

## The Poore Page

December 2016 – January 2017

I hope that you are having a great start to the second semester. I would like to use this *Poore Page* in a slightly different manner than previous versions. This newsletter will actually coincide with a press conference that we will host as you are receiving this communication. In keeping with our commitment to transparency, it is our goal to have all stakeholders receive information in a timely manner, share where we stand financially, review how we got to this point, provide the recommendations that we are making for school utilization and budget, build capacity, and share next steps.

I truly appreciate the input and engagement of the community over the past several months related to budget and utilization. We have received input a number of ways from a variety of stakeholders: the LRSD website, social media, community meetings, face-to-face communication, phone calls, emails and letters. These forms of engagement will continue. However, I think it is important to understand our current situation.

Based on the 2014 settlement agreement, the District will lose the final \$37 million payment in desegregation funds after the 2017-18 school year. These funds have historically been a part of our budget. By terms of the settlement agreement, in that final year, the money must only be used for capital improvement projects. In anticipation of the impending loss of these funds, the District implemented significant budget cuts beginning in 2015 which were primarily borne by employees. Staff received a reduction in contract days and in the amount the district contributed toward health benefits. There were also staff reductions. Attached you will find information explaining those reductions and how they have impacted our current financial picture. However, in order for our district to remain fiscally solvent, we must reduce our budget by another \$11 million this coming year.

We are charged with being good stewards of taxpayer money, and demonstrating strong fiscal management to ensure the financial stability of the district's future, while also prioritizing resources for the academic improvement of our students. Resource management also impacts our operations and facilities, and is critical to avoid fiscal distress.

As we consider the best way to reduce our budget by the additional \$11 million dollars, we must also consider how to invest in our infrastructure to avoid "kicking the can down the road." It is our hope to avoid additional modification of contract days and benefits, and prevent privatization of services.

One very significant part of our proposed budget reduction is shaped by school utilization. This is not an easy topic as staff along with students and their parents take great pride in developing school cultures. They are family. Closures and change are difficult. We also realize that choice is a reality parents value. We must create learning environments that attract families. We must also face the reality that we have trends that have led to the decision to reduce the number of buildings we will use. The attached Utilization document reflects a 15-year decline in student population. Additionally, you can see important data for the past three years in our district that provides enrollment numbers as well as the condition of our facilities. A statistic that is of particular concern is the **2,300 vacant seats** at our

elementary level – this does not include the portable buildings located at many of our elementary schools. Consequently, we are making the following recommendations:

<b><u>School</u></b>	<b><u>Recommendation</u></b>
<b>Franklin</b>	<b>Closure</b> Students will attend Stephens Plans for repurposing will be developed with community input
<b>Wilson</b>	<b>Closure</b> Students will attend, Western Hills, Romine, Bale, and Brady Repurposed with Hamilton ALE program relocating to Wilson
<b>Woodruff</b>	<b>Closure</b> Pre-K program students will attend Carver and Martin Luther King Plans for repurposing will be developed with community input
<b>Hamilton Learning Academy</b>	<b>Repurposed</b> – potentially reconfigured to a K-8 campus, incorporating Bale Elementary Future Hamilton ALE students moved to Wilson’s campus
<b>Carver Magnet</b>	<b>Remove from closure list</b> Enhance magnet program at Carver as part of district-wide initiative to support and improve to existing magnet programs

Again, we did not reach these decisions lightly, and as part of our commitment to parents and staff, we informed them that we would return to campuses that were recommended for closure and allow them to share additional feedback. Those meetings will occur Wednesday and Thursday, January 18 and 19, 5:30-7:30 p.m. at Franklin and Wilson, respectively. The recommendations will then be submitted to the Commissioner of Education for final approval.

Should the recommendations be approved, Dr. Sadie Mitchell, associate superintendent for elementary schools, will be entrusted to lead the effort as a Transition Team Coordinator. In that role, she and others will work with students and parents to ensure that the process goes as smoothly as possible. Dr. Mitchell will also work with LRSD’s Human Resources Department and the Little Rock Education Association to handle the staff moves associated with these transitions.

If approved by the Commissioner, in February we will ask for additional community input and submissions of proposed business plans for repurposing buildings at impacted school sites. In March, the community will be allowed to review and make recommendations on the options that have been presented.

While these are difficult decisions, they also present us with the opportunity to control our future. We must lead, communicate, recruit, and teach like never before. If there is one thing I know at this time, the employees of the Little Rock School District, are talented, caring and motivated, and will rise to the challenge. The work that we continue to do together is also an opportunity for us to regain local control. We should all take pride in the following and continue the work in these critical areas:

**Achieve Team** - I have been inspired and pleased by the progress of school and central office leaders all working together to improve achievement and climates at “academically distressed,” “priority” and selected “focus” schools.

**Literacy Council** - Although this approach is just getting underway, I believe the work of our teachers, school teams, and central office staff combined with concerned parents, and higher education leaders will guide us to improved delivery and a more effective use of resources to impact reading and writing.

**Special Education Task Force** - This approach also is just beginning; but the first meeting was very positive and the communication, coupled with a deliberate review of how we serve students with special needs, has great promise.

**Career Advisory and Development-Enhancement of Career Programs**- We are developing and enhancing our support for all students to access career strands that will support their future and our community's workforce needs. Strands are being developed with business leaders and higher education experts in the areas of medicine, technology, construction trade, aviation, and teaching.

**Project-Based Learning** - All of our Pre-K - 12 environments need to move toward a more complete delivery in this area. Specific emphasis is currently placed in our middle schools so that each school will have business partners that can provide real world applications for students.

**Bright Futures** - This new effort was kicked off last week. It is designed to have student needs that can't be handled at a specific school site supported by the community through a unique partnership between the City of Little Rock, Goodwill Industries, and LRSD.

**Athletic Think Tank** - We must not forget that extracurricular programs are critical for the development of our students as well as a tool to help attract and retain students. This month a group of leaders will begin exploring ways to enhance and support our delivery in athletics.

**Magnet Programs** - As mentioned earlier, we must enhance choice to meet parent expectations and serve the diversity of student needs. This spring we will establish a working committee to enhance and improve our magnet approaches.

Finally, one of the most important things we can do to move forward is to seek support from the community by asking for an extension of one of our bond issues. This will require a public vote and would allow us to extend our bond payment for an additional 14-years, generating \$160 million, which would be reinvested in our current facilities, as well as used to build the promised high school in southwest Little Rock. This would not be a "new tax" that would increase the mills currently approved by the community; this would simply be an extension much like homeowners use when refinancing. The additional resources would be allocated in the following key areas:

- A portion of the funds would be used to build a high school in southwest Little Rock  
Students from JA Fair and McClellan would attend the new high school  
Students and staff are already involved with planning for this site  
Resources from this extension would also be used to revitalize and repurpose McClellan
- Enhancing energy savings devices that will also impact lighting, windows, heat and air  
This utilization of funds will also create a return on our investment with improved energy savings
- Completion of other projects from the LRSD board-commissioned Fanning-Howey study  
The 2014 study concluded that LRSD actually had over \$300 million facility needs

As you read this entire Poore Page, I am sure you will have a mixture of thoughts. I hope that you can clearly see we are not backing down and we are not going to hang our heads, but we are going to strive to serve every student in an exceptional manner. I have seen significant improvement throughout this first semester, and it is my expectation that we will continue to improve. We began this year with the theme, "The Power of Us." I still love this message and remain optimistic about what we will accomplish together and in partnership with our community. I thank school leaders and families for their continued support as we advocate for the best outcomes for our students. I am grateful for the participation in the thoughtful and thorough process by which we have addressed our challenges, and am heartened by the commitment to chart the future of our schools. I am equally proud to be a part of this district and look forward to our continued work together.