



USD 497 News Release

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Board Discusses Alternative Options, HS Start Times, Graduation Rates

Alternative Options Committee

The school board closed Lawrence Alternative High School in 2005, choosing instead to add resources and support at Free State and Lawrence High Schools. At about the same time, the district opened its diploma-completion program and virtual school to better meet students' varied needs. During the past five years, though, high school graduation rates have declined.

An Alternative Options Committee began meeting in August to review unmet needs and discuss expanding opportunities for students. The Committee researched reasons students drop out of school, including poor attendance and grades and social factors, such as pregnancy and economic disadvantages. The group of 100 members divided into subcommittees to review alternative program strategies shown to yield success in reducing truancy and behavioral concerns and improving students' attitudes toward school. They looked at 15 strategies identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center as effective in reducing dropout rates.

As a result of its study, the Committee recommended to the board on Monday the development of the Lawrence College and Career Academy to integrate academic skills into the existing career and technical center. The Academy would serve students in grades 10-12 who choose to enroll. An application and interview process would inform an individualized plan for their academic, post-secondary, and career skill development. The Academy would offer daily health and wellness instruction and academic support, research-based behavioral interventions, adult academic mentors, and community agency involvement.

"When people think of traditional alternative schools, they think of risk factors. One of the things to keep in mind are the needs of kids who do pretty well but who just need a different school environment," said Bill DeWitt, principal of adult education services and alternative programming. DeWitt said that the Academy, designed as an extension to both high schools, would target underachieving students with low motivation, irregular attendance, and other factors that cause students to drop out as only 50% of its enrollment.

"We started to think about how can we preserve what is at the Lawrence College and Career Center (C3), where students may just want to take a CNA or Automotive course, and provide opportunities for students to take core classes at the same time," said Patrick Kelly, C3 and career and technical education director.

The Academy also would offer online learning options, such as those available through the Lawrence Diploma-Completion Program. That program is moving its classes from Centennial to Peaslee Tech later this month and will share a campus with C3.

Upon the board's direction to move forward with planning for the Academy, staff will now begin work on curriculum and courses, staffing, communication, enrollment, and selection of students; parking and classroom space, community partnerships, and transportation schedules, among other considerations.

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High School Start Times

After hearing from several students and staff members about concerns with the proposal for later high school start times, the board voted unanimously Monday to maintain the current start times and to add an option for a 9:00 a.m. start to a six-period day, as long as it meets the funding requirement of 360 minutes/day for a full-time student. This assurance would prevent a loss in funding.

“I have been a part of this conversation for three years, and what is clear to me is that students want options,” said Dr. Anna Stubblefield, deputy superintendent. She added that if the dismissal time stays the same, at 3:00 p.m., students choosing the 9:00 a.m. start would be committing to taking a full six-period day schedule to earn the number of credits required for graduation.

“It (the 9:00 option) would be really good for kids. Allowing them to take fewer classes is going to be really positive,” said Rick Ingram, the board member who championed the high school late-start proposal due to research about the health benefits of more sleep on the brain development of young people.

Amy Landwehr, a member of the Free State High Redesign Team, shared with the board that providing flexible options would not preclude the team from doing its work. She added that she thought eliminating the current 7:00 a.m. zero hour would limit the team’s plans.

“I like the flexibility because there were family hardship stories that we heard with being boxed in with only a 9:00 start,” said Jill Fincher, board member. “I like the idea of students designing their own day.”

Several students shared with the board that their stress levels and lack of sleep are the result of heavy course loads and a large amount of homework. Board member Kelly Jones echoed students’ concerns about mental health and homework assignments. Jones does not support the current 7:00 a.m. zero hour.

“The spirit of the board right now is to respond to the community to allow choice,” said Jones. “I still want the rigor. I still want students working hard but we need to do it smarter.”

Lawsuit Against JUUL

The board voted to join other school districts as a plaintiff in litigation against the JUUL electronic cigarette maker. The district, much like many others across the nation, is experiencing challenges with students’ use of JUUL e-cigarette devices. In addition to the health hazards associated with vaping, districts are incurring additional costs related to education, enforcement, and monitoring to prevent the use of the devices at school. The litigation against JUUL is intended to recover those costs.

Graduation Rates/ACT Performance

While Lawrence high schools continue to increase the number of students taking the ACT and see improvements in student performance on the exam, they continue to see a decrease in graduation rates, except among Black, Hispanic, and Lawrence Virtual School students. In 2019, there were 181 non-graduates across the district; That number compares to 171 the year prior. High school principals shared with the board some of the strategies they are using to improve. LVS has grouped students in home rooms with conferencing every other week. Staff has directed studies plans for students who start to fall behind. The school also added a second counselor and implemented Advisory.

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Lawrence High has a variety of strategies and programs in place, including program review, directed studies, credit recovery during the school day, winter night school, and summer school; and tutoring.

“I looked at it with outside eyes,” said Dr. Cynthia Johnson, interim principal, who just joined the school in July. “We have to decide what is working well. We need a root cause analysis of why students are not graduating.”

Dr. Johnson said that in addition to focusing on relationships and laying a foundation of connectedness, LHS is redeveloping its student support team process, piloting a school-within-a-school program, reallocating resources to support instructional needs, and improving the monitoring of data.

Free State High continues to develop its school-within-a-school programs called SOAR and Star. Its staff is teaming and implementing a tutoring program in the ninth grade, and through Redesign planning, discussing relevancy, habits for success, and balancing student workload.

“We must do a better job of career planning and talking to our students about careers at a much younger age,” said Myron Graber, Free State principal, about the school’s work on Individual Plans of Study.

Refocusing attention on the 181 non-graduates, Superintendent Dr. Anthony Lewis said that we’ve always heard that schools need to make sure they don’t have students falling through the cracks. “There shouldn’t be any cracks,” he said. “We will have a pulse on every single student.”

Legislative Priorities

The board approved its annual list of legislative priorities. Board members noted that support for adding Scoliosis screenings to the list came as a direct result of a student drawing attention to the concern that the state no longer requires schools to conduct them.

Special Recognition

The board honored outgoing members Jessica Beeson, Jill Fincher, and Rick Ingram upon completion of their terms of service and celebrated participants in the college and career center’s Teacher Cadet program.

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