

Instructional LEADER

Best Learning Practices

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IN THIS ISSUE

**A Shifting Landscape:
Addressing the Growing
Mental Health and
Behavioral Needs of
Students**

Page 2

**Locking in on Literacy: How
4DX Transforms Tier 1
Instruction**

Page 9

**The Identity Crisis in
Secondary Schools**

Page 11

**Understanding Grant Types
and Funding Sources**

Page 14

**Investing in Excellence:
How Our District Built a
Mentoring Program That
Transforms Teacher Practice**

Page 16

**Behavioral Growth, Building
by Building: A Districtwide
Commitment to Support and
Success**

Page 6



What is the Instructional **LEADER**?

- Quarterly publication of the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators (AAEA)
- Designed for lead administrators to share successful practices
- Published to raise the level of awareness and support for Association members and educators on issues affecting education in Arkansas
- Contains state and national information pertaining to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and accountability issues
- Articles are contributed by state instructional leaders (superintendents, principals, central office administrators, graduate students pursuing administrative degrees, and lead teachers)
- May also contain summaries of state and national articles of interest and current research information



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A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE: ADDRESSING THE GROWING MENTAL HEALTH AND BEHAVIORAL NEEDS OF STUDENTS

Contributor: Amber Likes, Director of Special Services, Harrison School District



The needs of special education students in Arkansas are undergoing a significant transformation, marked by a **palpable increase in complex behavioral and mental health challenges**. This trend is challenging traditional special education models and requiring schools across the state to rapidly adapt their systems of support. Arkansas, which has struggled with high rates of childhood mental, behavioral, or developmental disorders, is now prioritizing comprehensive, multi-tiered approaches to address the whole child.

The Rise in Behavioral and Mental Health Demands

Recent data and reports have highlighted the urgency of the situation. The mental health crisis among children and adolescents has been on the rise for years, with Arkansas experiencing the third-highest increase in **childhood depression and anxiety** between 2016 and 2020. For students with disabilities, these issues often manifest as challenging behaviors in the classroom, placing immense pressure on educators and staff.

Key factors contributing to this shift include:

- **Exacerbation by the Pandemic:** School closures and isolation severely disrupted routines and support systems, leading to increased anxiety, trauma, and behavioral issues.
- **Under-Identification of Needs:** Historically, students with Serious Emotional Disturbance

(SED) have been under-identified in Arkansas, meaning many students with difficult behaviors did not receive the specialized services they needed early on.

- **Intersection of Needs:** Behavioral issues are often intertwined with undiagnosed or unaddressed mental health conditions, developmental delays, or trauma. This complexity requires a level of support that goes beyond standard academic accommodations.

Arkansas Schools Are Adapting and Innovating

In response to the growing demand, Arkansas schools and the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) are implementing proactive, tiered intervention strategies focusing on social-emotional and mental well-being. The goal is to create a continuum of academic, behavioral, and mental health support for all students.

1. Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

A core strategy is the development and scaling of **Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)**, particularly through the state-led **AR THRIVE** initiative. This collaborative project aims to:

- **Increase Coordination:** Better align efforts that support behavior and mental health services across the school and community.



continued

- **Build Capacity:** Train school staff to develop and sustain evidence-based MTSS that include positive behavioral supports and interventions.

By implementing MTSS, schools can provide universal support (Tier 1) for all students, targeted interventions (Tier 2) for those at-risk, and intensive, individualized support (Tier 3) for students with the most severe needs.

2. Bolstering Mental Health Services

Recognizing that schools are on the front lines, districts are actively increasing the availability and accessibility of mental health services:

- **Hiring and Collaboration:** Schools are hiring more **mental health professionals**, including counselors and social workers, and forging partnerships with **community therapy clinics**. These collaborations enable on-site or virtual therapy during the school day, reducing transportation and access barriers for families.
- **Trauma-Informed Practices:** Schools are adopting **trauma-informed practices** to better understand and respond to challenging student behaviors as potential symptoms of trauma or underlying distress rather than simple defiance.
- **Early Intervention:** Programs are being implemented that focus on young children in early childhood education settings, providing consultation and technical assistance to address challenging behaviors before they lead to long-term negative outcomes like expulsion.

3. Integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

There is an increased focus on integrating SEL into the curriculum for all students, including those with disabilities. SEL encompasses skills like self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and

relationship skills. For special education students, strengthening these skills can lead to:

- **Improved Self-Regulation:** Helping students manage intense emotions and stress.
- **Enhanced Social Inclusion:** Building positive relationships with peers and reducing isolation.

By adopting comprehensive and collaborative approaches, Arkansas schools are striving to ensure that special education students receive a truly **Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)** that meets their unique and increasingly complex needs—addressing both the academic and the essential emotional components of their well-being.

Arkansas Special Education: Data and Adaptive Strategies

The needs of special education students in Arkansas are becoming increasingly complex, driven by a national surge in behavioral and mental health challenges. This is reflected in Arkansas-specific data and is compelling school districts to innovate their service delivery models.

Data on Diagnosed Mental Health Conditions in Arkansas Children

Data confirms that Arkansas's children have a high prevalence of mental health concerns, which significantly impacts their ability to succeed in the traditional school environment.

- **Growing Complexity:** Students with diagnosed conditions are far more likely to miss significant days of school for health reasons (5 times more likely) and have parents contacted by the school about problems (4 times more likely) compared to their non-diagnosed peers. This correlation reinforces the need for integrated school-based support.

Condition	Prevalence in Arkansas Children (Ages 3-17)	US Rank (2022-2023 Estimate)	Impact on School Engagement
Diagnosed Mental Health Conditions (ADHD, Depression, Anxiety, Behavior Problems)	24.8%	Among the highest in the nation	Adolescents with a diagnosis were 3 times more likely to be disengaged from school.
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	3.0% of 8-year-olds in 2022	Comparable to the national average (3.2%)	Requires highly specialized, individualized educational and therapeutic support.

continued



- **Early Intervention:** The increase in ASD identification among 4-year-olds (from 1.6% in 2020 to 2.5% in 2022) is particularly notable, suggesting improved early diagnosis and the need for robust services to support these children before they enter kindergarten.

Arkansas Special Education: Adapting Service Delivery Models

In response to these intense needs, the Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is guiding districts to utilize the **full continuum of services** required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), moving beyond traditional resource and inclusion models.

1. Abbreviated Day Programming (Shortened School Day)

The practice of a shortened school day is a highly restrictive measure that Arkansas districts are advised to use only as a **temporary, individualized measure of last resort**, as it can constitute a denial of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).

- **Legal Mandate:** A shortened school day must be based on the student's **specific, individualized disability-related needs** and cannot be used for administrative convenience (like staffing shortages or bus schedules).
- **Behavioral Challenges:** If a student's shortened day is due to behavior, the IEP team must have first developed a comprehensive **Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)** and **Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP)**.
- **Transition Plan:** The IEP must include a **systematic, data-driven plan** to gradually increase the student's time in school and monitor their progress, with the goal of returning to a full day as quickly as possible. IEP teams are required to reconvene frequently (e.g., every 30-60 days) to review this progress.

2. Behavior Classrooms and Day Treatment Programs

To provide a safe, structured, and intensive therapeutic environment, many Arkansas districts are utilizing and expanding specialized behavioral settings:

- **Behavior Classrooms (Self-Contained):** These classrooms are designed for students whose severe behavioral and emotional needs cannot be managed in general education or resource settings. They typically feature:
 - **Low student-to-staff ratios** for immediate behavior coaching and crisis intervention.
 - A highly structured curriculum that integrates Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).
 - A focus on teaching replacement behaviors and social-emotional skills to facilitate a transition back to a less restrictive environment.
- **School-Based Day Treatment:** This is the most intensive non-residential option. It is a highly coordinated effort that **integrates clinical mental health services** with the educational program. Components often include:
 - Small classes with individualized instruction.
 - On-site mental health counseling, crisis intervention, and family services.
 - A multidisciplinary team (teachers, mental health professionals, social workers) working together on the student's IEP and treatment plan.

Several Arkansas schools have responded to this need by creating their own behavior classrooms or school based day treatment programs. Currently, Rogers, Harrison, Bryant, Fayetteville, and Mountain Home School Districts are all providing these innovative programs to provide behavioral and mental health supports while ensuring students' needs are being met and while providing their Free Appropriate Public Education. Although each program varies among districts, they all provide new opportunities to address this ever increasing need for behavioral, social, and mental health needs in students.

Harrison School District provides the Pathways program which is a school based day treatment program. Students receive small group individualized instruction with special education teachers and paraprofessionals. The district partners with Chenal Family Therapy to provide mental health services onsite. There's a full time Qualified Behavioral Health Provider as well as Licensed Therapist who provide therapy and crisis intervention. Family

continued



sessions and services are also provided through the program. The district also employs full-time School Based Mental Health Therapists who support the program as well. The multidisciplinary team works together to meet the needs of the students outlined in their IEP and treatment plans. When students meet their behavior, academic, and mental health goals, they transition back to their previous school programming. This program has been very successful because it truly focuses on the whole child and has adapted to the current needs of students instead of the previous traditional special education services of the past.

3. Virtual and Alternative Instructional Options

While IDEA strongly prioritizes in-person services in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), districts are using virtual and blended options to meet certain needs, particularly for high school students or those with medical issues:

- **Virtual Learning Platforms:** The state utilizes platforms like **Virtual Arkansas** and district-specific virtual academies (e.g., Springdale's Virtual Innovation Academy) to offer core and elective courses.
- **Specialized Virtual Support:** For special education, this model allows students who struggle with the sensory input or large crowds of a traditional setting to receive instruction in a controlled home environment, though direct specialized instruction and related services (like speech therapy) must still be delivered as required

by the IEP, which can involve synchronous (live) online sessions or in-person check-ins.

- **Homebound Services:** Similar to the abbreviated day, homebound services are an IEP-driven decision for students with medical or severe psychiatric needs that prevent them from attending school for an **extended period**. The services must be sufficient to ensure FAPE.

The overall strategy across Arkansas's special education system is a dynamic approach that focuses on **capacity building**—training all staff in SEL and behavior management—while reserving these specialized, more restrictive options for students whose unique needs absolutely require them.

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BEHAVIORAL GROWTH, BUILDING BY BUILDING: A DISTRICTWIDE COMMITMENT TO SUPPORT AND SUCCESS

Contributor: Bridget Buckley, EdS, Assistant Superintendent, Mena School District

District Introduction

At Mena Public Schools, our approach to student behavior reflects our belief that all children can learn — socially, emotionally, and behaviorally — with the right support. This commitment began when we expanded our behavioral services by hiring two full-time behavior interventionists and, more recently, a licensed therapist to strengthen supports across all schools.

Through proactive systems, relationship-building, and responsive intervention, each of our buildings works to create a safe, respectful environment where students can thrive. Central to this initiative is the incorporation of BX3 and THRIVE, frameworks that strengthen positive behavior practices and student wellness. Every building has developed a behavior matrix, created in collaboration with staff and informed by student and parent feedback, ensuring consistency while allowing expectations to reflect each school's unique culture.

By aligning behavioral supports with instructional priorities, we are not only addressing student behavior but also advancing our goals for academic achievement, equitable access to learning, and a school climate that nurtures both success and belonging.

Louise Durham Elementary

At Louise Durham Elementary, positive behavior is seen as the foundation of a safe, respectful, and productive learning environment. Students are guided by the schoolwide PAWS expectations: Positive Attitude, Act Respectful, Work Hard, and Stay Safe. These expectations are taught explicitly, reinforced daily, and celebrated throughout the year.

Staff follow a structured Behavior Flowchart to ensure consistency. Minor behaviors, such as talking out of turn or not following directions, are addressed through redirection, individual conferences, and classroom consequences. Major behaviors, such as fighting or



Louise Durham students enjoy time with Assistant Principal Pete Rose during a glow party, part of their rewards program.

defiance, are referred immediately to the office, where administration determines appropriate next steps. All incidents are documented which allows patterns to be tracked and interventions adjusted.

Schoolwide culture is strengthened through unique engagement strategies, including a daily school song that reinforces PAWS expectations and prerecorded announcements focused on specific behavior skills. Now in its third year of BX3 participation, Louise Durham continues to benefit from the expertise of state behavior specialists, who provide coaching and resources for staff. The combination of clear consequences, meaningful rewards, and BX3 support ensures that students are consistently learning accountability while also being celebrated for their successes.

Holly Harshman Elementary

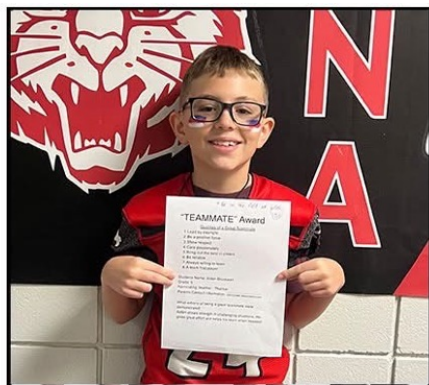
Holly Harshman Elementary (HHE) focuses on a tiered system of support, proactive teaching of expectations, and consistent application of PBIS practices. Staff collaboration through the BX3 Team has been central in shaping the behavior matrix for the building, with support from state specialists and leadership.

continued

TEAMMATE Award!

Qualities of a Great Teammate.

1. Lead by example.
2. Be a positive force.
3. Show respect.
4. Care passionately.
5. Bring out the best in others.
6. Be reliable.
7. Always willing to learn.
8. A team first player.



HHE

HOLLY HARSHMAN ELEMENTARY

Students at Holly Harshman Elementary have an opportunity each month to be selected for the Teammate Award.

The school uses Liveschool, a digital rewards program, to reinforce positive behaviors. Tier 2 and Tier 3 students are identified through structured monitoring and intervention tracking, including Student Intervention Monitoring (SIM) forms. Teachers also use resources such as a shared Behavior Google Classroom to access flowcharts, forms, and expectations at any time, ensuring consistency.

The behavior matrix is introduced and reinforced through creative and engaging approaches, such as PowerPoint lessons, assemblies, and student-produced "funny videos" that highlight the difference between positive and negative behaviors. Each year, adjustments are made to refine systems and keep expectations relevant. Administrators also respond to office referrals promptly, often on the same day, and communicate directly with families to build accountability and transparency.

Liveschool has been particularly effective in motivating students through ownership of rewards. The annual assembly focusing on the school's mission statement, RISE acronym, and behavior matrix reinforces the importance of shared expectations. Together, these practices have strengthened consistency, increased accountability, and fostered a culture where positive behavior is celebrated and supported.

Mena Middle School

At Mena Middle School (MMS), the focus is on resilience, consistent expectations, and proactive support through MTSS. The school has adopted the PRIDE framework — Prepared, Respect, Integrity, Drive, and Empathy — which is reinforced daily across classrooms and common spaces.

MMS uses weekly Bearcat Brag Tags, check-in/check-out mentoring, and personal growth groups to build coping skills and self-awareness. Brag Tags are also tied to a ticket reward system: students enter drawings for weekly prizes and can earn quarterly recognition for consistent positive behavior. Students are recognized for positive behaviors through celebrations such as the Kindness Wall and quarterly reward days. Teachers note that students are highly motivated when earning Brag Tags and that classroom culture has improved as a result. Staff report smoother transitions, fewer discipline referrals, and stronger student engagement, demonstrating how aligned expectations and consistent systems are positively shaping outcomes.

The school has benefited from the statewide phone laws that reduce classroom distractions, creating a calmer and more focused learning environment. Additionally, administrators use a behavior matrix to ensure decisions are consistent, equitable, and transparent for students and families.



Mena Middle School students choose time in the MakerSpace for a reward.

continued

Mena High School

At Mena High School, the emphasis is on preparing students for success beyond graduation by promoting responsibility, resilience, and respect. The behavior matrix provides consistency across classrooms, ensuring that students clearly understand expectations for conduct in both academic and extracurricular settings.

Weekly behavior team meetings allow staff to monitor trends and respond quickly to student needs. The high school also implements a check-in/check-out mentor system, ensuring that students have trusted adults for daily guidance. Staff have received de-escalation training to address challenges in ways that preserve relationships and maintain a safe learning environment. Targeted advisory periods provide additional opportunities for reflection and goal-setting.

Positive outcomes include reductions in office referrals and stronger staff-student connections. Recognition systems, such as academic and behavior “spotlights,” highlight student growth, while peer leadership opportunities empower students to model and encourage positive behaviors schoolwide.

Special Education (K–12)

In Special Education classrooms across the district, behavior is viewed as an integral part of learning and growth. Students’ IEPs include behavior goals tailored to their needs, ensuring that regulation, social skills, and independence are prioritized alongside academic achievement.

Special Education teachers collaborate with general education staff, paraprofessionals, and behavior interventionists to provide individualized support. Strategies include structured schedules, de-escalation spaces, visual aids, and explicit teaching of social-emotional skills. Teachers also integrate specialized curricula, such as Positivity and News-2-You (formerly Unique Learning System, now Everway), which embed positive behavior strategies into literacy, math, science, social studies, and life skills instruction. These resources provide interactive lessons, visual supports, and behavior management strategies that have proven beneficial for over nine years of use.

Over the past year, the majority of students with behavior goals have shown measurable progress in self-regulation and social skills. Teachers report fewer crisis interventions, stronger collaboration with



Service learning is an integral part of Alternative Education for Mena Public Schools. Here students prepare to serve lunch at the Polk County Senior Center.

families, and a higher level of student engagement. Students benefit from structured, positive, and interactive approaches that embed behavior support into daily learning across content areas.

Alternative Learning (CATS Academy)

CATS Academy emphasizes relationship-based support, trauma-informed practices, and predictable routines. Students receive individualized Student Action Plans (SAPs), small-group instruction, point sheets, and access to de-escalation tools. Service-learning opportunities and reward-based incentives provide authentic ways for students to practice responsibility and self-regulation.

By integrating BX3 and Thrive frameworks, CATS Academy ensures support is proactive and holistic. Outcomes include stronger student confidence, improved regulation, and meaningful community contributions through service projects.

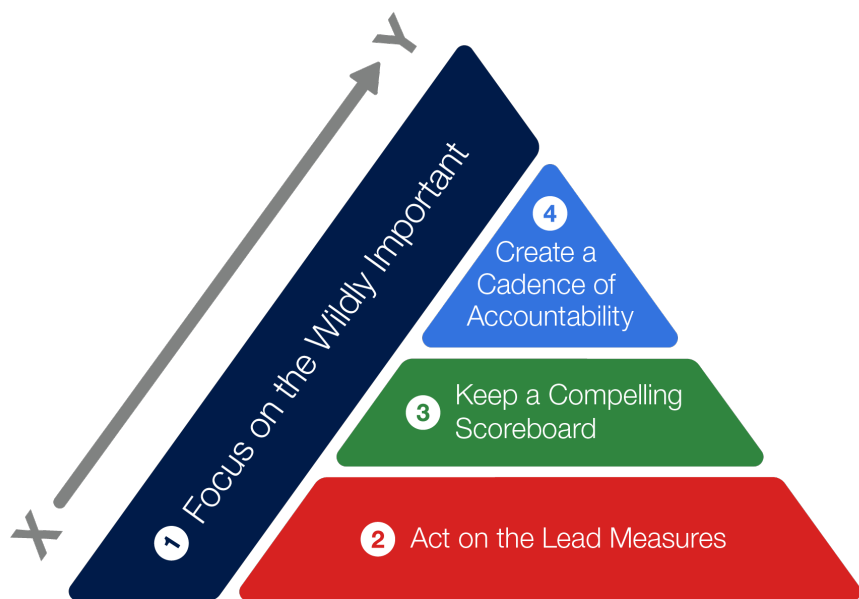
Districtwide Conclusion

Aligned behavioral systems are transforming school culture across the district. By creating consistent expectations and tailoring support to student needs, we are fostering learning environments that value both academic growth and social-emotional development.

Looking ahead, Mena Public Schools is committed to expanding staff professional development, strengthening SEL curriculum, and amplifying student voice in shaping behavior supports. Together, we are building a culture where every student is supported, every staff member is equipped, and every community member is confident in our shared vision for success.

LOCKING IN ON LITERACY: HOW 4DX TRANSFORMS TIER 1 INSTRUCTION

Contributor: J.R. Arnold, Ed.S., Principal, Arkansas High School, Texarkana School District



In today's educational landscape, secondary schools face the critical challenge of ensuring every student learns at high levels. In literacy, this means they must learn to be confident readers, writers, and communicators. Yet, amidst many initiatives, mandates, and shifting priorities, Tier 1 literacy instruction often gets lost in the noise. At Arkansas High School, we've found clarity and focus through a surprisingly, yet transformational framework: The 4 Disciplines of Execution for Educators.

From "Everything is Important" to the "Wildly Important"

Like many schools, our leadership team found ourselves spread thin, managing attendance, behavior, academics, and culture all at once. We were busy, but not always productive. We were like a hamster running in a wheel. That's when we turned to the 4DX framework by Sean Covey, Lynn Kosinski, and Meg Thompson. This system is built to close the gap between strategic intent and daily execution.

The first discipline, Focus on the Wildly Important Goal (WIG), forced us to stop trying to fix everything at once and instead aim our energy toward what would yield the greatest impact.

Our WIG became clear:

"Arkansas High School will increase the percentage of students reading at or above grade level by ten percentage points through consistent implementation of Tier 1 literacy strategies."

This single focus did not simplify the work; it sharpened the practice. Every team conversation, professional development, and classroom walk-through became an opportunity to connect daily instruction to that literacy goal.

Discipline 2: Act on Lead Measures, Not Lagging Data

Secondary Schools are notorious for chasing lag measures such as test scores, school report cards, ACT results, and the list goes on. All this data tells us where we've been, not where we're going. The 4DX framework helped us shift toward lead measures. Lead Measures are the daily, actionable behaviors that may predict results.

Our lead measures included:

- **Weekly "literacy bursts"** during professional learning teams (PLTs) where teachers model, refine, and share literacy practices. They are expected to utilize 3 strategies per week.
- **Intervention Time for all students** performing below grade level in literacy instruction in all content areas. Razorsharp (RTI) time is built into the schedule for 30 minutes, 5 days a week. IXL is utilized.
- **Literacy Professional Development Every Quarter** by all staff.

By measuring behaviors instead of outcomes, teachers could see immediate wins, and so could the entire school community. The data walls and scoreboards create visible momentum. These small gains help us build unstoppable momentum.

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Discipline 3: Keep a Compelling Scoreboard

Students and teachers alike perform better when they know the score. We transformed our literacy work into a living, breathing competition, not between people, but between the current state and our collective potential.

Most hallways featured a 4DX scoreboard with real-time updates:

- The percentage of teachers implementing literacy strategies observed in walkthroughs.
- The number of students demonstrating growth on i-Ready and common assessments.
- Quotes from students describing how literacy strategies helped them learn across subjects.

When teachers see progress, they don't need much external motivation, they own the win. And when students begin asking, "Did we move the needle this week?" you know you've built a culture of literacy ownership.

Discipline 4: Create a Cadence of Accountability

The final discipline, a cadence of accountability, transformed our leadership culture. Every week, departments and teams met for short "WIG Sessions" where teachers committed to one specific literacy action: "This week, I'll model annotating text in my lesson opener," or "I'll incorporate vocabulary routines in the bell work."

The next week, they reported back what worked, what didn't, and what they'd try next. All teams establish clearly defined norms, so the spaces are free from judgement. Just honest reflection and collective improvement.

As a principal, these meetings became my favorite part of the week. The language shifted from compliance to commitment. Teachers began celebrating each other's wins, borrowing strategies, and pushing for deeper student engagement.

The Ripple Effect

Our journey with 4DX hasn't just improved literacy, it has sharpened our leadership habits. Although we have just started, teachers are now thinking about systems. They identify their own lead measures, tracking their progress, and reflecting with precision. Students are reading, writing, and discussing at higher levels across all subjects. More importantly, they're beginning to see themselves as learners who grow through literacy. We often talk about "raising the bar", but 4DX helped us realize the bar isn't something you raise once, it's something you hold steady every day through intentional execution and practice.

Closing Thought

Secondary leaders face the constant pull of urgent fires and competing priorities. 4DX does not eliminate those dynamics, but it gives it structure. When paired with the daily work of Tier 1 literacy, it turns good intentions into action with measurable impact.

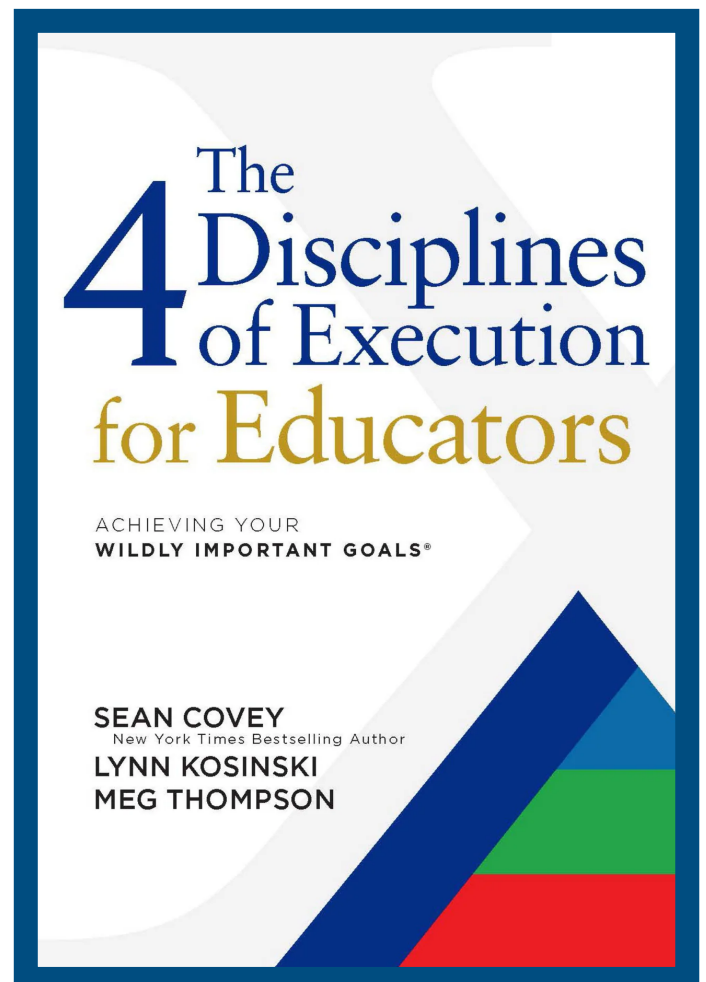
At Arkansas High School, our motto this year is:

"Lock In. Show Up. Ignite Growth."

That is not just a motto, it is the essence of 4DX in action. Lock in on your wildly important goals. Show up for your lead measures and execute them consistently. And watch your students, and teachers, ignite growth in ways you never imagined.

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THE IDENTITY CRISIS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Contributor: Chris Cochran, Assistant Principal, Rogers School District



A Coming Identity Crisis

You can feel it in nearly every conversation about the future of school. The world of work is moving in one direction. Secondary schools are still pointed in another direction.

Jobs are changing at a pace that is hard to absorb. Technical skills that once lasted a career now have a shelf life measured in years, sometimes months. At the same time, employers across industries continue to express the same concern: they struggle to find young workers who can communicate clearly, adapt to change, and solve complex problems with little direction.

Secondary schools sit in the middle of this tension. For much of the last century, their mission was clear. A

diploma signaled readiness for a set of predictable roles in a relatively stable economy. That clarity is fading. Students are moving through systems designed for an economy of routine tasks and long-term positions, then graduating into a labor market defined by automation, shifting roles, and constant learning.

As the distance between these two realities grows, secondary schools face a hard question about identity: what does it mean to be a "college and career-ready" school when the careers themselves are changing faster than the system built to prepare students for them?

This article looks at how work is changing, why schools are struggling to keep pace, and what it will take to realign around the human capacity students will need most.

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Work Is Changing Faster Than Schools

The labor market is not just shifting, it is speeding up. By 2030, a large share of jobs will be created, transformed, or eliminated. Roles that once stayed stable for decades now evolve in a matter of years. Entire categories of work are shrinking while new ones emerge before schools can update a single course description.

Skills inside those jobs are turning over just as quickly. Roughly half of today's job skills are expected to be outdated within five years. Many technical skills now have a useful life of only a few years. A worker might master a tool or platform one year only to see it replaced a few years later. Staying employed depends less on what people already know and more on how quickly they can learn and adapt to what comes next.

At the same time, automation and artificial intelligence are reshaping what people actually do at work. Software takes on routine clerical and administrative tasks. Robotics handles more of the predictable work in production. AI systems now support or replace pieces of analysis, writing, design, and customer service that once belonged only to humans.

This pace of change puts pressure on both sides. Employers need people who can step into evolving roles with confidence. Students are trying to prepare for careers that may not yet exist. When the world of work moves in cycles measured in months and schools move in cycles measured in years, the gap between them does not close on its own. It widens.

Schools Built for a Disappearing Middle

The design of secondary schools still reflects an earlier economy. Fixed periods, subject silos, standardized curriculum, and tests that reward accuracy and compliance made sense in a labor market built on routine work. That is no longer the world our students are entering.

For decades, many graduates moved into clerical, administrative, and production roles that valued consistency over creativity. These jobs sat in the "middle" of the labor market: stable, predictable, with clear advancement. "Career readiness" meant being prepared to enter this middle layer and follow known processes well.

That middle is shrinking. Automation, outsourcing, and digital systems have reduced the need for many routine tasks, while the roles that remain now demand higher levels of both technical and human skill. At the same time, new jobs are appearing in fields that did not exist when current course catalogs were written.

Yet the core structures of school look much the same. Students still spend most of their time in settings that



separate academic work from real work. They rarely have sustained opportunities to solve open-ended problems with real consequences, work across differences, or practice adapting when plans change.

This is where the identity crisis comes into focus. Secondary schools are doing what they were built to do. The problem is that they were built for a labor market that is disappearing. Until the mission and design of schools catch up with the world students are actually entering, even strong performance inside the system will leave too many graduates underprepared.

Readiness Now: Human Capacity at the Center

When employers talk about readiness today, they seldom start with test scores or transcripts. They talk about what happens on the job. Can a new hire communicate with a frustrated customer? Can they adjust when priorities shift at the last minute? Can they sit with a problem that has no clear answer and still move the work forward with other people?

Content knowledge and technical skills still matter. The difference is that they are no longer enough on their own. What employers say is missing are the capacities that make that knowledge usable in a fast-changing environment.

Across sectors, a small set of human-centered skills shows up again and again:

- **Communication under pressure** – listening carefully, asking good questions, and explaining ideas clearly when the stakes are high, not just on a prepared presentation.
- **Adaptability and continuous learning** – learning new tools and workflows quickly, staying curious, and being willing to try, practice, and improve in public.
- **Collaborative problem-solving** – working across roles and perspectives, navigating disagreement, and keeping a team moving toward a shared outcome.

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- **Breaking down complex, ambiguous problems** – sorting through competing priorities, identifying what matters most, and turning vague instructions into concrete next steps.

These skills do more than help graduates get a first job. They give students a way to keep growing as roles change around them. Technical skills will continue to evolve, but the capacity to communicate, adapt, work with others, and make sense of complex problems sits at the center of long-term success.

Here, schools have a real advantage. They work with almost every young person, every day, over many years. Social and emotional learning, advisory systems, project-based units, student leadership, and work-based learning already provide raw material for building these capacities. The challenge is that these experiences are often treated as enrichment instead of core.

Realignment begins when schools treat human capacity as a primary outcome rather than a byproduct. That shows up in practical ways: creating time for students to reflect on how they learn, integrating career-connected projects into core classes, partnering with local employers on real problems, and valuing portfolios, projects, and credentials alongside test scores.

A Call to Innovate With Urgency

Secondary schools are standing at a crossroads. One path preserves familiar structures, measures, and

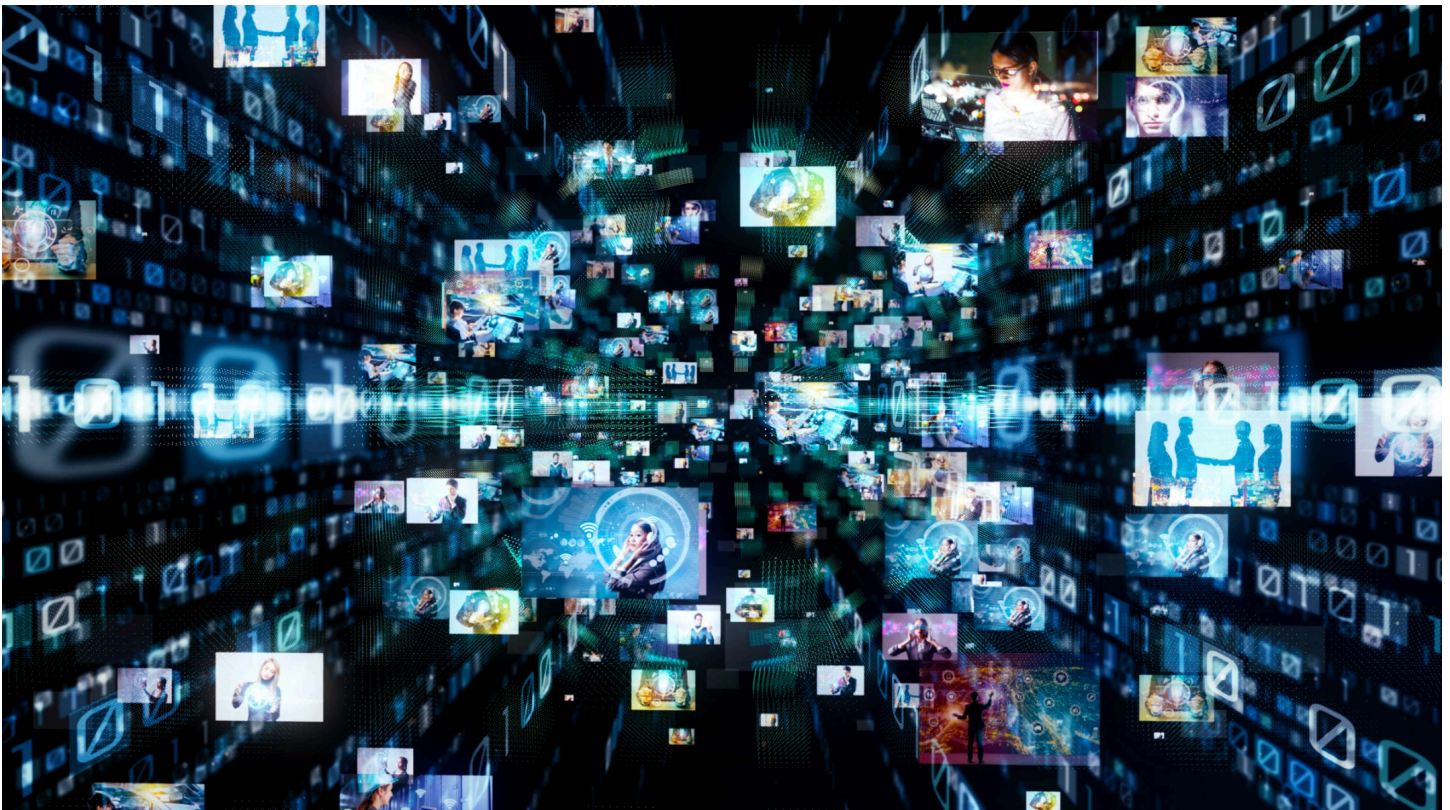
routines, even as the world around them changes. The other path asks harder questions: what are we really preparing students for, and which skills will still matter when today's tools are outdated?

The identity crisis is already visible in the gap between what employers say they need and what many graduates feel ready to do. If schools continue to define their work only by test scores, course credits, and graduation rates, they risk preparing students for an economy that no longer exists.

The alternative is to lean into the advantage schools already hold: time with young people and the ability to shape how they think, relate, and solve problems. That will mean rethinking schedules, assessments, and partnerships. It will mean making space for experiences that are harder to standardize but closer to real life. And it will mean trusting that communication, adaptability, collaboration, and complex problem-solving are not extras. They are the spine of preparation.

No single school can control the pace of change in the world of work. But each school can decide how it responds. Leaders who choose to realign their systems around human capacity signal to students, families, and communities that they are preparing young people not just to fit into today's jobs, but to grow into whatever comes next.

That is the work of secondary education in a changing world—and the opportunity at the center of this identity crisis.



UNDERSTANDING GRANT TYPES AND FUNDING SOURCES

Contributor: Howard G. Barber, CPA, MCPPO, SFO, ASBO School Business Now



Grant funding isn't just a line item or a revenue source. For school districts facing ever-tightening budgets, it's a bridge that connects needs with opportunity, vision with resources. Yet, beneath the numbers and acronyms lies a dynamic ecosystem that school business officials must understand to lead effectively and credibly.

Whether funding a new literacy initiative, upgrading facilities, or expanding student support services, a grant's structure matters. It influences not only how dollars are spent but also how they are pursued, managed, and ultimately evaluated. While grants may differ in size or scope, they generally fall along two key axes: where the money comes from and how it's awarded.

Funding Sources

Let's start with the sources of grants.

Federal grants, such as Title I, IDEA Part B, or School Safety initiatives, are some of the most prominent and closely monitored. They often align with national priorities and arrive with clear conditions: defined allowable costs, strict reporting protocols, and audit readiness under 2 CFR Part 200.

These grants may include indirect cost allocations, time and effort tracking, and compliance documentation that spans multiple fiscal years. For

school business officials, understanding these expectations upfront is essential to ensure compliance with federal reporting and to ensure that nothing is missed when auditors arrive.

In many cases, the success of an audit lies not only in what was spent but also in how clearly the business office can show its intent, process, and outcomes.

State grants, by comparison, may reflect local educational strategies like the merging of school district programs, early literacy programs, or targeted professional development. While they often offer greater flexibility in design, they still require disciplined budget management and consistent reporting.

State auditors often examine the alignment between awarded amounts and expenditures, especially when funding spans multiple departments or fiscal periods. Clarifying financial systems and backup documentation is essential for successful audit outcomes.

Then there are private grants—flexible, innovative, and sometimes underutilized. These may come from foundations, nonprofit organizations, or corporate sponsors interested in funding pilot programs, technology expansion, or equity-based initiatives. Although private grants typically carry fewer regulatory strings, they still carry reputational risks if

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mismanaged. A missed reporting deadline or vague spending plan can jeopardize future partnerships and eligibility or require the grant value to be paid back completely.

Funding Awards

How funds are awarded is equally critical.

Competitive grants require districts to submit detailed applications evaluated against set criteria. These grants are common in areas such as STEM education, school transformation, and student mental health. The evaluation process is thorough, often involving scoring rubrics, alignment with stated goals, and proof of capacity. After funding is awarded, auditors often review whether the district implemented the project as described and achieved the anticipated outcomes.

Targeted grants are designated for specific student groups, such as low-income students, English language learners, or children with special needs. These may be partially competitive but often prioritize demonstrated need. In post-award audits, the focus shifts to whether expenditures were properly aligned with the grant's stated intent and whether any performance indicators were met.

Entitlement grants, including Title I and IDEA, are formula-driven and allocated based on enrollment or demographics. These provide stable, recurring funding but come with rigorous compliance requirements. Audits for entitlement grants commonly include reviews of payroll certifications, procurement records, and the Maintenance of Effort (MOE) standard.

Maintenance of Effort (MOE) is a federal requirement that ensures school districts continue to invest a consistent level of local or state funds in special education services from year to year. This prevents districts from reducing their spending simply because they receive federal funds. Failure to meet MOE can result in reduced IDEA funding or findings during a financial audit.

Continuation grants allow districts to sustain programs with a proven record of success. Renewal is generally based on strong performance, compliance, and consistent reporting. Maintaining clear outcome data, tracking deviations from the original scope, and demonstrating program impact are all essential for continued funding and are critical during audits.

Earmarked grants are directed by legislation to a specific program or entity. Though rare in K–12, these grants may come without detailed implementation guidance, placing added responsibility on the business office to interpret regulations and maintain well-documented spending decisions.

To make this more concrete, consider a few federal examples:

- *Title I, Part A* offers formula-based support to schools with a high number of students from low-income families. Funds must enhance, not replace, core instructional programming.
- *IDEA Part B* provides consistent support for students with special needs, with strict MOE rules and documentation requirements.
- *School Safety and Security Grants* are competitive opportunities to fund security improvements, emergency preparedness, and mental health supports.
- *EIR (Education Innovation and Research) Grants* fund evidence-based educational innovations, often in partnership with research institutions.
- *TEACH Grants* offer tuition support to future educators who commit to teaching in high-need fields and communities.

These distinctions aren't simply administrative; they directly influence how districts plan, manage, and account for the funding they receive. Mislabeling a grant or misunderstanding its restrictions can lead to audit findings, funding clawbacks, or public scrutiny. Entitlement grants, in particular, must comply with MOE and supplement-not-supplant rules. Competitive grants may trigger additional reporting based on their innovation criteria. Any capital purchases or services funded by a grant must follow procurement regulations and documentation procedures.

Well-Informed Decisions

During annual audits, school districts are typically asked to provide trial balances by fund, revenue and expenditure reports, payroll records, encumbrance schedules, and vendor contracts. The better a district understands the type of grant it has accepted, the more efficiently it can prepare this documentation. In many cases, the success of an audit lies not only in what was spent but also in how clearly the business office can show its intent, process, and outcomes.

Ultimately, grant literacy empowers school business officials to make well-informed decisions, submit stronger applications, and manage funds with greater accountability. In a funding environment that demands both innovation and transparency, knowing how grant dollars flow — and how they are classified — can help turn opportunity into lasting impact. When handled strategically, grant funding becomes more than a temporary boost; it becomes a foundation for sustainable improvement and public trust.

INVESTING IN EXCELLENCE: HOW OUR DISTRICT BUILT A MENTORING PROGRAM THAT TRANSFORMS TEACHER PRACTICE

Contributor: Melissa Powell, Assistant Superintendent & Director of Human Resources, El Dorado School District

Time and time again, we are reminded that the single most important factor in a student's education is the quality of the teacher in the classroom. A district can have the strongest curriculum, the best support staff, and the most innovative resources, but if the teacher standing in front of students does not feel confident, prepared, and supported, there is still room to grow.

Nearly a decade ago, with this reality in mind, our district created a comprehensive mentoring program designed to support all novice teachers throughout their first three years in the profession. Research consistently shows that the greatest growth in teacher practice occurs during these early years, when educators are establishing habits, refining instructional decisions, and forming their professional identities. Studies also demonstrate that the level of support teachers receive during this period is one of the strongest predictors of long-term retention. For these reasons, we committed to building a program that systematically and intentionally supports every new educator who enters our classrooms.

Why a District-Based Program?

Education service cooperatives provide great support to new teachers across the state. However, our needs are both significant and unique. We employ a large number of non-traditional teachers, many of whom enter the profession through alternative certification pathways. These educators often require more targeted, day-to-day support than a regional program can realistically provide.

To meet this need, our district allocated resources to fund a dedicated mentoring coordinator whose primary responsibilities include training mentors, supporting them in effective coaching practices, and maintaining regular contact with mentees to monitor growth and address emerging needs.

More Than Assigning Mentors



Early in this work, we discovered something crucial: simply assigning a mentor does not guarantee meaningful support. Many excellent classroom teachers are not automatically skilled at coaching adults. Coaching requires a different skill set—one grounded in active listening, intentional questioning, and guiding reflection rather than giving directives.

As our program evolved, we integrated **Cognitive Coaching** strategies to strengthen the mentoring process. This shift helped mentors structure purposeful conversations that build self-directed, reflective practitioners. By embedding these practices into our program, mentors gained the tools necessary to move beyond giving advice and toward facilitating genuine professional growth.

Supporting Mentors So They Can Support Teachers

High-quality mentoring requires time, energy, and specialized skill. To honor that commitment, our district provides semester stipends, determined by the number of mentees a mentor supports and whether

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they are given a release period to conduct observations or coaching sessions.

Professional Development Tailored to New Teachers

Each year, we provide professional development to new educators in three distinct tracks:

- Experienced teachers new to the district
- Traditionally trained novice teachers
- Non-traditional/alternatively certified teachers

While some training overlaps, much of it is intentionally differentiated to meet the specific needs of each group. Additional professional development sessions are offered quarterly, driven by data collected through coaching cycles, observations and feedback from mentees.

Clear and Consistent Expectations

Mentors and mentees are expected to meet weekly for more than a quick check-in. These meetings may include targeted professional development or a structured coaching conversation around a growth area identified by the mentee.

In years 1 and 2, mentors complete three full coaching cycles annually. In year 3, coaches shift away from cycles unless the mentee requests additional support. Mentoring logs are maintained and monitored by the director to ensure fidelity.

Building Belonging: A Community for New Teachers

As our program matured, we realized that supporting novice teachers requires more than instructional guidance—it requires community. To foster belonging, the district hosts six social events throughout the year for new staff. These gatherings help teachers build relationships, connect with colleagues across campuses, and feel part of a supportive professional network.

Events range from district-hosted tailgates to bunko nights, mah-jong gatherings, murder-mystery evenings, and paint parties. For educators new to our area or new to the profession, this sense of belonging can make all the difference.

Sustaining the Work

Like any initiative that requires skill, intention, and consistency, a high-quality mentoring program demands ongoing resources. But the question is not whether we can afford to invest in mentoring—it is whether we can afford **not** to. Every dollar invested in supporting new teachers pays dividends in improved instruction, stronger classroom environments, and increased teacher retention.


Our mentoring program is more than a support system; it is a commitment to excellence. By growing strong teachers, we ensure strong outcomes for students—now and for years to come.

Instructional LEADER

Let other administrators know about the about the successful practices in your school/district!

Contact Dr. Karla Neathery, Assistant Executive Director, at k.neathery@theaaea.org.



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