

TRANSITIONING FROM STATE CONTROL, ADAPTING TO NEW LEARNING, AND INTRODUCING A FIRST-IN-A-HALF-CENTURY HIGH SCHOOL

Superintendent Mike Poore on Transforming Little Rock School District



Like many school districts around the state, Little Rock's has adapted to pandemic challenges with dexterity by delivering education, dispensing technology tools, food, and other support to its 23,000 students since their March 13 school closings.

Unique to the Little Rock School District, however, is another coinciding shock to the system. Under control of the state Board of Education since 2015, the district this year is rounding the final turn in its transition to local control. This fall, a newly elected school board will, with some limitations, take the helm from the state.



Mike Poore, Superintendent of the Little Rock School District

Meanwhile, the district opened doors in August to its first newly built high school in more than a half-century, Little Rock Southwest High. Its 400,000 square feet of state-of-the-art academic and athletic facilities will not only serve some 2,200 students but also serve as a symbol of a transforming district.

Superintendent Mike Poore, appointed by the state to the position in June 2016, is architect of the makeover. He is a veteran of similar circumstances, having led a district in Colorado off the state's academic watch list in only two years. Before taking the job in the state's capital, he was superintendent of the Bentonville School District.

Poore offers insights on moving out from under state control, solutions the district has found to COVID-19-related challenges, and the financial maneuvering it took to make Southwest High and other improvements throughout the district a reality.

What lessons can you impart from the process of transitioning the district from state control?

I really think we have created a partnership [with the State Department of Education]. It is not them telling us what to do. It is us all together at the table figuring out what strategies we want to use to impact achievement, to impact professionalism, and to use our staff in the most

thorough way. The past two years have been collaborative, and the focus is on supporting staff so that they can impact student achievement.

The other thing I will give the state a great deal of credit for is exit criteria for the Little Rock School District. The exit criteria no longer says here is what you have to do with test scores, or you have to move this many schools out of "F" category, or you have to have this percentage of kids be proficient. Instead, it says here are four foundational pieces that you have to show you are doing and doing well, and if you are doing that then we are going to give you back control.

What are the exit criteria for getting out of state control?

What I like is that these foundational pieces are not controversial. This is just what good, scientific, research-based practice is in education. Such as, are you handling literacy? Are you doing the Science of Reading? Are you doing it or not? And there are all sorts of checkpoints, such as training elements, the resources purchased, what we have done to support learners who are struggling ...

The second part asks us what are we doing to create a collaborative environment in the district. Have you moved forward on professional learning communities or high-reliability schools? How have you made that part of your culture? How can you prove that? We were on our way already to doing that when I first arrived, but now we are so much better at it.

The third piece is a monitoring piece that deals with not only the evaluation of staff and the monitoring of instruction but making sure to capture what is great practice. That helps us when something is not going right that we can offer the right professional development.

The final piece is utilizing the resources provided by the community in an effective way. We had systems such as the financial system and the student information system that did not tie into the state's. There were a lot of things that Little Rock did independently of everyone else, so we had to get all of our systems in place to make sure that you manage and utilize resources, and so you can partner more effectively with the state.

The district is offering both in-school and virtual learning options this fall, and so far nearly half have opted for the online option. How will the virtual learning taking place this school year compare to the virtual learning from the end of last school year?

We basically survived in the spring—and that is just being real—but the work we have done since then is very encouraging. We are shifting from a product that was basically engineered from a learning management system where the kids interacted with the system and then the teacher sometimes supported them as they needed it. Parents had to be very hands-on to support their student, and it became time-intensive for them. The new learning management system, called Schoology, puts the teacher back in the forefront of delivering the instruction and also utilizes different tools such as Google [programs].

We have also done really good work toward really understanding what the essential standards are and where our kids are at this given time. From March 13 to the end of the school year, kids stayed stagnant or may have lost ground. So we had to make sure that we understood where kids are going to be and how we were going to get them back onto grade-level work. A group of educators did some incredible work in June to revise what those standards look like and set up what the pacing will be as we begin the school year to really move kids forward so that they get that growth in the academic year.

What are some of the solutions the district has found for the more daunting operational or safety challenges caused by the pandemic?

One of the things that I am proud of that we did last spring was getting, when it was all said and done, 13,000 devices in kids' hands. We told our families if you need a device, we are going to get it to you. With our learning management product, we could track if a kid was going on and, if not, find if it was not necessarily just a kid problem. It could be a function of not having a hotspot or not having a level of support at the home to make sure that it is happening.

How has the district invested in technology to ensure students' access to virtual learning?

We have had to purchase additional devices for kids, probably another 2,500 Chromebooks since the pandemic. Also,

we thought we were behind in our tools for our educators. We needed to get away from desktops and provide teachers laptops so that they can be mobile, either working from home or working in the classroom. We bought more than 2,000 laptops and docking stations to have teachers better prepared to not only deliver virtual instruction but really be able to do instruction in the classroom that can be blended with resources that can be accessed online.

We also ordered 2,500 hotspots to complement the 500 that the state announced [in early August], giving Little Rock School District 3,000. We are also partnering with the City and the Chamber of Commerce to find additional hotspots so that families have multiple options if they run into any kind of broadband or data issues.

The district has been able to save on these new broadband costs by banding together with other districts. How did this come about?

The person who initiated this conversation was the new superintendent in Fort Smith, Dr. Doug Brubaker. They were a bit ahead of the game to realize that if we all work together, we can make [the providers] give us a better price. We have purchase power, and the companies bid against each other.

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So we went from a pricepoint in the spring of about \$45 to \$50 for a hotspot, to now we have dropped it down to \$15 to \$20. And it is a credit to those providers, too, for working with us.

Congratulations on the opening of Southwest High, an achievement that certainly faced challenges. You had initially hoped to pay for it with a millage extension in 2017, but voters said no. Then what did you do?

Well, we got whooped, and I think it went back to the fact that there was not local control. It was still a raw emotion. And there was still probably a trust factor with me just coming in. But that did not take away the need for this facility.

So, with help from Stephens Public Finance, we went to a second lien option, which means that you get approval from the state and borrow less money. So instead of getting \$170 million to \$175 million, we get \$90 million. That allowed us to move forward. It allowed us to show the community that when you entrust us with those kinds of resources, we are going to use them well.

The district has made improvements at other schools as well.

Everybody points to Southwest, which is great, but elsewhere in the district we have also done wonderful things. We put in new security systems. We put in new lights. We put in new HVAC systems. We had roofs that got replaced. Of our 13 middle schools and high schools gyms, not one of them had air conditioning, and every one does now. We improved our athletic fields to put in all-weather turf and have real tracks. The students needed a better environment. The projects that resulted from our second lien loan have impacted teaching environments, improved work conditions, created safer campuses, and helped us reinvigorate our athletic programs. All of those efforts will create better performance and allow us to compete for families in this world of choice.

If I had a final note to share with all, collaboration is needed more now than ever. It starts with our district staff. Classified employees, teaching staff and administrators all must work together to create student success. This has been essential under state control and it is even more important as we work through the pandemic. Even if we do that perfectly, it is not enough. We need partners from our community and our fellow school districts to thrive and survive in these challenging times. I am honored to have the opportunity to work with a great staff at LRSD, be tied to amazing leaders in our state and to have a community that is all in to make a difference for our kids.