



Dear Kennedy Staff and Families,

We have enjoyed students returning to full in-person learning this week. It has felt much like the excitement of the first days of school!

I am writing today to share with you that Lawrence Public Schools is discussing a proposal to expand early childhood education by creating an early childhood community center at Kennedy. Early childhood education has been a topic of discussion for many years within our school district and the community.

As early as 1990, a task force recommended that early childhood classrooms be established to address the needs of young children who did not have a quality preschool experience prior to entering kindergarten. In 1993, the district established its first full day early childhood educational readiness classroom through a partnership with the Lawrence Schools Foundation, Lawrence Education Achievement Partners, and community volunteers dedicated to a national goal that all children start school ready to learn.

With private funds, we grew that program by adding classrooms each year. The Kansas State Department of Education began funding the state Four Year Old At-Risk Program in 1998. That is when the district received its first state grant for early childhood education. Since then, we have used a combination of state and community grants and private funds to serve thousands of four-year-old children in the early childhood educational readiness program. In 2009, this program found its current home at Kennedy.

Our program serves district families who meet eligibility requirements, including families of children receiving special education and/or English as a Second Language services. Most of the families served qualify for free or reduced-priced school lunches. Families have shared that without our program, they would not be able to send their children to a high quality preschool due to the costs involved.

District early childhood services also include a Parents as Teachers Program for families of children from birth to age three and tiny-k Early Intervention, which provides therapy services to young children. Our early childhood education staff has developed a strong collaborative relationship with community providers, enabling improvements in community-based services, including for children with disabilities. The local Head Start program currently has a preschool classroom at Kennedy. An early childhood community center would expand district and community services available for families of young children at one location, Kennedy.

We still see many children entering kindergarten without the benefit of a high quality preschool experience. Early childhood educational research is clear: we must get to children early in order to establish a strong foundation for learning. This is especially true when you consider our responsibility to break the cycle of poverty. All children can learn and will learn when we provide access to quality educational services beginning with early childhood programs. Numerous longitudinal studies, some of which followed children from preschool to adulthood, show that high quality preschool experiences are beneficial to children's cognitive and social development and their success in school and in life.

Our Budget and Program Evaluation Committee supports the proposal for an early childhood community center at Kennedy. The district's Boundary Committee will discuss it at 5:00 today. You may watch the meeting at <https://bit.ly/3oVcYVF>. We will also record the meeting and provide the link to the recording.

The administration plans to bring this proposal to the Lawrence Board of Education on April 12. The district and school board will not make any decision regarding serving Kennedy's K-5 students without thoughtful consideration. We have a great deal of respect for Kennedy staff and families and want your input during this process.

If the board approves the proposal to develop an early childhood community center at Kennedy, the district would enact a plan to transition Kennedy K-5 students to neighboring schools where space is available, such as New York and Prairie Park Elementary Schools. Staff would follow students. In addition to economies of scale, combining student enrollments in this way would enable the district to provide full-time instead of part-time services to students at these schools.

The district has experienced a sharp enrollment decline this year resulting in a significant budget shortfall that will affect our finances for at least the next three years. It is critical that we look for ways to operate our buildings more efficiently and maximize limited resources. Kennedy's K-5 enrollment has dropped below 200 students with projections for another decline next fall.

We celebrate that our staff and families love their schools. We understand that any changes in school attendance centers are emotional and difficult changes. If the board approves this proposal for the 2021 - 2022 school year, we will immediately begin planning with our staff how best to support Kennedy K-5 students and families during the transition.

Lawrence Public Schools stands firm in its commitment to provide each student with the highest quality educational program possible. The district will ensure that Kennedy K-5 students benefit from any changes made. We know that the Lawrence and Douglas County community would reap lasting benefits from expanded early childhood educational programs.

I invite you to visit with me about your questions and concerns with this proposal during two virtual Kennedy Conversations from 5:30-6:30 p.m. March 30 or 6:00-7:00 p.m. April 7. I will follow up with additional information about how to receive a link to participate.

Sincerely,

Anthony S. Lewis, Ph.D.
Superintendent