



# Arkansas Department of Education

*Division of Elementary and Secondary Education*

Jacob Oliva, Secretary

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## **State Board of Education Returns Lee County School District to Local Control; Approves Final Rules for Education Freedom Account Program**

**MARIANNA, Ark.** – At its monthly meeting on Thursday, the State Board of Education voted to release the Lee County School District from state authority, returning governance to the local school board. The decision marks a significant milestone in the district’s multi-year effort to address accreditation violations and improve academic and fiscal performance.

In March 2019, the State Board of Education found Lee County School District in probationary violation of the Rules Governing the Standards for Accreditation. Based on the recommendation of the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), the district was placed under state authority and began an intensive improvement process.

During this period, Lee County was designated both a district in Fiscal Distress and a district in Need of Level 5–Intensive Support. In 2024, the district successfully exited Fiscal Distress. Under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Michael Stone and with the support of an appointed advisory board, the district has made measurable academic gains, improving its letter grade from an F to a D.

The Arkansas LEARNS Act has played a key role in supporting districts like Lee County. All D- and F-rated districts receive high-impact tutoring and literacy coaching to ensure students are reading and learning at or above grade level. Statewide, more than 73,000 hours of additional training have been delivered to teachers in the lowest-performing schools, serving 45,000 students. Combined with the state’s oversight to ensure strict implementation of grade-level expectations and learning standards, Lee County now stands on a stronger foundation for continued progress.

“Lee County has proven to the Board that the process of state authority in extreme circumstances can save a district, and in turn, save an entire community by ensuring that every single student, no matter their zip code, is reading at grade level in early years and prepared to either enlist, enroll, or employ in later years,” **said Deputy Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education Stacy Smith.** “I’ve witnessed the work Lee County has put into saving their schools for the last five years, and since LEARNS was enacted, that effort has only been strengthened. There is more work

to be done, but the district deserves to be celebrated for the foundation that's been laid, and with the present mindset, it only goes up from here.”

“This Department of Education works overtime to go into communities where the school system has been neglected for a really long time,” **said State Board member Jeff Wood.** “They correct the course, and they point the [district] in the right direction. It is clear here in Lee County that has occurred – that the wrong direction has been corrected.”

### **Board Approves Final Rules for the Education Freedom Account Program**

Also at the April meeting, the Board approved the final version of the rules governing the Education Freedom Account (EFA) Program. The public comment period for the original rules closed in December 2025, and the comment period for the amended rules closed April 7. Key amendments include:

- **Informs Parents Upfront which Items are Prohibited:** A list of non-qualifying expenses will be established.
- **Standardizes Reviews based on Expense Type:** Expenses that are not core educational expenses will be reviewed individually and will require written approval.
- **Provides written Determinations for Denied Expenses:** Any reviews of denied expenses will be conducted by a supervisor with a final review by the Assistant Commissioner.
- **Provides Technology Cap:** \$1,000 per participant for devices per year.
- **Prevents Duplicative Technology Purchases:** ADE must consider whether the same or similar technological devices were purchased in prior years to protect against duplicate spending.
- **Ensures Maximum Amounts of Funds are Available for Students:** The previous cap of \$20,000 was lowered to the prior year's EFA amount or \$8,500.
- **Clarifies Allowable Expenses under the “Extra Curricular” Category:** Prohibits spending on sports that limit participation and equipment.

“Arkansas ranks third in the nation in education freedom through our Education Freedom Account (EFA) program from the LEARNS Act,” **said Secretary of Education Jacob Oliva.** The EFA program is critical because it puts students—not systems—at the center of every decision. It gives Arkansas families meaningful options and the ability to choose the learning environment that best fits their child, while maintaining strong rules and responsible stewardship to ensure every dollar is to support a student's education. When parents have real agency and transparency, students win—and that is exactly what this program is delivering across our state.”

For more information on the EFA Program or to apply for an EFA, visit <https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/offices/office-of-school-choice-and-parent-empowerment/education-freedom-accounts>.

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