



Ozark Mountain School District
Regular Session– Western Grove
August 20, 2026 at 6:00 p.m.

Board Members Present: Travis Freeman, Andy McCutcheon, James Morris, Kenneth Hancock, Bart Beaver, Travis Dixon, and Allen Glidewell

Board Members Absent: None

1. The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.
2. The meeting was called to order by Board President Andy McCutcheon at 6:00 p.m.
3. **Public Comment:** Wiley Jones, a resident of the district and former student, expressed concerns about the need for the district to continue growing and expanding opportunities for students, stating that a school that cannot expand will eventually suffocate. He encouraged the district to bring back tennis, consider adding pickleball, and provide more before- and after-school activities for students.
4. **Student Achievement:** Information was provided by Mr. Knapp. No action was taken.
5. Motion was made by Travis Freeman and seconded by James Morris to amend the current MOU to correct the wording from Pyatt to Bruno and to extend the Bruno Trophies MOU for an additional three years. Motion carried.
6. Motion was made by Travis Dixon and seconded by Kenneth Hancock to approve the minutes of the July 16, 2026 Regular Session and the July 30, 2026 Special Session. Motion carried.
7. Motion was made by Kenneth Hancock and seconded by Allen Glidewell to approve the financial report for the month of July 2026. Motion carried.
Ending Balance: \$7,859,859.13
8. No personnel matters were presented for discussion or action.
9. Motion was made by Travis Freeman and seconded by James Morris to approve the slate of petitions for transfer. Motion carried.

10. Motion was made by Travis Freeman and seconded by Bart Beaver to approve Mr. Knapp to sign the CRW Consulting E-Rate Services Agreement. Motion carried.

11. **General Discussion:**

Facilities Update – Aliza Jones: Aliza Jones provided an update regarding district facilities. She reported that representatives from the State Facilities Division and the Arkansas Department of Labor had conducted a walkthrough of the Bruno-Pyatt campus. The information from the walkthrough had been received shortly before the meeting, and the district is awaiting a more detailed report.

At the Bruno-Pyatt campus, mold has returned and will need to be addressed. Two items identified as needing immediate attention are asbestos testing and mold/indoor air-quality testing. Mrs. Jones stated that the underlying source of the moisture issues needs to be corrected and that addressing the problem would likely begin with digging a trench and installing French drains around the building to improve drainage.

Chemicals remaining from the former science room were also identified and will need to be properly disposed of.

Preliminary estimates indicate that renovation of the Bruno-Pyatt facility could cost millions of dollars. Potential options discussed included renovation, demolition, or sale of the property. The district will seek a quote from Nabholz for additional testing.

Mrs. Jones further reported that, based on information received from the Department of Labor, installation of a new awning and gutters would not be advisable at this time due to structural separation concerns with the building.

Mrs. Jones also reported that a space audit of the Western Grove campus identified an estimated space shortage of approximately 21,000–29,000 square feet.

Facilities Update – Mr. Knapp: Mr. Knapp discussed scaling down the proposed outdoor classroom at St. Joe and reviewed different Facilities Condition Index (FCI) ratings for various campus areas. He recommended considering an addition at the Western Grove campus to address space needs.

Mr. Knapp also provided an update on the modular building project and reported that the estimated timeline for completion has been moved to mid-September.

Bruno-Pyatt Mold and Structural Concerns: Heath reported that representatives from the State Facilities Division and Department of Labor indicated that the previous mold remediation at Bruno-Pyatt addressed the mold without correcting the underlying structural issues. He discussed ongoing water intrusion along the sides of the building and through the roof, with mold growing on both the block walls and sheetrock. He noted that this is the second time mold remediation has been necessary and discussed the need to correct the underlying water-intrusion and structural issues to prevent the problem from recurring.

Motion was made by Travis Freeman and seconded by James Morris to authorize Mr. Knapp to pursue testing by Nabholz at the Bruno-Pyatt campus, provided the cost is under \$50,000. Testing may include air ducts, wet samples, indoor and outdoor air samples, and asbestos testing. If the cost exceeds \$50,000, a special board meeting will be called for further consideration. Motion carried.

Presented to the Ozark Mountain School District Board of Education
Jess Knapp, Superintendent

The decisions before us regarding facilities, enrollment, transportation, and the future configuration of our campuses are among the most consequential decisions this Board will make. They deserve more than an emotional response, and they deserve more than an attempt to balance what one community has gained or lost against what another has gained or lost.

They require us to ask a more fundamental question: **What configuration provides the most responsible, sustainable, and least disruptive educational system for the children and families of Ozark Mountain School District?**

After considerable study, consultation, and reflection, my recommendation is that Western Grove Elementary students remain at Western Grove; St. Joe Elementary continue operating for as long as doing so remains educationally and financially viable; academic and vocational opportunities at Bruno-Pyatt continue to be explored; and future facilities investment necessary to accommodate our students be concentrated at Western Grove rather than accomplished by transporting Western Grove students to St. Joe.

My rationale begins with one principle: **We should transport the fewest number of students the least distance possible for the least amount of time.** Before proceeding, I want to make one thing absolutely clear. Since I have served as superintendent, there has not been a formal administrative proposal, within our current facilities planning, to transport Western Grove Elementary students to St. Joe. I am not proposing that configuration tonight. Nevertheless, it is something of an elephant in the room, and responsible planning requires us to examine significant alternatives—even those we ultimately reject.

I have spent twenty-one years in education, serving in three different districts as a teacher, academic coach, literacy coach, dean of students, principal, and superintendent; however, I am not an architect, facilities engineer, attorney, financial adviser, or demographer. Responsible leadership requires recognizing the limits of one's own expertise.

For that reason, I have sought the counsel of people who know more than I do about these matters—facilities advisers, veteran administrators, educational cooperative personnel, financial advisers, attorneys, state-level educational professionals, and members of our administrative team. The advice has been remarkably consistent: **Do not unnecessarily transport students away from the district's largest concentration of students to solve a facilities problem. Address the facilities need where the students are concentrated.**

I wish we did not have to transport a single child. But rural education makes some transportation unavoidable. There is, however, an important difference between necessary transportation and unnecessary transportation. Arkansas's own facilities-planning framework recognizes reasonable travel time, demographic considerations, efficient instructional delivery, appropriate space utilization, student health and safety, and sound educational practices as legitimate facilities considerations (Arkansas Division of Public School Academic Facilities and Transportation, *Academic Facilities Partnership Program Rules*, §5.01).

Transportation should therefore provide access where geography makes it necessary. **It should not become a strategy for redistributing enrollment among buildings.** Western Grove Elementary and Ozark Mountain High School represent the largest concentration of

students in our district. Moving elementary students away from Western Grove would intentionally transport students away from that concentration.

So I ask a simple question: **If adequate instructional space already existed at Western Grove, would we seriously consider removing students who are being served there and transporting them somewhere else simply to redistribute enrollment?** I do not believe we would. That reveals the actual problem before us.

Our problem is not that Western Grove students attend school in the wrong location. Our problem is that we need adequate facilities for the students who are already there. We should be extremely cautious about solving a facilities problem by creating a transportation problem.

Geography also matters to families. For many families around Western Grove, the natural movement for employment, healthcare, shopping, and emergency medical services is north toward Harrison. Census data reinforce the broader point that commuting is already burdensome within our district geography: estimated mean travel time to work is approximately 34.2 minutes, compared with 22.5 minutes statewide (U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2024 Five-Year Estimates).

Our families already live with rural distance. We should not unnecessarily make that burden greater. Imagine a parent who works north of Western Grove, has a high-school student at Ozark Mountain High School, and an elementary child whom we send south. Add an illness, doctor's appointment, parent conference, ballgame, weather change, or a single parent coordinating multiple children. Those are not theoretical inconveniences. They are daily life. And today's families have choices. They may choose neighboring districts, school choice, homeschooling, charter schools, or Education Freedom Accounts. If we make OMSD substantially less convenient for a family while another educational option exists in the direction that family already travels, we must acknowledge the potential consequence.

Enrollment loss does not necessarily happen all at once. It happens one family at a time. One kindergarten decision at a time. One school-choice application at a time. One decision to homeschool at a time. Over ten years, those decisions matter. **If a plan saves money but causes families to leave the district, those savings will disappear.**

Our enrollment analysis indicates that OMSD should prepare for continued demographic pressure over the coming decade. A reasonable ten-year planning range places district enrollment at approximately 430 to 470 students, depending upon retention, demographic changes, birth trends, school-choice behavior, Education Freedom Account participation, and other variables (Ozark Mountain School District, *Ten-Year Enrollment Projection Analysis*, 2026).

No projection is prophecy. But one fact is certain: **Moving existing students between our own buildings does not create a single additional student for Ozark Mountain School District. It changes distribution. It does not change enrollment.** I also want to be unmistakably clear about something else: **St. Joe Elementary is not the problem.** St. Joe serves children well. It possesses relationships, traditions, history, and a school culture worthy of respect. I believe St. Joe Elementary should remain open for as long as doing so remains educationally responsible and economically feasible.

Supporting Western Grove does not require diminishing St. Joe. Supporting St. Joe does not require creating hardship for Western Grove. There is room for both. Every community in this district has experienced change and sacrifice. Those losses are real, and we should respect them. But I do not believe the answer to one community's past sacrifice is to create a new sacrifice for another community's children.

We cannot undo yesterday by redistributing hardship today. Yesterday's sacrifices should inform our compassion. They should not dictate tomorrow's sacrifices. There is also a cost that never appears on our balance sheet: **A child's time.** Additional time on a bus is time not spent at home, reading, playing, participating in activities, completing homework, eating with family, resting, or simply being a child. Some transportation time is unavoidable. That is precisely why we should not voluntarily create more of it than necessary.

The facilities question, then, becomes fairly straightforward. If Western Grove requires additional space to serve the students already concentrated there, we should evaluate how best to provide that space there. *

Additionally, the 19.2 MILLION APPROPRIATED FOR BUILDING THAT NEVER CAME TO FRUITION

Arkansas facilities records already document previous Partnership projects at Western Grove, including a new building and a subsequent classroom addition, with state financial participation * (Arkansas Division of Public-School Academic Facilities and Transportation, *2016 State Master Plan*). That history does not determine what should happen today, but it demonstrates that capital investment at Western Grove is neither novel nor inherently unreasonable.

The underlying principle is simple: **Buildings exist to serve children. Children do not exist to fill buildings.** I believe there is another useful way to test our reasoning. Remove the words Western Grove, St. Joe, and Bruno-Pyatt from the discussion. Imagine presenting an independent group of experienced educational and facilities professionals with only the enrollment numbers, map, transportation routes, facilities, commuting patterns, financial implications, and alternatives.

One option transports a significant number of students away from the district's largest concentration of students and potentially away from the direction their families naturally travel. The other keeps children where they are successfully being served and addresses the facilities need where the students are concentrated.

What would an objective observer recommend? And perhaps more importantly: If the circumstances were reversed—if St. Joe contained our largest concentration of students and programs and the family and transportation patterns pointed toward St. Joe—would this same principle lead us toward St. Joe?

For me, the answer is yes. That is why I believe the principle is defensible. **A sound principle should survive a change in names.** This is not a Western Grove principle. It is not a St. Joe principle. **It is a student-centered principle.**

We must also distinguish equality from equity. Fairness does not mean that every campus has the same enrollment, receives identical investment, or experiences equal hardship. The question is not: **"Has every community sacrificed equally?"** The question is: **"What**

arrangement most responsibly serves all of the children entrusted to this district?"

Fairness does not require us to distribute hardship equally.

Likewise, supporting St. Joe does not require pretending circumstances can never change. Enrollment changes. Funding changes. Laws change. Facilities age. I recommend that we eventually establish transparent enrollment and financial thresholds applicable to the future of SJE. For instance, if St. Joe enrollment falls below a certain number, we consider the option of a micro school or a school within a school, a concept I plan to explain more thoroughly in the near future. That would give the St. Joe community something it deserves: predictability and honesty.

Most importantly, this must not continue to be Western Grove versus St. Joe. Our schools represent communities, memories, traditions, and generations of families. Those histories deserve respect. **The children sitting in our classrooms today did not make the decisions of the past. They should not inherit our grievances.** Our responsibility is not to settle the historical ledger among communities. **It is to educate children.**

My Recommendation

I therefore recommend that we:

1. Keep Western Grove Elementary students at Western Grove.
2. Continue operating St. Joe Elementary while doing so remains educationally responsible and economically feasible, taking into account aforementioned options.
3. Continue exploring academic and vocational opportunities at Bruno-Pyatt.
4. Address Western Grove's additional facilities needs at Western Grove rather than by relocating its students.
5. Evaluate future proposals according to transportation time, family burden, enrollment retention, educational quality, cost, demographics, and long-term sustainability.
6. Continue seeking independent professional counsel before making a final long-term facilities decision.

I recognize that I occupy this position for only a season. Board members serve for a season as well. **The consequences of our decisions may last considerably longer.** Leadership does not mean pretending to know everything. Sometimes leadership means finding people who know more than you do, asking questions, listening to the evidence, and then accepting responsibility for a recommendation. That is what I have attempted to do.

Once again, I wish we did not have to transport any child. But we cannot eliminate geography. We do not, however, have to make its burden greater than necessary. I do not want us to move children simply because another building has space. I do not want us to impose a new sacrifice because another community sacrificed before it. I do not want us to make family life more difficult without a compelling educational or financial reason. And I do not want us to mistake moving enrollment for creating enrollment.

Again:

Buildings exist to serve children. Children do not exist to fill buildings. Our obligation is to provide children the best education we can, as close to their homes and families as reasonably possible, while responsibly stewarding the resources entrusted to us. I believe keeping students where they are currently being successfully served, preserving St. Joe while

it remains viable, exploring opportunities at Bruno-Pyatt, and solving our facilities needs where those needs actually exist creates the least disruption, offers the greatest opportunity for enrollment stability, and represents the most defensible use of our transportation and facilities resources.

It respects Western Grove. It respects St. Joe. It respects Bruno-Pyatt. And most importantly, I believe it is what is best for children.

Jess Knapp
Superintendent
Ozark Mountain School District

The September board meeting will be moved to September 22nd at the St. Joe campus.

12. Motion was made by Travis Freeman and seconded by James Morris to adjourn the meeting at 7:08 p.m. Motion carried.

Board President, Andy McCutcheon

Board Secretary, Travis Dixon