July 8, 2019

Board Hosts Annual Organizational Meeting; Reviews Budget, Student Data

Election of Officers
The Lawrence Board of Education on Monday kicked off the district’s new fiscal year, which began July 1, with its annual organizational meeting and election of officers. The board elected Melissa Johnson to serve as president and Kelly Jones as vice president. Jessica Beeson completed her year as president, and as is a tradition in the district, received a piece of student artwork in recognition of her leadership. Superintendent Anthony Lewis presented Beeson with a framed pastel still life created by Katie Grear, a 2019 graduate of Lawrence High School and a former student of art teacher Wendy Vertacnik.

Upcoming Meetings
Beeson invited board members and staff to attend the July 23 negotiations session from 4-8 p.m. at the Educational Support Center. The negotiations team will begin salary discussions at this meeting. In addition, Beeson announced a joint meeting of board members, district staff, city commissioners, and city staff to discuss funding of school resource officers. This meeting will be held 3-4 p.m. Wednesday, also at 110 McDonald Drive.

Budget Update
Kathy Johnson, the district’s executive director of finance, shared legislative and school finance updates. The board will approve its maximum budget authority for publication on July 22, with the annual public budget hearing scheduled August 12, followed by budget approval.

Johnson noted that the Kansas Legislature expanded the definition of “school bus” for motor-fuel tax purposes enabling districts to claim a refund on fuel taxes when using school activity vans to transport students to-and-from school or school-related activities. This change requires separate accounting of the purpose of fuel purchased. Johnson said the legislature also will fund the ACT and WorkKeys exams for students in grades 11 and 12 at no cost to the student.

Due to a Consumer Price Index adjustment on the Base Aid for Student Excellence (BASE), formerly called Base State Aid Per Pupil or BSAPP, Johnson estimates the district will receive an additional $312,278 from local property taxes without a mill levy increase. This adjustment will occur within the district’s current Local Option Budget (LOB) authority, which is capped at 33% of the general fund.

Johnson summarized that with decisions the board has already made regarding staffing ratios, support staff restructuring, renewal of fringe benefits, and covering an estimated budget deficit of $1.5-$1.7 million, the board has a projected $1.74 million in uncommitted dollars from new state funding left to allocate.

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Student Data

Zach Conrad, the district’s new executive director of research, evaluation, and accountability, presented NWEA Measures of Academic Performance (MAP) data showing Lawrence students performed this spring at approximately the same level as the national average with a few schools performing slightly above or below that mark. When examining the same data by racial/ethnic and socio-economic subgroups, all performed at the national average, except Asian students, who performed higher, and American Indian/Alaskan Native students and students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches, who performed lower than that mark in reading; and Asian students, who performed higher, and Black or African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches, who performed lower than the national average in math.

Conrad said that MAP data provides limited insight into how well students are performing compared to the rigorous criterion-referenced Kansas Assessments. He did note that students who start behind at the elementary level in Lawrence often remain behind, and that gaps exist in student subgroups meeting their growth targets, particularly with subgroups identified by race/ethnicity and poverty.

In his report of student behavior and disciplinary data, Conrad shared that the top five infractions reported by schools were classroom behavior, skipping class, refusing directions, disrespect to staff, and unacceptable use of technology. Office referrals showed a large spike at the middle-school level. Disproportionate numbers of office referrals by racial subgroups and for students with disabilities also were noted.

Conrad shared selected survey data related to students having strong connections with teachers, feeling a sense of belonging at school, seeing the curriculum as relevant to their lives, and feeling safe at school. More than 86% of middle and high schoolers reported that their teachers care about them, and more than 80% feel like they belong. About 73% said the things they learn at school are important to them, and 77% reported feeling safe at school.

Attendance data reported on Monday showed a strong correlation between students scoring “college and career ready” on the Kansas Assessments and students being in attendance for 95% or more of school days. There are significant declines in attendance rates of 95% or better once students reach sixth grade and beyond. “Research shows that missing ten percent or more of school days negatively affects student achievement,” said Dr. Lewis.

“We have a plan this year to go into schools and conduct fidelity checks of the data,” said Conrad, who noted a lack of full confidence in the data presented Monday since it was collected differently this year than in previous years due to the implementation of a new student management system last fall. The district’s strategic plan includes an initiative to improve consistency in data collection, monitoring, and reporting. The data presented Monday night will serve as a baseline for the work that will begin in 2019-2020 under the new strategic plan.

Administrators shared with the board what the district is doing to address concerns noted in the data report. The strategic plan includes initiatives around curriculum development, consistent implementation of the district’s tiered system of student supports, culturally relevant teaching, expansion of the use of AVID strategies, and improved professional learning for staff. As an example, the district will allocate additional resources to support schools with a higher incidence of student behaviors seen as barriers to learning. Identified elementary and middle schools will receive staff training in restorative practices, interventions, and relationship building, among other professional development. The district also will focus on leadership development, including personal growth goals, data consults, and a new evaluation tool for school principals.

“There is a plan to look at this data with school principals and staff more frequently. Action team leaders also will come to the board on a more regular basis with progress reports about our work on the strategic plan,” Dr. Lewis said.

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