ARTA INTERLINK
CONNECTING ARKANSAS'S PUBLIC EDUCATION RETIREES

Volume 69-1

SAVE the DATES

Annual ARTA State Convention
May 4, 2027

Area Leadership Training
September 22 - November 5

See page 5 for details

Annual Members

Please see page 5 for renewal instructions

Not sure of your membership type? Refer to the Membership Key and your mailing label on the back page of this publication.

Find, Like and Follow us on Facebook to see travel photos, member news and upcoming event announcements.

Early Childhood Literacy

The 2025-26 school year was the first in which third grade students in Arkansas had to meet new reading standards to advance to fourth grade. Under the LEARNS Act of 2023, third graders who fall short of the standards, and do not have a good-cause exemption, will not be promoted.

According to an article in the statewide newspaper, early screener tests suggested that thousands of Arkansas third graders were at risk of being retained for the 2026-27 school year. The Arkansas Department of Education stated that it would actually be many months before the full number would be known. It will be even longer before the effects of the new standards on Arkansas literacy scores are known.

For those of you who support childhood literacy, and would like to do something *now*, we recommend the following -

Local Retired Educator Units
Many local units and their members support book and reading programs. These include reading in schools, tutoring, and book donations.

If you are interested in joining a local unit, find one near you in the pullout directory included in this issue. If your group needs ideas, read on.

In Schools
Most school districts welcome adult readers. Whether you are reading to one student or an entire classroom, as an individual or as part of a program, your efforts will have a positive effect on students. Contact your district office for more information about needs and opportunities for volunteers or paid tutors.

Daycare centers also appreciate your support, although their rules for volunteers are different. If they do not need readers, ask if they need donations of high-quality books by age group, either for the facility or for the families enrolled in their services.

AR Kids Read
In central Arkansas, AR Kids Read recruits and trains volunteers to provide one-on-one tutoring with students in grades 1-3. You can learn more about AR Kids Read at www.arkidsread.org.

To find a similar program in your community, contact your school district or local library for recommendations.



Arkansas Imagination Library
Arkansas Imagination Library mails children one free book each month until their 5th birthday. Any child in Arkansas between birth and age five can enroll in this free program.

You can support this program by enrolling a child you know or by making a donation to support the program. Learn more at www.arkansasimaginationlibrary.org.

For more information about any of the programs in this article, or to tell us about a literacy program we should know about, contact us!

President's Message



I remember the first time I attended an ARTA state convention in the fall of 2015. I sat in the audience looking at Dr. Ella Walker-Rolfe who was presiding over the meeting. I remember thinking "WOW! She's really special to be President of ARTA. I could never get up in front of all these people and preside over a meeting." Well, here I am eleven years later, and I am the current President of ARTA. It is indeed an honor to have been chosen to lead ARTA.

I graduated in May 1987 from Henderson State University with a degree in elementary education. As summer continued, I became more discouraged because I didn't have a teaching job. The weekend before school started, I learned about an opening at Cale Elementary, one of the five schools in the newly consolidated Nevada School District. During my second interview, I was told that work-shops started the next day. I was extremely surprised to learn within about forty-five minutes that I was being hired for the job and needed to be there the next morning.

I was hired for a first and second grade combination class. The new Nevada building was not completed yet, so classes were still being held on the original campuses. My students and I were housed in a portable building divided into two separate classrooms. I would have a full-time aide since I had two rooms. I was hoping she had experience and would be able to help me manage two grades. I discovered that she was new to education. To summarize, I was hired on a Tuesday afternoon, attended workshops on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and started with two classrooms of students on Monday. What an adventure that year was! I had between thirty and thirty-three students all year.

That was the beginning of my twenty-eight year career in elementary education. I moved between first and second grade. My husband liked to tell everyone that I made it out of first grade but then they sent me back again. I even ended up teaching another combined first and second grade class one year. At least this time all the students were in the same room. Near the end of my career, I was a literacy coach for three years and after that I began teaching third grade. This ended up being my favorite grade. I was fortunate to be able to spend my entire career in the same school district.

After retirement, my retired colleagues invited me to come to the Nevada County Retired Teacher's meetings. I began attending as a chance to see my friends, not knowing that I would eventually become vice president and then president of the Nevada County group. I am the current president of the Nevada County Retired School Employee Association.

This led to me being elected as an associate director for Area Four. Then I served part of a year as Area Director until I was nominated to be ARTA Vice President. Dr. Ellen Holmes and Mr. Bob Thompson were extremely encouraging when it came time to make a decision about being an associate director, area director, and finally being elected as vice president.

When I started attending meetings, I was going because it was a social outing and I got to

Continued, page 7

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Linda Powell ..... Operations Manager
Tammy Gray ..... Communications

To view the full ARTA Directory,
visit www.artanow.com

Director's Desk

ARTA Members,

First and foremost, thank you for the opportunity to serve an organization that champions the interests of our state's dedicated public education retirees. I am deeply honored to step into this role and build upon the strong foundation laid before me. I look forward to visiting local county units and area meetings this fall and hearing directly from members all across the state.

August is always a busy time for public schools with many back-to-school events. ARTA staff and members were present at quite a number of these with updates on teacher retirement and our association. This was a great opportunity to engage with those educators still working to let them know what ARTA has to offer as a professional organization that advocates for the personal, professional, social, and economic interests of all Arkansas's public education retirees.

Regarding advocacy, discussions are already underway at the Capitol in anticipation of the 2027 Legislative Session. In fact, a recent legislative committee discussion focused on rising health insurance costs. Consultants reported that projected healthcare expenses have increased substantially in recent years, driven largely by medical and prescription drug costs. It is crucial that ARTA monitors these meetings and represents retiree interest in these deliberations.



And lastly, I want to share a recent experience that will sound familiar to many ARTA members. A young man approached me in the Kroger parking lot in Conway and asked, "Are you Mr. Mertens?". Even though I did not recognize him, that question identified him as a former student. He proceeded to sincerely thank me for the support and encouragement I gave him while a student. This was not the first time a former student has reached out but the message is always the same. *It's not what we teach them but it's how.* I am thankful to have former students that remember the "how" and I am privileged to serve thousands of Arkansas retired educators who made a difference in the lives of many.

Mike Mertens

Welcome New Life & Life Continuing Members

Arkansas County
Terri Patton

Benton County
Angela D. Carter
Janet Chaney

Bradley County
Rhonda Daniel

Carroll County
Clare Haozous
Devon M. Williams

Clark County
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Garland County
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Terrence Lorenzo Turner

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Carol Danette Smith

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Michele A. Champoux-Ray

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Carla A. Green
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Saundra Sanders

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Margaret McClure
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Anne Formby
Carol Nix
Denise Schwartz

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Billie Ruth Light
Marilyn McNear

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Lisa Bowden

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Allison Mcmath
Ellis Register
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Amy Woodsmall

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L. Michelle Shoppach

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Terrie Depaola Holbrook

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Donna Proctor

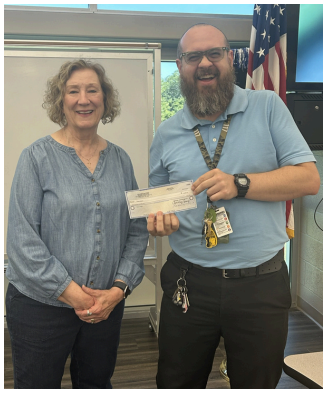
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Theresa Bobst
Wendy Gross
Janet Perkins

Washington County
Donald Cumbie
L. Diane Firmin
Jennifer Hierholzer
Susan Middleton
Mari G. (Lynn) Smith
Frances Marline Vernon
Cynthia Whitaker
Hubert Whitaker
Susan Zimmerman

White County
Karla Tarkington

Out of State
William L. Sheridan

ARTA Awards Record Number of Educator Grants













Row 1: Robert Anderson, North Little Rock; Travis Wright, Conway; Angela Bates, Hot Springs; Brittany Brazil, Van Buren; **Row 2:** Abbie Bussey, Bryant; Brittany Cage and Ericka McQueeny, Benton; Janet Warford, Rogers; **Row 3:** Roza Shaimurat, LISA Academy; Anna-Mae Wyatt, Arkadelphia; DeAnna Steele, Walnut Ridge; **Row 4:** Grace Archer, Bergman; Amy Hodge, Mt. Vernon; Kayla Villines, Omaha.

Area Leadership Training

All ARTA members are invited to attend Area Leadership Training -

Area I October 22 Charleston, AR	Area V October 20 Pine Bluff, AR
Area II September 22 Newport, AR	Area VI November 5 Bryant, AR
Area III October 8 Forrest City, AR	Area VII October 13 Fayetteville, AR
Area IV October 27 Ashdown, AR	Area VIII October 15 North Little Rock, AR

These events include messages from ARTA leadership, area business, training for unit members, and time for networking with colleagues from around the area. They also usually include great entertainment, delicious food, and a few surprises.

For meeting details, contact the area leadership shown in the pullout directory included in this issue.

Never miss out on the INTERLINK newsletter

If your mailing label on the back page has a 26 next to your name, your membership has expired.

Please renew today to ensure continued membership, which includes this publicatiion.

You can renew using the form on the back page, or by scanning the QR code:



WANNA GET INVOLVED?

ARTA offers many opportunities for involvement at the local, state, or area level.

View the ARTA website, contact your ARTA board member, find a local unit, or reach out to the ARTA staff for more information about getting involved in ARTA.

501-375-2958

www.artanow.com

AREA I



ARTA Executive Director Mike Mertens (R) attended a back to school meeting for personnel of the Mena School District in Polk County, where he shared information about the ways that ARTA supports active personnel and their retirement system. He is pictured here with Superintendent Lee Smith.

ARTA does not currently have an affiliate group for education retirees in Polk County. If you are interested in starting a local unit, please contact the ARTA office for assistance.

AREA II

ARTA Executive Director Mike Mertens attended two back to school events in White County, where he shared information about the ways that ARTA supports active personnel and their retirement system. He is pictured here at Riverview School District.



Local units can submit photos, news items and story ideas to ARTA via text or email:

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AREA IV



Miller County RTA members Dr. Ellen Holmes and Cordia Metcalf served on the Texarkana Arkansas School District Community Back to School Bash Planning Committee. They are pictured here with MCRTA member Jennie Jones and members of the TASD community at the event.



Members of the **Nevada County RSEA** collected cereal and other breakfast items to be distributed to district families at Open House.

Arkansas Retired Teachers Association



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NOTES

AREA V

The **Garland County RTA** awarded two scholarships this spring. Recipients Karlie Carver and Kristen Sangster are both Elementary Education majors attending the University of Arkansas at Monticello. These scholarships reflect the association's dedication to encouraging and supporting future educators.

Left to Right: Jean Sexton, GCRTA Secretary; Paula Bettis, President; Kristen Sanger; Karlie Craver; Yvonne Neal, Vice President; and Dana Lambert, Scholarship Committee Member.



Follow us on Facebook to see more local member photos and news.

Perry County RTA member Patty Brazil dropped off the group's donation of water, Gatorade and snacks to the Perryville High School Band.



Local units can submit photos, news items and story ideas to ARTA via text or email:

501-350-3916
tammy_arta@att.net

President Byers, continued

see the friends I had worked with. At that time, I didn't realize the importance of what ARTA was designed to do. Due to the importance of ARTA, I want to encourage each of you to reach out to other retirees who are eligible to join ARTA. The best way to get new members to join is through personal invitation.

I really appreciate all of those who have helped as I moved up from vice president to president-elect, and now to president. Linda and Tammy do an amazing job managing and maintaining the ARTA office and taking care of ARTA business. They are always super willing to help me with whatever I need and are patient as I ask my many questions.

I have enjoyed getting to know Mr. Mike and working with him. He made planning for my first board meeting seem like a walk in the park. He shared his thoughts and listened to my thoughts and ideas and helped put together an agenda that would serve us well for our first meeting. ARTA is truly blessed to have Mr. Mike as our new executive director and I am looking forward to continuing to work with him.

I'd also like to acknowledge Mark Gammill and Paulette Parker for the leadership example that they set and for their encouragement and willingness to help me as I became president. Susan Ridings and Diana Kolman are both standing beside me just waiting to see what I need them to do.

Most importantly, I'd like to thank each of you for placing your trust in me as I spend this year leading ARTA. My goal is to be a leader who listens to you and your thoughts concerning ARTA and the direction we need to move. I am making plans to attend the area leadership training this fall and look forward to meeting new members in each area.

Rita Byers
ARTA President

ARTA Travel Policy

ARTA members are invited to participate in safe, affordable group travel. Guests are welcome but must travel with an ARTA member. Whenever possible, ARTA trips include a member of the ARTA staff.

BOOK EARLY - ARTA partners with Collette Travel to offer customized travel opportunities. Plans include a reserved block of airline seats for each trip. A deposit is required to reserve your seat and to ensure that you receive any advertised savings. Reservations made after the block is filled, or after the early booking date has passed, are based on availability and are subject to current pricing. Prices include round trip airfare from Little Rock National Airport. Departures from alternates gateways should be requested when booking.

BOOK ONLINE - **www.artanow.com/travel** includes links to the itinerary, pricing and online reservation form for each Collette trip.

BOOK DIRECT - Collette Travel also offers a direct booking method. Call 1-800-581-8942 and refer to the booking number provided for each trip.

MOTOR COACH TRIPS - ARTA contracts with local companies for motor coach trips to U.S. destinations. Bus trips require a minimum number of travelers booked with deposit. Reservations are made on a first come-first serve basis.

For general questions about traveling with ARTA or to suggest a trip, contact the ARTA office at **501-375-2958**.

Discover British Landscapes #1430168

April 18 - 27, 2027

An adventure fit for a Shakespearean tale takes you from verdant hillsides to bustling British cities rich with culture. Sleepy villages, grassy slopes, mountainside lakes, and cities built upon layers of history - these are the landscapes of Britain. Highlights include Edinburgh Castle, York Minster, Chester, Conwy Castle, Stratford-upon-Avon, and a Traditional Afternoon Tea. **Save $100 pp - book by October 5, 2026.**

Cultural Treasures of Japan #1430076

May 6 - 19, 2027

Immerse yourself in the ancient and modern cultures of Japan. Discover everything from peaceful temples to technological marvels, all set against the unimaginable natural beauty. Highlights of this once in a lifetime trip are too numerous to mention.
Seat reduction date has passed - call for availability.



Discover the Islands of New England #1430162

June 25 - Jul 2, 2027

Explore New England's majestic seaboards, from Rhode Island to Cape Cod. Explore the local charms, walk along historic cobble-stone streets, and feel like a true New Englander. Highlights include Newport, Plymouth Rock and Plymouth Harbor Cruise, Cape Cod, Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard and a Lobster Dinner. **Save $200 pp - book by December 11, 2026.**

Discover Canadian Rockies #1430176

August 18-15, 2027

From scenic mountains and valleys to the stunning Lake Louise, explore the best of Western Canada via the famous Rocky Mountaineer train. Set off on a mesmerizing voyage from Vancouver, British Columbia to Calgary, Alberta. Highlights along the way include Grouse Mountain, Stanley Park, Lake Louise, Banff, Icefields Parkway, Athabasca Glacier, and Peyto Lake. **Save $200 pp - book by November 16, 2026.**



Painted Canyons of the West

September 19 - 27, 2027 **#1430014**

Trek across the Southwest as you take in the sienna-colored canyons, towering spires, and desert landscapes found in Utah's five national parks. Explore the kaleidoscope of colors found in America's rocky western landscapes as you visit Arches National Park, Canyonlands National Park, Dead Horse Point State Park, Capitol Reef National Park, Bryce Canyon National Park, and Zion National Park. Other highlights include Colorado National Monument, a visit to a family-owned vineyard and stops in Moab and Las Vegas. **Save $150 pp - book by March 12, 2027.**



Spotlight on the French Riviera

Sept 30 - Oct 8, 2027 **#1430013**

Uncover the chic resorts, sun-soaked beaches, and elegant allure that attract the rich and famous to the exquisite French Riviera. Unpack for a leisurely multi-night stay, embracing the luxury and breathtaking beauty of the Côte d'Azur. Highlights include Nice Flower Market and Food Tour, Monaco, Monte Carlo, Hilltop Village of Eze, a Perfumery Workshop, Menton, Cannes, St. Paul de Vence and a Wine Tasting on Saint-Honorat Island. **Save $100 pp - book by March 25, 2027.**



Northern Lights of Finland

November 2 - 9, 2027 **#1430012**

Embark on a winter adventure to the magical landscapes of Finnish Lapland. Explore Helsinki, "Daughter of the Baltic", then search for the breathtaking northern lights, lead your very own dog sled team, meet the reindeer on an evening sled ride, and spend a night in a glass igloo. **Save $150 pp - book by May 3, 2027.**



Christmas on the Danube

December 13 - 21, 2027 **#1336122**

Welcome winter by relaxing on a timeless trip down the Danube River. Be transported to beloved cities, where age-old culture is interwoven into seasonal specialties. Peruse handcrafted trinkets, traditional sweets, and infectious holiday cheer as you make your way through some of Europe's most renowned Christmas markets. Highlights include Vienna, Wurzburg, Rothenburg, Nuremburg, Regensburg, Passau, Wachau Valley, Melk Abbey and Durnstein. **Save $50 pp - book by November 31, 2026.**



In Memoriam

"These immortal dead who live again in minds made better by their presence"

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Mary E. Shores

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Emma J. Cornelius
Marilyn K. Lawrence
Donna G. Rogers
Diane R. Watt

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Ruth A. Fauntleroy
Mary J. Fine
Craig M. Fraiser
Mae E. Gettis
Mattie P. Gibson

Continued, page 11

Memorials & Donations

Thanks to the thoughtfulness and generosity of members and friends, $2,058.80 in memorials, honorariums and donations were contributed to ARTA in the last three-month period. An additional $905.50 contributed by Life Continuing and Continuing Plus members and $1,871.00 in auction proceeds from the convention brings the total to $3,508.50.

Your gifts to ARTA, for whatever reason, are greatly appreciated and are a meaningful and substantive part of funding the ARTA Grants Program. This program funds grants to Arkansas public-school personnel to further their own education.

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In Memory of:
Emma Jean Cornelius
Mary Dell Harrod

Clark County RTA
In Honor of:
Pamela Harris

Craighead County RTA
ARTA Grants Fund

Faulkner County RTA
In Memory of:
Bettye Balmaz

Franklin County RSEA
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Phyllis Dianne Adams
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In Memory of:
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JOIN, RENEW OR CHANGE YOUR MEMBERSHIP

1. ___ I elect to have $2 per month deducted from my benefit check for ARTA dues (CONTINUING MEMBER, CM) *
2. ___ I elect to have $20 deducted from my benefit check for 12 months for a total of $240 (LIFE MEMBER, LM) *
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* You are authorizing the Arkansas Teacher Retirement System to deduct your ARTA dues from your monthly benefit check. This authorization may be canceled only by a written notice from you to ARTA (the association) or ATRS (the retirement system).

Name _____ Signature*_____

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Send completed form and applicable payment to:
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