



USD 497 News Release

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Board Approves Staffing Cuts, Repurposing LMCMS after Planning Year, & Scheduling Public Hearings for Possible Closure of Broken Arrow & Pinckney; Votes Against Hosting a Hearing for Woodlawn Closure

In the early morning hours of Tuesday, the Lawrence Board of Education voted to direct the administration to schedule and publish notice of public hearings for the possible closure of Broken Arrow and Pinckney Elementary Schools. It also approved repurposing Liberty Memorial Central Middle School with an innovative curricular theme or themes for the 2024-25 school year. A full year of planning will take place prior to that instructional shift, so no changes to the current educational structure will occur at the middle school next year.

The board also approved staffing reductions at the middle, high, and virtual schools. Executive Director Kristen Ryan said that the district could realize a reduction of 50 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff positions by maximizing FTE, establishing class size minimums, staffing for a class size average of 25 students for core courses, and thinking creatively about course scheduling.

A motion to publish a notice of public hearing for the closure of Woodlawn Elementary failed on a 4-3 vote. Board members shared concerns with closing the only school in North Lawrence because of the separation of the neighborhood from other school attendance areas by the Kansas River. Board member Kay Emerson said that closing Woodlawn school was not in the best interest of students. Other board members indicated they would want transportation provided to prevent children from walking across the river bridge; however, the costs of busing could have negated the estimated savings from the building's closure.

During its meeting the board heard from more than 30 community members, sharing passionate pleas to save their neighborhood schools. A few educators, including Emerson Hoffzales, Lawrence Education Association president, spoke about the union's concerns with staffing cuts and the potential for larger class sizes and increased teacher workloads. A representative of the classified staff union, PAL-CWA, told the board that wage improvements for classified staff are long overdue.

"I really wonder if Lawrence Public Schools has the community support that it needs to make the kind of hard decisions that have to be made if we mean what we say about wanting to pay our teachers and staff better," said Board President Shannon Kimball. "Our administration has done exactly what we asked them to do, and again, we are at a decision point where the board has to decide what kind of district we are going to be for the next decade."

Among the next steps, the board's Boundary Advisory Committee will meet from 5:30-7:00 p.m. Wednesday at the district's Facilities and Operations Office, 711 E. 23rd Street. The group will consider boundary proposals for redistributing Broken Arrow and Pinckney students to nearby schools with room to grow. By law, potential receiving schools must be included in the notice of public hearings. That notice must be published for two consecutive weeks and at least 10 days, but not more than 20 days, prior to a final board vote on the school closings.

If after the public hearings, the board would decide to close both elementary schools, the spending cuts could save \$3.85-\$4.05 million in 2023-24 and \$325,000 in 2024-25 for potential reallocation toward its goal of achieving competitive wages to recruit and retain high-quality staff to educate students.

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