

# Instructional LEADER

Best Learning Practices

March 2026



**Leadership is Not a Title.  
It's a Choice.**

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# 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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# LEADERSHIP IS NOT A TITLE. IT'S A CHOICE.

Contributor: Shavon Jackson, Principal, Crawford Elementary, Russellville School District



Classroom observations. Discipline referrals. Parent and staff emails. Staff absences. Bus discipline. Data meetings. Safety concerns. Crisis management. District meetings - and this is all just before lunch.

As leaders, our plates are overflowing. The work of a principal is complex, constant, and consuming. There are no tasks that feel unimportant, and each demands timely attention. If we are honest in our reflections, we may realize the challenge does not lie solely in the weight of the work, but how we choose to carry it.

Administrators were not hired to be superheroes who save the day alone. While the image of swooping in with a red cape and an "S" on your chest is entertaining and inspirational, it's also fictional. Even in the superhero universe, the strongest stories are not about one hero, they are about teams. The Avengers don't rely on Iron Man alone. Their strength comes from each member using their unique abilities toward a shared mission.

Schools are no different. They are not saved by solitary heroes; they are strengthened by shared leadership. Strong leaders intentionally multiply leadership capacity within their buildings. They do more than assign tasks, they develop people. They build systems that grow leaders at every level.

Leadership is not a title, it's a choice.

At Crawford Elementary, multiplying leadership capacity did not happen by accident. It required intentional systems and structures, consistent modeling and coaching, and a deep commitment to shared ownership. One structure that has positively impacted our instructional growth is our Guiding Coalition.

We were intentional in selecting members for this team. Representation alone was not enough. We sought leaders who could drive instructional conversations, elevate expectations, and foster peer accountability among their grade levels and

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departments. Selection was not based on tenure or popularity. Instead we identified individuals with demonstrated credibility grounded in evidence and data, a willingness to reflect and grow, and a commitment to make necessary changes that positively impact student learning and growth.

We did not expect these leaders to instinctively know how to effect change. Empowerment requires preparation. We were intentional in coaching them how to build strong team culture, analyze and disaggregate data, facilitate hard conversations that drive instructional improvement, and distribute responsibility through effective collaboration. In doing so, we equipped them not only to lead, but to multiply leadership within their own teams.

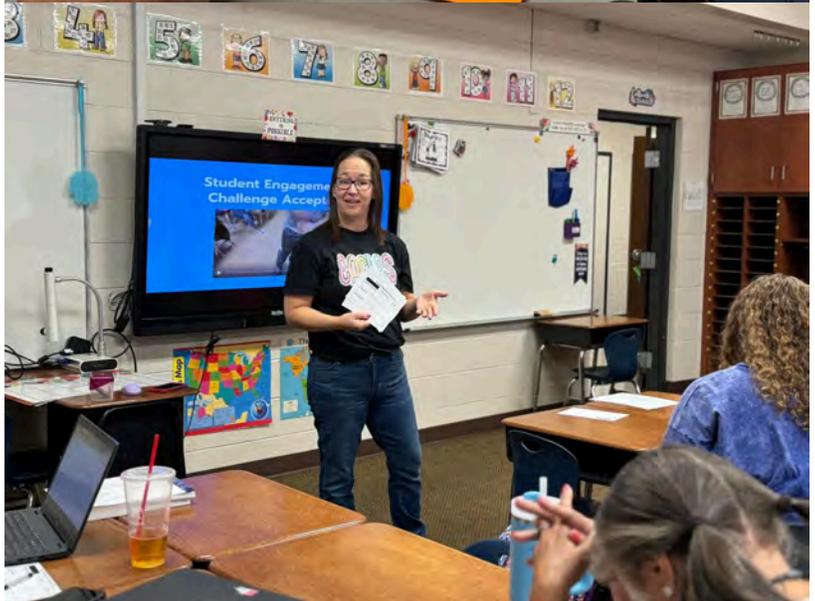
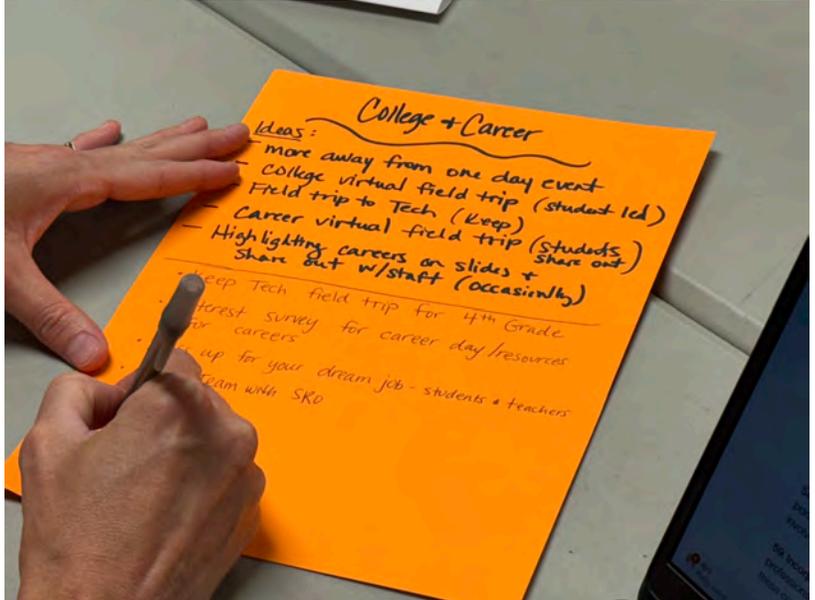
This intentional coaching has positively impacted our school. Team leads inspire growth daily. Their impact extends beyond their grade levels, influencing the entire building as they share best practices across both horizontal and vertical teams.

Our Guiding Coalition has shifted our building from using principal-driven decision-making to shared ownership of instructional growth. Instead of top-down decisions, leadership is distributed, conversations and understanding are deeper, and accountability is collective. When teacher leaders are equipped and empowered, the work of the school accelerates, allowing principals to focus their time and energy on the most strategic priorities.

### Two Action Steps to Begin Multiplying Leadership:

- Examine how teacher leaders are selected in your building. Are decisions based on seniority and tradition, or by influence, demonstrated expertise, and a commitment to growth?
- Commit to coaching your teacher leaders intentionally. Do not assume leadership skills; develop them through modeling, coaching, reflection, and feedback.

Another structure that has expanded ownership beyond a small group of individuals is our use of purpose-driven action teams and committees. When only a small group of teachers carry the responsibility for schoolwide initiatives and extracurricular engagement, overload and burnout quickly follow.



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We began by reviewing initiatives most aligned to our mission and vision such as celebrations, cultural events, student birthdays, attendance incentives, positive behavior, and staff engagement. While each of these efforts matters deeply to school culture and climate, they are too significant for a small group of people to tackle alone. As a result, we streamlined our existing committees and action teams ensuring that only relevant and meaningful teams and committees remained.

I communicated clear expectations: every teacher would contribute to innovation and engagement through focused participation on at least one team. When the load was shared building wide, creativity flourished. Teachers were more eager to contribute when their responsibility was purposeful and limited. Ownership increased because the ideas were theirs.

As leadership expanded, additional teacher leaders naturally emerged. We tapped into the diverse strengths and creativity within our building, reinforcing that leadership opportunities extend beyond formal titles. While I am not solely responsible for the ideas behind each initiative, I continue to facilitate conversations that help teams see the larger vision and align their work to schoolwide goals and priorities. Through these collaborative discussions, staff have gained a deeper understanding of how intentional systems drive school culture, climate, and growth.

### **Two Action Steps to Strengthen Shared Ownership:**

- Evaluate existing committees and action teams. Eliminate those not in alignment with your school mission and consolidate your efforts into meaningful teams that drive purposeful, high-impact work.
- Ensure every teacher has a defined but limited role in advancing school culture and improvement.

Identify their strengths and naturally position them to lead.

It's important to remember that capacity building is not about scheduling more meetings or creating more teams; it's about sustainability, clarity, and shared responsibility. At Crawford, we live by the motto "We > Me," a simple reminder that we are stronger together than we are alone. When school improvement is dependent upon a single leader, efficiency slows, innovation stalls, and clarity diminishes. Over time, stress, feeling overwhelmed, and burnout become inevitable not only for administrators, but for the entire organization. However, when leaders intentionally build capacity, teachers feel valued, trusted, and empowered. As effective leaders know, people support what they help create. Through shared ownership, schools and leaders can move from surviving to thriving.

### **Reflective Questions for Leaders:**

- Where might I be unintentionally stalling progress in my building?
- Who in my building is ready to lead but needs encouragement and empowerment?
- What responsibility can I intentionally share in order to multiply our impact?

Leadership is not about titles, words, or delegation. It's demonstrated through action, initiative, influence, and ownership. Everyone has the opportunity to lead, not because of a title or a team but through a willingness to reflect, learn, grow, and positively impact others. Schools are not strengthened by solitary heroes; they are strengthened by leaders who empower other leaders. Leadership, then, is not a title. It's a choice - a choice to carry the work alone or to multiply the impact together.

# ACCESS IN ACTION

## DISTRICT-LEVEL ACCELERATION EFFORTS ACROSS ARKANSAS

**Contributor:** Katie Lawson, K–6 Advanced Learning Coordinator, Searcy Public School District  
With contributions from Arkansas district leaders

With the passage of the ACCESS Act in March 2025, academic acceleration has become an increased priority, prompting districts across the state to implement pathways that expand opportunities for postsecondary success. By offering a range of accelerated academic options and career pathways, such as Advanced Placement, concurrent credit, Cambridge, International Baccalaureate, and Career and Technical Education, districts can significantly improve students' postsecondary outcomes, and research supports the positive effects associated with each of these options.

- Students who earn AP credits are more likely to complete college in less time, pursue double majors, and enroll in more advanced coursework compared with peers who do not enter college with AP credit. (Evans, 2019)
- Participation in concurrent credit and early college high school programs is associated with improved college access, greater postsecondary persistence, and higher degree attainment. (King Schaller et al., 2023)
- Research examining nearly 924 students enrolled at Arizona State University found that those who completed Cambridge International programs earned higher average SAT and ACT scores than state and national peers, and their performance in Cambridge coursework was strongly associated with first-year college success, indicating increased college readiness. (Cambridge International & Arizona State University, 2022)
- According to the International Baccalaureate Organization (2019), a large U.S. study of IB graduates found that their students enrolled in college at higher rates, were more likely to attend four-year and selective institutions, persisted at higher rates, and graduated at significantly higher four and six-year rates than national averages.
- A regional study found that students focused on Career and Technical Education had higher high school graduation rates and increased postsecondary enrollment within two and five years. (Institute of Education Sciences, 2020)

Together, this body of research highlights the strong link between intentional acceleration opportunities and improved postsecondary outcomes for students. While the evidence is clear, the ways in which these pathways are implemented vary widely based on local context, resources, and student needs. In the following sections, districts across the state highlight how they have expanded accelerated learning opportunities and their plans for 2026–2027 to prepare students to succeed beyond high school.

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### Caddo Hills

*By Justin Neel, Caddo Hills High School Principal*

Caddo Hills School District has intentionally structured Caddo Academy to ensure students are not only college- and career-ready, but *life-ready* upon graduation. In response to the ACCESS Act, our focus has been on accelerating student learning through authentic pathways that allow students to earn credentials, college credit, and workforce experience before they leave high school. Our work is guided by a clear mission: every graduate will be prepared to enroll, enlist, or employ.

One of our primary acceleration strategies is the expansion of Career and Technical Education pathways aligned to regional workforce needs. Through the Caddo Academy of Advanced Manufacturing, students engage in hands-on, industry-aligned coursework that includes industry certifications, concurrent credit opportunities, and direct partnerships with regional employers such as Nidec Motors. These partnerships provide students with exposure to high-wage, high-demand careers and, in many cases, employment opportunities immediately following graduation. Similar acceleration opportunities exist through pathways in culinary arts, health sciences, emergency services, and business entrepreneurship, allowing students to progress at an accelerated pace based on readiness and interest.

In addition to CTE acceleration, Caddo Academy supports academic advancement through concurrent

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credit and honors-level coursework designed to remove barriers for rural students. Students are encouraged to pursue postsecondary learning while still in high school, supported by intentional advising and flexible scheduling. By integrating academics, career training, and real-world application, Caddo Academy has created a cohesive acceleration model that aligns with the ACCESS Act's emphasis on readiness, relevance, and student success beyond graduation.

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## Hope Public Schools

*By Dr. Jonathan Crossley, Superintendent*

The Hope School District has taken a deliberate, districtwide approach to acceleration by aligning long-term strategy, board priorities, and community partnerships around a clear goal: ensuring students graduate with real credentials and real options. The district set an ambitious target for 80 percent of students to earn either an associate degree or a skilled trade certification prior to graduation and expanded its definition of postsecondary readiness to include military readiness and the Arkansas Seal of Biliteracy. This inclusive vision—reinforced through collaboration with DESE, the local Economic Development Commission, and regional partners—affirms that college, career, and military pathways all matter and deserve intentional, high-quality support.

Hope has operated a Collegiate Academy for several years, laying a strong foundation for college acceleration, and in recent years participation has

nearly doubled as that vision expanded through The Academies of Hope, a districtwide rebranding and program-alignment effort focused on acceleration and relevance. In partnership with the University of Arkansas Hope–Texarkana, Hope aligned coursework, credits, and workforce pipelines through joint board work sessions and sustained collaboration, while city leaders, employers, and civic organizations were engaged to build broad community ownership around student success. As a result, Hope is now a leader in the state for students earning Associate of Arts degrees while still in high school, has quadrupled the number of students earning skilled trade certifications, expanded access to internships directly connected to employment after graduation, and is outpacing the state and region in success-ready indicators for high school graduates—all within a district that is nearly 90% free and reduced lunch.

These efforts have produced measurable gains across the K–12 continuum. Elementary reading scores increased by 13 percent, one school improved from an “F” to a “C” rating within two years, and Pre-K enrollment grew by 40 percent through targeted outreach and family engagement—reinforcing the district's belief that acceleration begins early. Importantly, this progress occurred amid political uncertainty and public debate, yet Hope remained focused on outcomes rather than rhetoric. Today, students—many from low-income or historically marginalized backgrounds—are graduating with credentials, confidence, and clear pathways forward, reshaping the narrative of public education in the region and demonstrating what is possible when acceleration is intentional, inclusive, and community-driven.



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## Hot Springs School District

*By Dr. Mike Hernandez, Superintendent*

Hot Springs School District has approached [acceleration](#) through a coherent, K–12 success-ready framework aligned to the ACCESS Act and Arkansas LEARNS, ensuring students are prepared not only to graduate but to thrive beyond high school. Rather than viewing acceleration as a high-school-only initiative, HSSD has intentionally built a developmental pathway that begins with early career awareness in the elementary grades, expands through structured career exploration in middle school, and culminates in rigorous academic, technical, and postsecondary options at the high school level. This work is anchored in a districtwide Student Success Plan (SSP) that guides academic, career, and personal planning and ensures every student is on a clearly defined path toward college, career, or military readiness

At the secondary level, HSSD has [expanded and clarified accelerated learning opportunities](#) through multiple, high-quality pathways. Students may pursue concurrent credit with weighted GPA benefits, International Baccalaureate coursework (Course, Career-Related Programme, or Diploma Programme), or state-aligned Success Ready Pathways leading to industry certification, postsecondary credit, or advanced recognition at graduation. These options are intentionally aligned to Arkansas’s Diploma of Merit and Diploma of Distinction framework, reinforcing that acceleration is both rigorous and attainable for a wide range of learners.

A defining feature of HSSD’s approach is early and intentional planning. Career awareness begins in elementary school through classroom connections and

exposure to a wide range of professions. In middle school, students engage in career interest surveys, structured exploration, and introductory CTE experiences that help them identify strengths, interests, and future goals. By high school, students refine their pathway through hands-on learning, advanced coursework, and portfolio development aligned to the district’s “Enlist, Enroll, or Employ” vision. Through this intentional progression, Hot Springs School District ensures that acceleration is not a single program, but a system of support that moves students forward toward meaningful postsecondary success.

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## Pulaski County School District

*By Dr. Kerry Daughety, Director of Gifted Programs and Advanced Placement*

The Pulaski County School District has provided acceleration opportunities for over a decade, offering advanced middle school courses in English, mathematics, science, and social studies beginning in 6th grade. To prepare students for more rigorous coursework in high school, upper elementary students are provided with enrichment opportunities, and middle school courses later provide experience in advanced academics. Middle school students have had the option to take high school courses, such as Algebra I, in 7th grade and other courses in 8th grade, including Introduction to Business, Algebra II, and Physical Science.

Four years ago, PCSSD implemented the Ford NGL academy model to provide opportunities for scholars to explore career pathways in preparation for post-secondary success. Scholars engage with business and industry leaders, transferring academic knowledge to a career setting while building a network with professionals. Each year, the high schools update the pathway offerings, if needed, based on student interest, high-wage and high-demand careers in central Arkansas, and industry needs. Ninth-grade students explore the pathways on their school campus and self-evaluate their personal interests, skills, and aptitudes in Freshman Seminar to select a pathway. In 10th to 12th grades, scholars take their level courses and participate in experiential learning to prepare them for enrollment, enlistment, or employment after high school. These experiences may include college visits, industry expert speakers, job shadowing, industry certifications, mock job interviews, career and technical student organizations, and career practicums.

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The Multidisciplinary Studies pathway allows students to create a path of Advanced Placement courses (20 offered within the district) to explore a variety of careers. Five additional pathways are provided through the University of Arkansas-Pulaski Technical College, where students can earn a certificate of proficiency or technical permit while earning concurrent credit within their pathway classes. All pathways provide scholars with the opportunity to take concurrent courses as well as Advanced Placement courses if desired, which allows any student to work towards recognition as a College Board AP Scholar and the potential to earn a Diploma of Merit or Distinction. A total of 24 Academy pathways will be offered between the high schools for the next school year.

For the 2026-2027 school year, honors courses will be offered at the 6th-grade level, with more high school course offerings in middle school. These include Physical Science and Biology in 7th grade, and English 1 and Intro to Computer Science in 8th grade. Two new pathways consist of a Multidisciplinary Studies (Concurrent Credit) in Humanities and one in STEM. The DRIVEN School utilized the flexible model for several years but will transition to a charter school serving 9th to 12th graders. Acceleration features shorter instructional periods for most courses, allowing students to take more than the allotted number of courses each year. PCSSD is dedicated to preparing students for success beyond graduation by developing future-ready learners and visionary leaders for a global economy. Through acceleration, career exploration, innovative learning, and opportunities to earn college credit, we empower students to graduate with purpose and a clear pathway to success.

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## Rivercrest School District

*By Shantele Raper, Assistant Superintendent*

As districts respond to the ACCESS Act, acceleration has become both an opportunity and a challenge. At Rivercrest School District, we found that we were ahead in some areas and further behind in others. Rivercrest has a long history of concurrent credit opportunities in high school, with a longstanding policy of the district covering the cost of college credits for students. As a result, approximately 15–20 percent of each Rivercrest High School graduating class earns a one-year General Studies credential or an associate degree through Arkansas Northeastern College. For Spring 2026, 33 percent of Rivercrest High School students are registered for concurrent courses. This success is driven by a strong partnership

with Arkansas Northeastern College, including an effective Career Coach program and close alignment among our Career Coach, CTE Coordinator, counselor, and administration. For Rivercrest, ACCESS proved to be a benefit, particularly related to concurrent credit. The per-credit cost decreased under ACCESS, and because the district was already paying these costs, the change increased opportunities for students while decreasing costs to the district. That said, the new law does not come without obstacles. Navigating scholarship requirements, transitioning between Diploma with Merit or Distinction pathways, understanding weighted credit changes for concurrent courses versus AP, and aligning the broader expectations of LEARNS and ACCESS has added complexity for districts, students, and families.

However, we knew we had areas to improve, and as we reviewed our student opportunities, the gaps became clear. While many students were earning college credit, career awareness tied to those pathways was limited. At the same time, AP offerings and early academic acceleration needed attention, and acceleration in middle-level core courses was almost nonexistent. Although the process is not perfect, we are making progress through student success plans, piloting LAUNCH, hosting parent meetings, and sharing clear information with staff. These efforts are helping students more intentionally balance academics, CTE, and postsecondary goals. The new acceleration standards have made it easier for middle-level core teachers to clearly understand what students need in order to be prepared for accelerated opportunities and high school credit in 8th grade.

Specifically, Rivercrest began with acceleration at the 7th grade level through Career Development. Although Career Development has traditionally been an 8th grade course, we found that moving it to 7th grade worked well. The course provides the exploration students need early, allowing them to



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begin a pathway with a Tier I CTE course in 8th grade. As a result, nearly 98–100 percent of Rivercrest 8th grade students earn at least one high school credit before entering high school. This approach allows students to become CTE completers by 10th grade and gives them time to explore options before fully committing in grades 11 and 12, whether through a technical center, concurrent credit toward an associate degree, or work-based learning and internships. We are also beginning to expand accelerated core offerings beyond Algebra I, preparing students in grades 6 and 7 for accelerated Physical Science and high school English in 8th grade. Additionally, Rivercrest offers a high school Fine Arts credit in 8th grade.

We know we still have a long way to go, but the path seems to be a little clearer, eliminating areas of gray between what used to be core academics and career and technical education. It is simply a pathway to success. As we move forward, we must keep the end in mind, ensuring our students are ready for education or employment, and giving them every opportunity to succeed by starting early.

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## **Rogers Public School District**

*By Dustin Seaton, Director of Advanced Programs*

Rogers Public Schools (RPS) is strategically expanding and aligning its accelerated learning opportunities to meet—and exceed—the needs of advanced learners across the district. Following the passage of the ACCESS Act of 2025, Arkansas districts gained increased flexibility in designing accelerated coursework, along with access to

competitive pilot grants to explore innovative pathways for advanced learning.

In October 2025, RPS leadership successfully secured one of these pilot grants to launch the state’s first K–12 Cambridge International Education feeder pathway. The initiative began at Janie Darr Elementary School under the leadership of Principal Leah Padilla, where the district implemented a schoolwide Global Perspectives focus for grades K–5.

Building on this foundation, Principals Jeremy Yates (Kirksey Middle School) and Lisa Williams (Rogers High School) are extending the pathway into grades 6–8 and 9–12, respectively. Their work includes designing new Cambridge-aligned coursework that will launch in the fall of 2026, ultimately leading to Arkansas’s first AICE Diploma cohort in 2027 and beyond.

Given the global diversity of Northwest Arkansas—driven in large part by the region’s Fortune 500 employers—RPS serves families who expect high academic rigor, cultural relevance, and abundant opportunities for both acceleration and enrichment. The Cambridge AICE Diploma, with its strong emphasis on global perspectives and critical inquiry, aligns seamlessly with our district’s 3E Promise, ensuring that every student graduates with a clear plan and purpose, prepared for Enrollment, Enlistment, or Employment in a pathway that reflects their strengths and aspirations.

As the Director of Advanced Programs, I acknowledge that innovation requires adaptive leadership. My guiding message to staff is that there’s no growth in the comfort zone, noting that we encourage students to embrace a growth mindset, yet as adults we sometimes become resistant to change ourselves. The world is rapidly transforming under our feet as advances in artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology, and human-tech relationships reshape how we live, work and solve global challenges.

This mindset is shared by campus leaders. Tina Matsubara, Advanced Learning Coach at Darr Elementary, describes the impact of the Cambridge Global Perspectives pilot as transformative, adding, “Students are asking questions about the world around them—beyond Rogers, Benton County, Arkansas, and even the United States. It’s exciting and inspiring to witness.”

RPS is also proud to highlight the continued success of the Rogers Honors Academy (RHA), a premier program designed for students with a minimum grade point average of 3.7 who wish to pursue highly selective postsecondary opportunities. Founded in 2017 through a partnership with the Walton Family Foundation, RHA provides students from all three high schools with one-on-one college advising, elite

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campus visits, and a structured sequence of college and career readiness experiences.

RHA has become one of the most innovative and future-focused high school programs in Arkansas, offering students an integrated experience that combines advanced academics, professional mentorship, leadership development, and community engagement. This comprehensive approach has helped RHA students become among the most competitive applicants at top colleges and universities nationwide.

It is clear that today's students and families are seeking meaningful opportunities and experiences that prepare them for an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Rogers Public Schools remains firmly committed to meeting that expectation. With the support and flexibility provided through the ACCESS Act, RPS is expanding accelerated pathways and introducing innovative diploma options at a level unprecedented in Arkansas. These efforts ensure that our graduates are not only well-prepared, but truly competitive on a global stage.

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## Searcy Public School District

*By Megan Churchwell, Searcy High School Assistant Principal and CTE Coordinator and Shelly Elliott, 7-12 Advanced Learning Coordinator*

Searcy Public School District has taken a proactive approach to expanding opportunities for academic acceleration and career exploration. Driven by a commitment to opportunity, the district provides students at every grade level with purposeful experiences that prepare them for success after graduation in Employment, Enlistment, or Enrollment.

Beginning in the elementary grades, students are introduced to career awareness, and in the 2026–2027 school year, expanded honors coursework will begin in 5th grade. These efforts provide early exposure to rigorous academics, support career exploration, and build a strong foundation for advanced learning in middle, junior, and high school.

Searcy High School has taken intentional steps to ensure students are equipped with the academic preparation, skills, and experiences necessary to be competitive for scholarships and selective admissions programs, in alignment with the goals of the Arkansas ACCESS Act. This year, the district expanded advanced coursework by adding AP Seminar, with plans to introduce AP Research next year. Along with strong performance in existing AP courses, these



offerings allow students to earn a Diploma with Distinction, qualifying them for the Governor's Scholarship, which provides a scholarship for up to \$5,000 per year. AP World History was also added, and students were given increased opportunities to begin AP coursework earlier in their high school careers.

As admissions and scholarship committees increasingly look beyond GPA and test scores, Searcy High School supports college-bound students through ACT preparation, targeted admissions and scholarship counseling, and assistance with developing high school resumes. Students are also guided through competitive application processes such as the Arkansas Governor's School. These supports are critical, as navigating college admissions and financial aid can be complex for students and families.

Participation in concurrent credit courses have also increased as barriers were removed and acceleration opportunities expanded. More than 35 seniors are on track to earn the Diploma of Distinction for 2025–2026 by completing a Technical Certificate of General Studies.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) is embedded throughout a student's educational journey. Students encounter careers, skills, and real-world applications from elementary through high school, helping them see relevance and possibility in their education.

To guide this work, Searcy has adopted a scaffolded "Learn, Do, Act" framework that builds career readiness over time:

- Grades 4–6: Learn – Students are introduced to foundational career concepts.
- Grades 7–8: Do – Students practice and apply skills through exploratory courses, hands-on activities, and career-focused experiences.

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- Grades 9–12: Act – Students apply skills in authentic, career-ready contexts through advanced coursework, work-based learning, and career pathway experiences.

Searcy High School also intentionally offers expanded career focused coursework to give students earlier access to meaningful learning experiences. This year, 8th graders could take Introduction to Health Care and Introduction to Agriculture courses that have led to strong engagement and academic success. This approach allows students the option to become CTE completers by 10th grade and provides flexibility in their schedules to fit additional wants and needs, such as technical center coursework, concurrent credit toward an associate degree, AP courses, or work-based learning and internships. At the high school level, CTE Career Practicum sections have grown across multiple pathways, helping students complete Level 3 courses and meet Success-Ready Pathway criteria.

By providing these opportunities and paths, we are ensuring students are prepared to access, pursue, and succeed in employment, enlistment, and enrollment.

It is clear that Arkansas districts are making significant strides in implementing accelerated learning pathways in response to the ACCESS Act. By expanding honors courses, Advanced Placement, concurrent credit, Career and Technical Education options, and implementing rigorous academic programs like Cambridge and International Baccalaureate, districts are providing students with the academic skills, career awareness, and real-world experiences needed to succeed beyond high school. These efforts demonstrate a strong commitment to student growth and postsecondary readiness across the state.

As districts plan ahead, updated guidance and details can be found on the DESE website on the [“Accelerated Learning”](#) page and in the newly released [Course Code Updates for the 2026-2027 Academic Year](#).

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# EMBRACING THE VISION OF BUILDING THE FUTURE: EVERY LEARNER, EVERY DAY, EVERY WAY

Contributor: Susan Gilley, Executive Director, Instructional Technology & Federal Programs, Harrison School District



This year marks my 41st year in education and while many things have changed—and will continue to change—many things remain the same. My educational philosophy has always revolved around “**what is best for students.**” When every problem, obstacle, or decision is viewed through that lens, the answers often become clearer. It is much like remembering your “WHY.”

As a federal coordinator and CTE director, I can easily get lost in the loss of funds, budgetary shortfalls or the day-to-day processes that often lead back to the same question: “*But who’s going to pay for that?*”

Ultimately, our children are the ones paying for everything. They are paying with their time, focus, interests and passions. It is our responsibility as

educators to prepare them for their future. How we decide what that looks like is increasingly difficult. Their future workplace in today’s artificial intelligence world continues to be an ever-evolving, changing landscape. We must ask ourselves, “*Are we preparing them for a future career that will be replaced or respaced by AI?*”

Of course, in many ways it all comes down to money. How will we fund the student opportunities we want to make available in a fiscally responsible way? This makes my unique role of federal coordinator, CTE director, and other duties as assigned a perfect fit. It allows me to focus on keeping opportunities cutting-edge for students while also identifying creative and

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sustainable ways to fund the work that prepares them for the future.

Which leads to the question, ***“What are we doing at Harrison School District?”*** and I am proud to share about several programs that we are working on to support our mission of *Building the Future: Every Learner, Every Day, Every Way*. These include the WOLF program, our teacher apprenticeship program, and an innovative middle school collaborative literacy initiative.

- Let’s start with **WOLF**. The "Arkansas Wolf Program" primarily refers to the WOLF (Work-Based Opportunities Leading to Future Employment) program, a vocational training program for students with disabilities through Arkansas Rehabilitation Services.

This collaborative partnership between our district and Arkansas Rehabilitation Services provides work readiness skills and experience to help students achieve competitive, integrated employment after high school. We are at the beginning of the process this school year of integrating these pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities into our high school program of possibilities. A district can have up to 40 students employed each semester. Currently, we have reached about half of that number, but hope to have the full allotment employed in a variety of places on campus as cafeteria, custodial, office, lab, library, teaching, or technology staff assistants. We also want to work with area businesses to expand the program to area business establishments so that students really are on their way to their work life future. To learn more about the WOLF program and pre-employment transition services, please visit the Department of Workforce Connections, [Arkansas Rehabilitation Services website](#). For more information from there, you can click in the center of that web page where it says [Click here for more information](#) and the questionnaire for new schools interested in Pre-ETS.

- Next, is our **teacher apprenticeship program** which includes two interconnected pathways. The first focuses on building a pre-educator pipeline for high school students interested in teaching. In our first year, seven students have already passed their paraprofessional praxis exam allowing them to be hired as classified employees. Two of those students have been working as aides in our after-school program and one began serving as a substitute in an elementary school this semester. The second pathway supports our current paraprofessional staff. More than 20 classified staff are actively pursuing bachelor’s degrees with the goal of becoming licensed teachers. We have already revised our paraprofessional salary schedule to incentivize degree completion by providing increased pay for continued education.

Through the Arkansas Teacher Registered Apprenticeship Program, paraprofessionals partner with master teachers who support their coursework while providing on-the-job training and mentorship. Because apprentices are aligned with approved postsecondary institutions, they are able to complete student teaching without leaving the district—a true win-win-win for staff, students, and schools. To learn more about the Arkansas Teacher Registered Apprenticeship program, please check out the state website [here](#).

- Finally, our **middle school literacy teachers** are expanding a project they have refined over several years. The basic premise of the original project was “What is one well-informed action members of your community can take to promote healthy, sustainable food choices or contribute to environmental improvement.” This project that requires a research-based solution to address a community health issue has consistently impressed community panels with innovative ideas—many of which have been implemented locally. For the 25-26 school year, they chose to kick-start the program into overdrive by launching a student-led initiative called Homegrown Stories funded in part by the Harrison Public School Foundation. Through this project, students are working to preserve the stories of local farmers by bringing them to life in a series of children’s books. Partnering with local author Brandy Mincer, students conducted interviews with a local farm family, wrote the story with author mentorship, collaborated with a student illustrator, and managed the marketing plan. The students are excited to announce the launch of their first book, *Farmer Jack and the Never-Ending Puzzle* on January 27. This has been an amazing learning experience for all involved in creating, producing, and publishing a book while integrating community experiences with student-led initiatives. I, for one, can’t wait for them to share their experiences, and I plan to share my newfound knowledge of book publishing at the Spring Arkansas Association of Federal Coordinator’s Conference. To learn more about their book and this project, click [here](#). They will also be presenting at the National Ag in the Classroom Conference in Rhode Island this summer.

I am proud of the work happening at Harrison School District and the opportunities that we are creating for students. It truly is a privilege and blessing to “show and find the money” to our students, staff, and community in order to fund projects that truly are: *Building the Future: Every Learner, Every Day, Every Way*. **#GoGobs**

# FROM ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL TO RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTION: LEADING DIFFERENTIATION AT SCALE

Contributor: Sophia Kor, Partner Engagement Manager, Modern Classrooms Project



In many Arkansas classrooms, teachers are expected to meet students at wildly different readiness levels—the percentage of students both below Basic and at Advanced for grade 4 mathematics in the last five years continues to be the largest these groups have been in the last 20 years (or more), according to [NAEP](#). Arkansas students’ math performance over the last five years has reached its lowest point since 2003—and yet, educators are expected to continue keeping the class moving through the curriculum. The result is predictable: some students are bored, some are lost, and some are absent altogether. As a result, teachers will inevitably feel forced to reduce rigor and teach to the middle. In Mayflower Public Schools, 4th-grade math teacher Allison Wilbanks reported “students looking bored or not really understanding.” And while her experience is not unique, do we have to accept this as a simple reality of teaching?

This isn’t one teacher’s classroom management issue or one school’s training problem—it’s a system-wide problem that affects learners’ ability to learn. We can’t expect educators to meet every learner’s needs through a one-size-fits-all approach. Though differentiation has inherent value in supporting the needs of every learner, it is rarely implemented at scale in ways that support educators in meaningfully moving the needle on mastery. For district leaders, the question is no longer whether differentiation matters, but how to support it effectively.

## Differentiation Defined

Differentiated instruction is best understood not as a set of isolated strategies, but as a deliberate approach to teaching that responds to meaningful differences among learners. Researchers define differentiation as the intentional tailoring of instruction through modifications to content, process, product, and the learning environment in order to better support individual learners (Wilkinson & Penney, 2014; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). Differentiated instruction requires educators to adjust curriculum, pedagogy, and delivery methods so that all students can access rigorous learning experiences (Roy et al., 2013; Tomlinson, 2014, 2015; Mbugua & Muthomi, 2014).

In practice, this requires:

- Access to high-quality instructional materials, including curriculum and other resources
- Implementation of a variety of instructional strategies that support all students to achieve mastery
- Classroom systems that support students on their individual learning journeys toward the course’s shared learning goals.

Importantly, differentiation is not about writing 25 separate lesson plans or lowering expectations for some students; it is about designing classrooms that are responsive. Tomlinson et al. (2003) emphasize that differentiation is rooted in deep respect for learners and requires teachers to proactively modify instructional resources, activities, and expectations to ensure all students can thrive. Smale-Jacobse et al. (2019) further explain that effective differentiation includes both pedagogical decisions (what teachers differentiate and how) and organizational structures (such as grouping practices and pacing systems), highlighting that differentiation is not synonymous with rigid ability tracking but instead relies on flexible, purpose-driven instructional design (Corno, 2008; McQuarrie et al., 2008; Valiande & Koutselini, 2009).

Differentiation matters in mathematics because math learning is uniquely cumulative—when students miss key concepts early, gaps compound quickly and can

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shape not only achievement but also confidence and persistence. Research suggests that differentiated instruction, particularly when it intentionally adjusts content, process, and product, can significantly improve student mathematical achievement by varying levels of structure, support, and autonomy in learning tasks (Rijal, Aswarliansyah, & Waluyo, 2025). Even short-term differentiated instruction has been shown to improve performance and increase students' confidence in solving foundational problems, making it especially valuable for students who have historically struggled in mathematics (Aguhayon, Tingson, & Pentang, 2023). Yet despite its promise, differentiation is notoriously difficult to implement in math classrooms because traditional pacing often forces teachers to choose between supporting students who need more time and challenging students who are ready to move forward. In this sense, differentiation is not simply a pedagogical preference—it is a response to the reality of student variability, particularly in mathematics. Mayflower students themselves highlight the emotional stakes: one shared that before self-paced learning, they “didn’t really feel confident in math,” but with more flexible pacing, they no longer felt “rushed or like I have somebody waiting on me.” Differentiation in math is hard because it requires more than good intentions; it requires structures that allow teachers to respond to real-time learning needs and provide immediate feedback to correct misunderstandings.

### **Differentiation Done Differently**

This year, Mayflower Public Schools has taken a different approach to supporting differentiation at scale. Instead of discussing differentiation as an individual teacher strategy, it is embedded as a system-level instructional model. Mayflower’s District Math Specialist, Veronica Hebard, has been heavily involved in supporting educators in shifting their pedagogical approach to meet the needs of every



student, and the team has been thoughtful about when and how they are rolling out the training and support. Through implementation of the Modern Classrooms approach, teachers maintain their high-quality instructional materials while redesigning how time, pacing, and feedback operate within the classroom. Rather than replacing content or dumbing it down, the model strengthens the curriculum by creating the conditions that support turnkey differentiation: formative assessment, flexible learning paths, and responsive instructional decision-making (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2014).

As an example, in Mayflower, math class could look like this:

- Begin with a whole-class warm-up, designed to activate prior knowledge and build student discourse.
- Teachers facilitate an inquiry task, allowing students to explore concepts collaboratively before formal instruction.
- From there, the classroom shifts into a structured self-paced learning block, supported by checklists, guided notes, practice tasks, and instructional videos that students can revisit as many times as they need to. This self-paced time is not unstructured independent work; it is the engine that creates time for targeted support.
- Students complete short mastery checks aligned to the lesson objective. These short one- or two-problem quizzes allow educators to quickly assess student understanding
- Teachers use formative data to pull small groups and provide individual feedback.
- Class concludes with a closure routine that reinforces learning and gives students a chance to reflect on misconceptions and growth.

Where in the past, educators may have had capacity restraints and pacing guides that required them to leave kids who missed a lesson or who needed extra 1:1 support behind, they now have more freedom to provide targeted support when and where they need. Orienting classrooms toward mastery also allows educators to use the data to guide their differentiation. Mastery checks function as real-time formative assessments, allowing teachers to identify misconceptions quickly and trigger a reassessment loop when students need additional support. This structure reflects what research consistently emphasizes: differentiated instruction is inseparable from continuous assessment and flexible adaptation, and it succeeds best when embedded in an intentional organizational system rather than left to teacher

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improvisation (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019; Deunk et al., 2018).

But scaling differentiation from one classroom to an entire district takes intentional leadership decisions.

### **3 Ways District Leaders Can Enable Differentiation with Veronica Hebard**

#### **1. Protect and define instructional time structures**

Before leaders can scale differentiation, they have to answer a basic question: What does differentiation actually look like in a classroom? Too often, districts roll out the language of differentiation without defining the instructional structures that make it possible. In Mayflower, Veronica is still refining how to help building leaders develop a shared vision for student-centered math instruction—but that work is essential. If principals and instructional leaders cannot clearly picture the end goal, they cannot coach toward it, protect time for it, or evaluate it fairly.

Teachers also cannot be expected to take instructional risks without this clarity. Imagine being observed during a self-paced math block by a leader who has only ever seen whole-group instruction. Without shared understanding, principals may mistake strong student-centered routines for a lack of control, or confuse mastery-based pacing with a sink-or-swim approach. Both misunderstandings are damaging: the

first discourages innovation, and the second risks undermining rigor and accountability.

When leaders understand the structure of differentiated classrooms—how warm-ups, self-paced learning, mastery checks, and small-group instruction work together—they can provide meaningful feedback, reinforce high expectations, and protect the time teachers need to differentiate effectively. Building leaders who know what to look for can identify whether students are engaged in productive learning, whether pacing is purposeful, and whether teachers are using data to respond to student needs. Most importantly, educators gain confidence that the support they receive is aligned to research-backed instruction rather than personal preference. From that foundation, differentiation becomes scalable—not because teachers work harder, but because the system is designed to support it.

#### **2. Make pacing flexible without losing rigor**

Have we really lost the forest for the trees when it comes to pacing student learning? By treating pacing guides as rigid requirements rather than suggested timelines, we create predictable outcomes: students who are behind fall further behind, students who are ready for challenge disengage, and teachers feel forced to cover content instead of ensuring mastery. A curriculum needs to be used with integrity, both to provide rigorous, aligned learning that is flexible enough to support all students.

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In Mayflower, leaders are building a system where students are held accountable for mastery through clear learning targets and aligned assessments, but they are not punished for needing additional time or support. Fourth-grade educator Allison articulated this culture shift: “Students know it’s okay if I am a little bit behind my neighbor because we’ll end up catching back up together.” This is the heart of flexible pacing—students are not released from expectations; they are given a structured pathway to meet them.

For district leaders, the work is not simply giving teachers permission to slow down. It is building systems that allow pacing flexibility without instructional drift: protecting time for reteaching, ensuring that teachers have clear standards-aligned mastery expectations, and creating common language around what it means to be on track. When pacing becomes responsive instead of rigid, differentiation stops being an extra task and becomes the natural result of a well-designed instructional system.

### **3. Foster a deep understanding of formative assessment**

Formative assessment provides the backbone that makes this all work. It acts as the data engine to respond to students in real time rather than relying on unit tests or end-of-quarter results. But too often, educators and leaders misunderstand formative assessment as something formal, infrequent, or compliance-driven—another spreadsheet, another benchmark, another meeting. In reality, formative assessment is not always a test; it is a continuous process of gathering evidence of learning and using that evidence to adjust instruction immediately (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2014). Without this cycle, differentiation becomes guesswork.

In Mayflower, mastery checks provide a clear example of formative assessment functioning as it should: short, standards-aligned measures that give teachers immediate information about student understanding. These checks are not “gotcha” quizzes or grading tools—they are instructional signals. Educators can use this data to pull small groups for reteaching, a practice that aligns directly with research emphasizing that high-quality differentiated instruction depends on frequent assessment and flexible instructional adaptation (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). When students struggle, the response is not to move on anyway; it is to reteach, reassess, and ensure understanding before advancing.

District leaders can strengthen differentiation by ensuring formative assessment is embedded into instructional expectations and professional learning. This includes training teachers to interpret formative data quickly, creating schedules that allow small-

group reteaching during the school day, and helping principals identify whether formative assessment is being used as a tool for learning rather than a tool for grading. When leaders prioritize formative assessment as a classroom practice—not an accountability event—teachers gain the ability to intervene earlier, students gain faster feedback, and differentiation becomes sustainable at scale.

The national data from educators who implement the Modern Classrooms model suggests that when differentiation is built into instructional design, it becomes both more effective and more sustainable. Initially, only 51% of educators who attended a Modern Classrooms Project summer training reported agreeing with the statement “I am able to effectively serve students at all levels of understanding.” Three months after the training, 78% of educators agreed, and nine months later, this number increased to 84%. Instead of becoming yet another demand on teachers’ plates, educators are finding that this approach makes their jobs easier. Where only 49% of trainees initially agreed that teaching felt like a sustainable career, compare that to 78% at three months and 89% at nine months. And unlike many of the fleeting “district initiatives,” it appears this has a lasting impact on educators’ instruction. Before training, only 24% of educators agreed that they had plenty of opportunities to work 1:1 or in small groups with students; three months after training, that figure rose to 73% and remained high at 70% nine months later. These results reinforce what Mayflower’s educators describe firsthand: when differentiation becomes a system, teachers regain the time and structure needed to ensure all students can succeed.

For Arkansas instructional leaders, the lesson from Mayflower is both practical and hopeful: differentiation does not require abandoning rigor, rewriting curriculum, or asking teachers to do the impossible. It requires leadership decisions that protect time, prioritize formative assessment, and normalize flexible pacing as part of high-quality instruction. When districts build structures that make small-group instruction routine, mastery data actionable, and student progress visible, differentiation shifts from aspiration to reality. As Mayflower’s experience shows, when the system changes, classrooms change—and when classrooms change, students who once felt rushed, overlooked, or left behind begin to experience mathematics as something they can access and master. The task before district leaders is clear: design systems where differentiation is implemented well at scale. After all, the question is not whether students are different. The question is whether our system is designed to respond.

# NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES TO CREATE INNOVATIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOLARS

Contributor: Keith McGee, Superintendent, Watson Chapel School District



## Spotlight Feature: A First-in-the-State of Arkansas JROTC Concurrent Credit Partnership

One of the most innovative initiatives to emerge from Watson Chapel School District's commitment to student-centered transformation is the establishment of a first-in-the-state concurrent credit pathway for scholars enrolled in the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) program. This initiative reflects the district's broader belief that students flourish when learning experiences are both rigorous and relevant, particularly when those experiences honor students' interests, talents, and future aspirations.

Through a strategic triad partnership with the University of Arkansas at Monticello, the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, and Watson Chapel School District (WCSD), JROTC scholars now have access to college-level coursework aligned with leadership, organizational management, and civic responsibility. This partnership represents a reimagining of how career-focused programs can intersect with academic rigor and post-secondary access. Rather than viewing JROTC solely as a military preparatory program, WCSD intentionally positioned it as a college- and career-aligned pathway that develops transferable leadership skills applicable across multiple professions.

The vision behind this initiative was rooted in a simple but powerful question: How can we honor the leadership development inherent in JROTC while expanding students' access to college credentials? By leveraging the expertise of higher education partners and the structure, discipline, and expectations of the JROTC program, WCSD created a pathway that affirms students' strengths, elevates expectations, and broadens postsecondary options—particularly for students who may not have previously envisioned themselves as college-bound.

This initiative reflects a growing recognition that meaningful innovation in education often emerges at the intersection of partnership and purpose. By aligning secondary education, higher education, and leadership development, the JROTC concurrent credit pathway offers a scalable model for districts seeking to expand access while maintaining relevance. More importantly, it reinforces a core belief: when students are provided with meaningful opportunities that connect learning to leadership and future goals, engagement, confidence, and aspiration follow.



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### Superintendent's Reflection

The establishment of concurrent credit opportunities within the Watson Chapel High School JROTC program has proven to be a strategic investment not only in academic rigor but also in student behavior and overall school culture. Grounded in the belief that students thrive when provided with purposeful, relevant learning experiences, district leadership intentionally expanded JROTC coursework to include college-aligned instruction. Since the introduction of these courses, the district has experienced a notable decline in behavioral referrals, reinforcing the long-held understanding that structured academic pathways positively influence student engagement, accountability, and conduct.



During the 2022–2023 academic year, JROTC enrollment stood at 265 scholars, serving as the baseline year prior to the expansion of concurrent credit opportunities. Enrollment increased to 327 scholars in 2023–2024, reflecting a 43 percent growth rate, and continued its upward trajectory in 2024–2025 with 369 scholars enrolled—a 50 percent increase over the baseline year. By 2025–2026, enrollment reached 413 scholars, representing a 55 percent increase, coinciding with the first-year scholars gained access to college-level coursework through the concurrent credit pathway.

Beyond enrollment gains, the impact on student behavior has been equally compelling. Administrators observed fewer disciplinary referrals among JROTC scholars, a trend attributed to the program's emphasis on leadership, discipline, consistency, and mentorship. The opportunity to earn college credit instilled a heightened sense of responsibility and purpose, encouraging students to view themselves as scholars preparing for life beyond high school. This initiative underscores a critical lesson for educational leaders: when innovation is intentionally aligned with character development and high expectations, schools cultivate environments that support academic success, positive behavior, and long-term student outcomes.

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*Keith McGee is Superintendent of the Watson Chapel School District in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. He is committed to advancing student-centered leadership, equitable access, and innovative partnerships that prepare scholars for success beyond graduation.*  
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