April 8, 2019

Board Honors Challenge Award Schools, Discusses Enrollment/Budget

Recognition
The Lawrence Board of Education on Monday night recognized four elementary schools for earning Challenge Awards from the Kansas Confidence in Public Education Task Force. Kansas State Board of Education Member Ann Mah presented certificates to Broken Arrow, Hillcrest, New York, and Schwegler Elementary Schools. Challenge Awards honor outstanding achievement and uncommon accomplishment based on Kansas math and reading assessment results and other qualifying factors, such as attendance and enrollment by race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Of Kansas schools meeting the criteria, only the top 200 are selected for Challenge Awards.

Enrollment Projections
During a work session with its Boundary Advisory Committee, the board heard an enrollment analysis from consultant RSP and Associates. RSP projects that the district’s overall enrollment will increase by nearly 400 students or 3.9% by 2023-2024, at a rate of 1%-1.6% per year during the next five years. Of that projected increase, the district may expect growth of 200, 100, and 100 students at the elementary, middle-, and high-school levels, or 3.8%, 4.8%, and 3.6%, respectively. RSP projected the district’s 2018-2019 enrollment with 99.6% accuracy.

Instructional Learning Coach Program
Lawrence Public Schools uses instructional coaching, a partnership between teachers hired as coaches and classroom teachers, to support teaching, learning, and student success. Coaches work with classroom teachers to analyze current challenges, set student-centered goals, identify effective teaching strategies to meet those goals, and provide support until the goals are met. The district employs ten elementary coaches (one per each of the five largest schools and five who split their time between one or two schools) and six secondary coaches (one full-time coach per each middle and high school).

Coaches receive training to provide personalized and continuous instructional support tailored to the needs of educators and students. Through job-embedded professional development, such as the instructional coaching model, teachers are more likely to implement and continue to use targeted teaching practices that improve student engagement and time-on-task behavior. In Lawrence schools, coaches double as mentors to new teachers. They also serve on committees to support district initiatives related to curriculum, equity, student-centered support, and technology integration. The state does not provide funding for learning coaches.

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“A learning coach is always helping me be the best teacher I can be,” said Mary Lopez, Southwest English teacher, who described for the board working with her school’s learning coach, Shelly McBeth, to create a poetry project to help students make stronger connections to literature.

“Sometimes the most effective and impactful professional development we will ever get is from the colleague down the hall. That’s who I want to be,” said McBeth, Southwest learning coach. “The teacher is the content expert. I am the instructional expert. Together, we make a powerful team.”

Leah Wisdom, director of equity, student services, and instruction, summarized the report. “This is about building a community of learners and making sure all of us see ourselves as learners.”

Budget
On the heels of last week’s passage of Senate Bill 16 with bi-partisan support of the Kansas Legislature and Governor Laura Kelly’s signature, the school board began discussions on Monday of what the new funding plan could mean for Lawrence schools, if the Kansas Supreme Court rules that it’s adequate. Executive Director of Finance Kathy Johnson estimates that SB16 could result in approximately $3.8 million in new funding for Lawrence schools based on $4,436 in base state aid per pupil (BSAPP), an increase of $271 per full-time student.

With projected increases of only $1.7-$1.8 million in new funding in subsequent years, Johnson told the board that this is the year to make up for deficit spending. “The district may not have that option with the increases anticipated in the next few years,” she said, noting that even an enrollment spike would not positively affect funding levels until the following fiscal year.

The board must weigh competing interests for the new funding – replenishing contingency reserves depleted by deficit spending, staff salaries, employee health insurance benefits, and staffing needed to address class sizes, to name a few funding priorities. In addition, the board’s Budget and Program Evaluation Committee (BPEC) has been meeting twice monthly to review public school funding, the district’s current finances, and potential budget additions, reductions, and reallocations. The committee is currently reviewing 25 budget requests totaling approx. $2.3 million. Johnson said that among the saving options that the BPEC will consider are reducing staffing through multi-age classrooms, evaluating all non-classroom positions, and moving allowable expenditures from the General Fund to Capital Outlay, which, she says, could tie up funds needed for future building maintenance and repairs.

The district will be closing transfers into some schools that traditionally have larger class sizes, such as Langston Hughes and Deerfield Elementary Schools. Families may still request a transfer into schools where space is available, such as Cordley and Woodlawn.

“Lawrence has distinctly decided to have 14 elementary schools. I want to be able to educate people as to the challenges that decision presents,” said Kelly Jones, board member. Jones added that she does not advocate closing schools. “I am asking that we have honest conversation about the trade-offs,” she said.

The board will continue to discuss budget options as it moves toward approval of its 2019-2020 budget for publication on July 22. The board’s annual public budget hearing, and final approval of the budget, is scheduled for August 12.

Review the complete school board agenda at www.usd497.org/SchoolBoard.