Board Meets with City & County Leaders, Approves 5-Year Strategic Plan

Joint Governmental Meeting
The Lawrence Board of Education met from 3:00-5:00 Monday afternoon with city and county commissioners to discuss equity. Superintendent Anthony Lewis opened the meeting by sharing that equity should be a community focus, not only a priority of its public schools. Deputy Superintendent Anna Stubblefield walked participants through milestones along the district’s 10-year continuing journey toward educational equity and excellence. (A map of highlights can be found online at www.usd497.org/equity.) School board member Shannon Kimball shared that the board’s Policy Committee continues to discuss equity policies.

Dr. Lewis cited as a model for future community partnerships a new effort with Lawrence Memorial Hospital to provide underserved students with paid internships. The students will work at the hospital during the summer and learn about the variety of careers available in health care. Lewis added that merely having today’s discussion about equity speaks highly of the Lawrence community, since similar efforts in some other cities and school districts have not moved forward.

Lewis said that the district’s five-year strategic plan is being designed to move the needle in terms of student achievement growth. “Equity is not measured in the number of trainings we’ve had or books that we’ve read but in the opportunities afforded students and the changes in behaviors in our classrooms,” he said.

Dr. Stubblefield, who served as a middle school principal before becoming a district administrator, said that students have found their voice. “My experience is that our students feel more empowered to share when something isn’t happening that should. I have received emails from students sharing that they feel something is discriminatory. They feel comfortable calling it out and proposing ideas to solve it,” she said.

Matthew Herbert, a Lawrence city commissioner and a high school teacher, also spoke of the impact of the district’s equity work on students. “The face of an AP (Advanced Placement) classroom really did change,” he said, adding that equity continues to be a priority among school staff despite turnover in district leadership. “This work has stuck around, and that is what has created the buy-in around it,” said Herbert.

City and county staff shared facets of their equity work, including a report about the Douglas County Criminal Justice Services’ Youth Program. Both city and county commissioners discussed their interest in providing internships to encourage local high school students to consider careers in local government.

Extension of Superintendent’s Contract
During its regular meeting at 6 p.m., the board voted to extend Dr. Lewis’ three-year contract an additional year through the 2021-2022 school year. “This is a common practice for us when we are happy with our superintendent,” said Board President Jessica Beeson. Lewis’ salary will be addressed once decisions about staff salary increases are made as part of contract negotiations with the Lawrence Education Association.
Lawrence Police Facility
Lawrence Police Department Captain Anthony Brixius shared an update about LPD’s new headquarters, which will be built west of Free State High School. While construction is slated to begin in August, the city plans to coordinate delivery of materials to avoid school arrival, lunch, and school dismissal times.

NASS Report
Native American Student Services Coordinator Jennifer Attocknie reported on the NASS program, which serves the American Indian/Alaska Native student population. NASS grants, Title VI and Johnson O’Malley, are a partial fulfillment of treaty obligations of the federal government. NASS program enrollment is not based on income, rather the status of students with dual sovereignty in both Indian Nations and the United States. There are more than 100 tribes represented in the approximately 500 K-12 students served by NASS. The program began as Indian Education in 1972 and continues to offer advocacy, affinity, academics, and assistance to Native American students and families. Attocknie also shared that students served by NASS achieve higher graduation rates than the district’s overall Native American student population and national graduation rates for Native American students.

Budget Update
On June 14, 2019, the Kansas Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the $90 million appropriation to public schools complied with a clause in the Kansas Constitution outlining the state’s role in making suitable provision for education. The courts retained jurisdiction of the case “to ensure continued implementation of the scheduled funding.”

Executive Director of Finance Kathy Johnson updated the board about the district’s final legal maximum budget for the current school year, released June 12, 2019, along with budget assumptions and projections for the 2019-2020 school year. With fairly flat student enrollment, and assuming state weightings remain about the same, Johnson estimates an increase in the district’s state aid of $4 million. She reviewed what the board has approved to date – staffing ratios, support staff restructuring, deficit spending, fringe benefits renewal; and showed that an estimated $1.4 million remains uncommitted. Contract negotiations are ongoing, so staff compensation packages have not yet been determined.

“With our contingency reserve fund nearly depleted, our cash flow could create a cash basis violation,” said Johnson, who estimates that in the next four years, the district will receive only $1.8 million in new state aid annually. “Keep in mind that this year’s insurance premium increased by $1.075 million,” she said.

The district’s Budget and Program Evaluation Committee has met twice monthly since January to review requests for budget additions and to consider reductions and reallocations. The committee will resume its meetings in the fall.

Five-Year Strategic Plan
The board hired Greenway Strategy Group (GSG) in January to assist with the design, development, and implementation of a process to determine strategic direction for the district. The work culminated in a five-year plan, which includes establishing short-term priorities and goals for the 2019-2020 school year, as well as a comprehensive direction for school years 2020-21 through 2023-24.

GSG analyzed district student academic data, survey results, and feedback collected during the Superintendent's fall Listening and Learning Tour. Next, the district invited student, teacher and staff, school board, parent, and community representatives to a Design Team meeting to review the data analysis and discuss priority student outcomes. The district's Executive Leadership Team (ELT) grouped that input into five priority student outcomes and five strategic themes that made up the draft Strategic Plan Framework.

The school board on February 25 agreed to share the draft framework with the community for feedback. The district hosted five forums and invited feedback via an online survey. On March 25, GSG shared highlights of that feedback and a revised Strategic Plan Framework incorporating the community input.
GSG then trained district Strategy Team leaders for each of the five themes. They worked with teams for eight weeks to brainstorm ideas around objectives and initiatives, reaching out to experts and stakeholder groups for additional input throughout the process. The Strategy Teams shared their progress with the ELT on April 11, 2019. The draft objectives also were shared with principals and staff, the district’s Equity Advisory Council, District Equity Leadership Team Advisory, and District Site Council committees.

GSG again shared the draft Strategic Plan Framework, including objectives and initiatives, with the school board on May 13, 2019. Following board consensus to move forward, Martha Greenway trained Action Team leaders. These staff members continue to work with teams to develop action plans for the nine initiatives chosen by the ELT for phase-one implementation during the 2019-2020 school year. The nine initiatives include work around curriculum standards, instructional resources, student supports, instructional framework, teacher observation and feedback, adult connections with students, safety, climate and culture, data use in decision making, and resource allocation.

“This is a plan. Just like you have a plan for a road trip and get a flat tire, you may have to adjust the plan, but the destination doesn’t change,” said Dr. Lewis.

Following a review of the mission, priority student outcomes, themes, objectives, and initiatives, as well as the ELT’s phasing plan, the board voted unanimously to approve the Strategic Plan. (The plan may be found as part of the agenda at www.usd497.org/schoolboard.)

Next steps in the strategic planning process include continued work by the Action Teams to develop action plans, responsibilities and timelines; ongoing community engagement, budget planning, the drafting of performance indicators and monitoring and reporting processes, and communications planning.

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