. Test scores at rock
15 bottom, student morale is low, families are
16 leaving, but what's even worse is how our most
17 vulnerable children are being treated. If
18 Blytheville has -- if a child has special needs
19 in Blytheville, more often than not they're
20 pushed aside, sent home to learn --

21 (Audience claps.)

22 MR. BALLARD: -- and in isolation because
23 the district lacks the staff and frankly the
24 will to support them. This is not education;
25 this is abandonment. And it's doing real harm

1 to children who deserve every opportunity to
2 grow with their peers.

3 But it doesn't stop there. The leadership
4 here or lack thereof has created a toxic
5 environment. I've heard from employee who have
6 been talked down to, disrespected, and even
7 humiliated by board members.

8 Teachers are afraid to speak up. Vendors
9 and service providers have come here in good
10 faith to offer solutions only to be mocked,
11 dismissed by the people who think leadership
12 means domination and not collaboration.

13 And now I'm hearing the board president is
14 blaming Sheila Whitlow for the district's
15 failure to even secure a superintendent or an
16 interim superintendent. Let me be very clear.
17 This mess is not the fault of one woman. This
18 is the result of a board that is too prideful
19 to leave and too fractured to function. We
20 cannot keep pointing fingers while our children
21 fall through the cracks.

22 Today you have the power to stop this. You
23 can cut through the chaos and bring order,
24 accountability, and hope back to our schools.
25 This isn't about politics. It's about

1 protecting the next generation. Thank you.

2 Have a great day.

3 (Audience claps.)

4 MS. ROLLINS: The next three, Blake Karns,
5 Joe Coleman, and Wagular Jackson. Are any of
6 those people here?

7 WOMAN: Well, excuse me, my name is not on
8 there, but I would like to speak.

9 MS. ROLLINS: You're not on the list.

10 MS. SMITH: She's got to go by her list.

11 WOMAN: Oh, you've got to go by your list?

12 MS. SMITH: Yes.

13 MS. ROLLINS: Yes.

14 WOMAN: Okay. My name is not on there, but
15 I would like to speak.

16 MS. JACKSON: Can she put her name on
17 there?

18 WOMAN: No, I didn't get my name on it. I
19 didn't know there was a --

20 MS. JACKSON: Can she put her name on
21 there?

22 WOMAN: No, I can't do --

23 MS. ROLLINS: The board says no.

24 WOMAN: The board said no.

25 MS. JACKSON: That's why we're here today.

1 MS. ROLLINS: Please introduce yourself.

2 MS. JACKSON: My name is Juanita Jackson.
3 I want to talk about proactive and reactive. I
4 want to commend the State for coming in and
5 being reactive in the way that you are being
6 reactive, I commend you, because in every
7 system, we should have a check and balance.
8 They'll find it here.

9 The second thing is, follow the money. I
10 was always told, with a failing business,
11 homicide, and a failing city, follow the money.
12 So I'm glad to see that the State has
13 independently come in to follow the money.

14 Now we have to be proactive. We have Dr.
15 Perkins who was here doing an excellent job.
16 She had a plan. She was proactive. She was
17 dismissed by the same board that now you want
18 to dismiss. Let's save some money. My
19 suggestion is, let's bring Dr. Perkins back,
20 get her to drop that lawsuit, save us some
21 money. Reimburse her for her attorneys' fees
22 and back pay. Save us some money, because the
23 numbers is what counts. And give her a written
24 reprimand. Because she was accused of
25 misappropriating the money, but look what we

1 find when we follow the money. Because
2 everybody was doing what they were doing, you
3 know. Nobody was getting a check and balance
4 system.

5 As you heard the new -- I guess you've got
6 a new accounting director for the school board.
7 But listen, what it all boils down to, I
8 remember the song Whitney Houston sang, I
9 believe the children are our future. Teach
10 them well to lead the way. We're not doing
11 that here, and we've got to get back to doing
12 that.

13 So again, I commend the State for coming in
14 and taking over, but we need to save some
15 money, because that's -- you know, the school
16 is a business. The kids are our product. They
17 are our future. That means when these board
18 members leave, they step up. You know, if
19 they're not equipped now, we're just going to
20 repeat history. Save the money.

21 Let's get back to the plan of being
22 proactive and not reactive. Let's get Dr.
23 Perkins back in here and try to come to some
24 kind of resolution, because she has a plan.
25 She's qualified.

1 MS. ROLLINS: Thank you. We appreciate it.

2 (Audience claps.)

3 MS. ROLLINS: Okay. That is the last of
4 our comment period. Ms. Smith?

5 MS. SMITH: Again, we recommend and ask
6 that this Board classify this district in need
7 of Level 5 - Intensive Support.

8 MS. ROLLINS: At this time, Board, is there
9 any other discussion, comments?

10 DR. ARNOLD: Would it be possible to put
11 the slide back up with the three
12 recommendations on the screen? If not, we'll
13 just go with the oral version.

14 MS. SMITH: You might have it in your Board
15 packets on the very last.

16 DR. ARNOLD: Thank you.

17 MS. SMITH: Are you signed up?

18 MS. LEWIS: Yes.

19 MS. SMITH: Carlonie Lewis signed up. You
20 have it? No? No? We've got it right here.
21 Can she go?

22 MS. ROLLINS: Yes.

23 MS. SMITH: Ms. Lewis?

24 MS. LEWIS: Yes. Hi. I am -- my name is
25 Carlonie Lewis. I am a former board member for

1 eight years. And I just want to know -- let
2 everybody know the why we were here from the
3 first year, from the year before, because all
4 of us had gotten together, got to the board,
5 told the board, reached out, we needed help.
6 We needed help.

7 We seen things that was going on that
8 wasn't right, and we asked for help. That's
9 the reason why you-all made it down the year
10 before. Okay. That incentive we received was
11 great, thanks to the teachers and everybody
12 else, but one of the reasons was it was under
13 Dr. Perkins' hat. She did that. She was doing
14 what we asked her to do. She was promoting,
15 doing everything that we asked her to do. It
16 was the board that stuff became personal. Yes,
17 I got off the board, that I felt like I could
18 help my students better, my parents better, my
19 teachers better. And that's what I do every
20 day.

21 But I want to make another statement with
22 our students. Had anybody asked me, sit down
23 and ask our students what is wrong. What do
24 you need to be educated? I have May 1st, it
25 was so shocking, and I can share my stories

1 with some of you that we got from the students.
2 My students is the number one priority to me.

3 We have smart kids. They want to be
4 educated, and we're -- she said product. I
5 don't look at my kids being a product. I look
6 at them being our future, because they are our
7 future. They just need help. Either if it's a
8 parent -- I remember coming to school. I
9 graduated '84. If it wasn't our parents, guess
10 what, it was our teachers. They were on us.
11 They were making sure we got what we needed to
12 go forward.

13 So I'm asking now, the decisions that you
14 make, I noticed that when you did your
15 takeovers, I've read up on all of them, that
16 you did resolve the board, you suspended, you
17 did whatever you had to do. Please do the same
18 so we can start all over and start fresh,
19 because we need it here at Blytheville School
20 District. Thank you.

21 (Audience claps.)

22 MS. SMITH: So Board, so the first action
23 in the request would be to classify in need of
24 Level 5 - Intensive Support. If the Board
25 chooses to do that, then after that, then I

1 would ask for a second motion with the other
2 two recommendations up there, to remove the
3 authority of the local board and authorize the
4 Commissioner to assume all authority, and then
5 also direct the Commissioner to appoint a
6 superintendent and pursue the possibility of a
7 transformation contract. So that would be two
8 motions that we're requesting today.

9 DR. ARNOLD: I would move that we classify
10 the Blytheville School District in need of
11 Level 5 - Intensive Support.

12 MS. WOODS: Second.

13 MS. ROLLINS: Dr. Arnold made the motion.
14 There was a second by Adrienne Woods. Is there
15 any further discussion? I believe we should do
16 a roll call vote, Secretary.

17 MS. ROLLINS: Ms. Keener?

18 MS. KEENER: Yes.

19 MS. ROLLINS: Ms. Hunter?

20 MS. HUNTER: Yes.

21 MS. ROLLINS: Mr. Henderson?

22 MR. HENDERSON: Before I make my call, I
23 just want to say that these decisions are
24 tough, especially tough when you're in your
25 hometown. But I made an oath, and also I made

1 a promise to my mom and the stakeholders. Yes.

2 MS. ROLLINS: Dr. Arnold?

3 DR. ARNOLD: Yes.

4 MS. ROLLINS: Ms. Woods?

5 MS. WOODS: Yes.

6 MS. ROLLINS: Ms. Moore -- Dr. Moore?

7 DR. MOORE: Yes.

8 MS. ROLLINS: That's, I think, unanimous on
9 that motion.

10 MS. SMITH: Again, the second request would
11 be to remove the local -- remove the authority
12 of the local board and authorize the
13 Commissioner to assume all authority of the
14 local district board of directors and to direct
15 the Commissioner of Education to appoint a
16 superintendent and to pursue the possibility of
17 a transformation contract. So that's our
18 recommendation.

19 MS. HUNTER: So moved. Do I need to read
20 the entire --

21 MS. SMITH: Yeah, you --

22 MS. HUNTER: -- motion?

23 MS. SMITH: Yeah.

24 MS. HUNTER: Okay. So I make a motion to
25 remove authority of the local board and

1 authorize the Commissioner to assume the
2 authority of the local district board of
3 directors and to direct the Commissioner of
4 education to appoint a superintendent and to
5 pursue the possibility of a transformation
6 contract.

7 MS. ROLLINS: Motion by Ms. Hunter. Do we
8 have a second?

9 MS. KEENER: Second.

10 MS. ROLLINS: Second by Leigh Keener. All
11 those in favor, say aye.

12 MS. WOODS: Aye.

13 DR. ARNOLD: Aye.

14 MR. HENDERSON: Aye.

15 MS. HUNTER: Aye.

16 MS. KEENER: Aye.

17 DR. MOORE: Aye.

18 MS. ROLLINS: Any more discussion? Okay.
19 We'll do a roll call vote again. I'm sorry.
20 Ms. Woods?

21 MS. WOODS: Yes.

22 MS. ROLLINS: Dr. Arnold?

23 DR. ARNOLD: Yes.

24 MS. ROLLINS: Mr. Henderson?

25 MR. HENDERSON: Yes.

1 MS. ROLLINS: Ms. Hunter?

2 MS. HUNTER: Yes.

3 MS. ROLLINS: Ms. Keener?

4 MS. KEENER: Yes.

5 MS. ROLLINS: Dr. Moore?

6 DR. MOORE: Yes.

7 MS. SMITH: Thank you.

8 (Audience claps.)

9 MS. ROLLINS: We really appreciate all of
10 you being here. I know this is a very
11 difficult and emotional day, but I do believe
12 that the community and the children will
13 benefit from this. The meeting is adjourned.
14 Thank you.

15
16 (Hearing concluded at 11:27 a.m.)

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C E R T I F I C A T E

STATE OF ARKANSAS)
) ss
COUNTY OF SHARP)

I, Melanie Heath, Certified Court Reporter #870, a notary public in and for the aforesaid county and state, do hereby certify that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings given to the best of my understanding and ability.

I FURTHER CERTIFY that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which this proceeding was taken; and, further, that I am not a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially interested, or otherwise, in the outcome of this action; and that I have no contract with the parties, attorneys, or persons with an interest in the action that affects or has a substantial tendency to affect impartiality, that requires me to relinquish control of an original transcript or copies of the transcript before it is certified and delivered to the custodial attorney, or that requires me to provide any service not made available to all parties to the action.

WITNESS MY HAND AND SEAL this 20th day of June,
2025.



Melanie Heath

Melanie Heath, CCR
Certified Court Reporter
and Notary Public
State Certificate No. 870

My Notary Expires:
November 18, 2032

