

WITH EDUCATION EXPERIENCE AT EVERY LEVEL, STEPHENS GUIDES ARKANSAS SCHOOL DISTRICTS

An Interview With Melissa Walsh, Associate Banker With Stephens Public Finance



Servicing Arkansas school districts means speaking their language. Melissa Walsh uses her experience in the classroom, as well as her work promoting education, to put school district clients in the best position to educate their students.

Your path to the public school financing world came by way of the classroom. How did you find your way to Stephens and Arkansas?

I came to Arkansas through Teach For America. I moved here literally 24 hours after I graduated from college in New York. Teach For America is one of the most competitive post-collegiate programs in the country. At its peak, about 50,000 people would apply each year and roughly 7 percent of those applicants would be accepted. The organization places teachers in various regions throughout the country. I was placed here in Arkansas, Pine Bluff specifically, and served my two-year commitment to the program teaching eighth- and ninth-grade math – pre-algebra, algebra and advanced algebra. I feel really lucky to have been placed here. Arkansas is underrated in my opinion. There is so much history and the people are incredible. Pine Bluff as a community, and really the whole state of Arkansas, were so welcoming to me. I feel honored to have served our students in the classroom and to call Little Rock home.

What did you do at the completion of your two-year teaching commitment?

At the time in Teach For America, Arkansas and Mississippi were one region. During my second year in the classroom, they announced a split. Arkansas was going to become its own region with its own staff and operations. By then I had come to completely love this state. I loved its vastness and its natural beauty. I loved everyone I met. And I care deeply about education and about public education. So when Teach for America announced this split, there was an opportunity to combine all those things into one and work for the Teach For America Arkansas region.

What did you do in your new capacity with Teach For America?

I worked for Teach For America for three years after my classroom experience and wore a lot of hats. We were opening our own region, even though we had been here for 25 years, so it was an all-hands-on-deck situation. Mainly, I worked to solidify our funding, and I managed several school districts throughout the state, all in the Delta. Additionally, I was a part-time student as a Walton Fellowship Recipient in the LEAD 21 program at Arkansas Tech. I received my Masters in Educational Leadership through a fantastic program. That experience and work exposed me to the districts and the Arkansas education landscape more than before. I came to meet so many wonderful educators and school leaders as well as other organizations partnering with Arkansas School Districts. It solidified my view of “it takes a village.” Everyone working with schools in any capacity should have the students at the forefront of their work. That is the difference between a partner and a great partner.

How did you come to work for Stephens?

Throughout those five years working and learning in Arkansas education I was lucky enough to meet different school leaders and school administrators statewide. I gained a deeper appreciation for how much effort goes into financing our schools and how vital that is to any district’s success. Many of the districts I was working with were clients of Stephens. So, in many ways, I was on the other side of the table. I saw Stephens from the client’s perspective, and that is how I learned about their Public Finance Department. It was immediately clear how much the firm values its clients and doing not only the best but what is best for Arkansas public schools. There is no other bank in the state of Arkansas that truly cares about its clients like Stephens does.

What do you do at Stephens now?

I am an associate banker and have been here for about a year. I work with two other bankers, Michael McBryde and Jason Holsclaw, to serve as the Municipal Advisor to about 65 school districts. We mainly cover southern Arkansas, southwest Arkansas and all of eastern Arkansas. At any given time, every Stephens’ school district client in Arkansas has two bankers and two analysts working with them. They might have one lead banker who serves as the main contact, but they have that full support system. Our team approach is another way we try to differentiate ourselves and do what is best for our clients. This approach makes sure that we are not only fully servicing our clients but that we have different eyes looking at things from different perspectives with different professional experiences. There is true collaboration.

How does your experience, both inside the classroom and also as part of an organization that promotes education, help you better serve your school district clients?

One of the best ways to serve your client effectively is to know them and know their needs as well as understand the forces they are working against. That lived experience of being an educator, and having a Master’s degree in which I am qualified to be a building-level principal and school district leader, allows me, as a banker, to think more broadly about the needs of the district and understand the other aspects of the superintendents’ daily work. I have more of a passion to help them achieve their financial goals because I so firmly believe in what they are doing day to day and understand how difficult their job is. The better that I am at my job and the better Stephens is, the easier a superintendent can do their job. And that is the end goal for us, to do right by our clients every step of the way so they can do right by their students. We service them as best as possible in the arena that we know, so that they can best service students in the arena that they know. At the end of the day, we want to make it as easy as possible for our clients to do what matters most, and that is educating our students.

Where did you get your passion for education?

I’m a fourth-generation female college graduate. My great-grandmother had a college degree, as did all six of her sisters. So, I have a lot of strong women in my family who care a lot about education and have not taken it for granted because they had to work really hard for it. My mom is an entrepreneur in residence for the University of Maryland. My maternal grandmother was a published author in the field of education, specifically learning differences. She gave speeches all over the world and wrote many books on literacy and learning differences, specifically around dyslexia. My paternal grandmother was a high school theater teacher, and my grandfather taught at the University of Maryland after he retired. Education and supporting educators is and always has been a household value.

What personal experiences contributed to your passion for education?

When I was a kid I had a hard time learning how to read. No one ever doubted my ability, they just knew I needed different support, and as a result it was just a blip on my educational experience. This is a result of having a lot strong educators and strong resources around me. That is not the case for every student, particularly a lot of our students in the most economically disadvantaged part of our state. It takes many wonderful educators and people who care about kids and understand

that every kid can learn. Seeing such smart people in my family work in education in a variety of ways is what contributed to my passion for the field. My paternal grandmother loved the theater and found a way to positively impact kids through her joy. My other grandmother was passionate about learning differences and was a skilled writer and found a way to positively impact students through her talents. I love math and finance and have found at Stephens a way to positively help students and school districts through that passion and skillset. It might sound a bit corny, but it has been very exciting for me. I can make an impact doing what I love and have the opportunity to work for a great firm, one that allows schools to do best the most important job of all.

What can clients expect working with Stephens?

Clients can expect professionalism, expertise, integrity, dedication and true Arkansas values. We are highly analytical and data driven. The deep institutional knowledge of the firm is unmatched in this state and really the whole region. In addition, there is a level of integrity at Stephens that is sometimes not associated with people in finance. We deeply care about our clients. Five out of the eight Bankers in Public Finance here in Arkansas worked in the public sector before joining Stephens. Not only are clients working with bankers who have experience on both sides of the table, but it says a lot about the firm that they want to hire individuals who care and are motivated by doing what is good for Arkansas. Simply put, when working with Stephens, a client can expect the absolute very best.



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