Board Adds Middle School Sports, Reviews Communications Report

Additional Middle School Sports
The Lawrence Board of Education on Monday approved a request from middle school assistant principals/athletic directors to add seventh- and eighth-grade cross country and seventh-grade basketball to the athletics offerings available at the middle level. At present, seventh-graders may participate in wrestling, track and field, tennis, and cheerleading. The additions will be funded within existing middle school budgets and coaching allocations.

“I feel like we have the opportunity to get an additional 200 students participating next year who have not been participating,” said Ron May, director of operations. He added that when students are engaged and participating in extra-curricular activities they become more focused academically and develop a sense of belonging and connection to school. This connection extends to increased family engagement.

“Student athletes as a whole tend to be more tied in to their school. Students who participate learn the importance of being a good team member. They benefit from the increased positive social interaction that naturally occurs within sports teams,” said Kristin Mallory, Southwest Middle School physical education teacher and coach. “We need to give them opportunities at a younger age.”

The board had previously eliminated seventh-grade sports as part of a budget cut in the 2002-2003 school year. May said that the intent with the additional athletic offerings will be to evaluate them after the 2019-2020 school year, and then add volleyball and consider seventh-grade football.

2018-19 Communications Report
Julie Boyle, executive director of communications, and Rachel Asbury, communications specialist, reported communications highlights and challenges of the 2018-2019 school year. Boyle said that Kansas Education Systems Accreditation and ongoing district Excellence, Equity, and Engagement goals guided their efforts. These included introducing the public to Superintendent Anthony Lewis and engaging the community during the Listening and Learning Tour, Strategic Planning Forums, and Community Conversations about Public Safety. The district is using the input gathered from the community in the development of its strategic plan.

Among the year’s highlights were new methods of communicating, such as the Contact Us online platform that enables patrons to send questions or suggestions, the All Students Safe online reporting tool, and Instagram. District website traffic increased by 48% over last year’s. Asbury said that the district exceeded its social media goals for growth in followers and met nearly all engagement goals for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. “I want to answer for the community the question, ‘What did you do at school today?’” she said to explain her role.

Among communication challenges were the harsh winter that led to seven inclement weather days; transitions in technology systems, and school safety concerns. Areas of focus next year will include getting the word out about the strategic plan, Kansans Can School Redesign efforts, and bond construction. The district also will add texting capability for communicating emergency information to staff and school families and begin to market a suite of mobile apps to parents/guardians.

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