June 28, 2021

Board Discusses Strategic Plan Progress and Budget Planning

STRATEGIC PLAN UPDATE
At a 5:00 work session Monday, Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction Patrick Kelly asked the school board to consider how the strategic plan update they were about to receive influences progress on the board's goals. The district's strategic plan aims to ensure that students of all races, backgrounds, and abilities achieve at high levels, demonstrate proficiency in reading by the third grade and in math by the eighth grade, and graduate on time prepared for success in college and careers. It prioritizes equity and guides improvement in five key areas: Cohesive Curriculum, Student-Centered Learning, Safe and Supportive Schools, Effective Employees, and Data-Informed Decisions.

Kelly said that the district has asked all schools to connect their building goals for the 2021-2022 school year to these strategic plan themes, as well as state and federal systems. These include the Kansas State Board of Education's goals, Kansas Educational Systems Accreditation, and federal Title and special education funding requirements.

Cohesive Curriculum
Dr. Jennifer Bessolo, director of curriculum and federal and virtual programs, spoke to the district’s work on an aligned scope and sequence Pre-K-12 and culturally sustainable resources. She reminded the board that research shows that curriculum alignment positively affects student learning. Dr. Bessolo added that areas of focus for the new school year include high school science, world languages, social studies, elementary reading, math, and virtual school curriculum alignment.

Student-Centered Learning
Leah Wisdom, director of instruction, equity, and student services, shared district efforts to meet the academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs of students and to decrease barriers to student success. Wisdom noted that the district will evaluate its social skills curriculum in the coming school year and focus on leadership support and professional development for staff.

Safe and Supportive Schools
“This year, a laser-like focus will be on whether or not we are consistently implementing the social-emotional curriculum,” said Dr. Cynthia Johnson, who will become the executive director of inclusion, engagement, and belonging July 1. She noted that the high schools plan to develop student mental health advisory teams next year.

“This student-voiced, student-led team will be massive in the work that we do as we meet the needs of our students in Lawrence Public Schools. They are going to advise us on what they need to be successful,” said Dr. Johnson, who described teams at each high school coming together at regular intervals during the school year. The teams will begin with students who have received Sources of Strength training focusing on self-care and suicide prevention.

Effective Employees
Samrie Devin, executive director of human resources, shared information about the district’s work to create a positive culture and climate to improve staff retention and its efforts to recruit a diverse staff. These include partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and “grow your own” programs, such as the students enrolled in the Lawrence College and Career Center as Teacher Cadets. Devin said another “next step” is to revise the classified staff evaluation tool to provide more meaningful feedback to district support staff.

MORE
Data-Informed Decisions

Dr. Zachary Conrad, executive director of data and technology, reported about new District Common Assessments, a formative evaluation tool implemented this year in English language arts and math. He shared data about priority student outcomes. These included that 22% of third graders have mastered all (nine) English language arts standards on the district assessments, which mirrors the top two performance categories (3 and 4) on the state assessments. On the Kansas State Assessments, 46% students demonstrated proficiency as compared to the state’s 40%. In 2018, 46.9% of Lawrence students demonstrated proficiency versus 39% at the state level.

In math, 9% of eighth graders mastered all of the standards on the district assessments. On the Kansas State Assessments, 21% of students demonstrated proficiency (22% at the state level). In 2018, 28% of Lawrence students demonstrated proficiency versus 24% statewide.

“This was a pilot year for the district common assessments, and during a pandemic. It gives us some baseline data. We will be able to identify those standards that have the most significance in predicting outcomes on the state assessments, hone in, and support students who are behind. You identify gaps and you help them. You intervene. The goal is that we are acting upon what data comes back,” said Dr. Conrad.

He added that the district has made progress on addressing achievement gaps. “The gaps have significantly narrowed in all categories, except students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches in reading proficiency,” he said. “The odds of being proficient are more similar (for student subgroups) than they were two years ago.” In addition to low socio-economic status, other subgroups are based on students’ race/ethnicity, English Language Learners, and Students with Disabilities.

2020-2021 and 2021-2022 BUDGET PLANNING

The board received a budget and legislative update, including the district’s efforts to make up for this year’s budget shortfall due to a large enrollment drop. These include leaving many unfilled positions vacant and freezing year-end spending. The report included preparations for next year’s budget, such as repurposing Kennedy Elementary School as an early childhood community center and 10% districtwide, across-the-board cuts to begin 2021-2022.

Executive Director of Finance Kathy Johnson called attention to a new state form that families must complete in order for the district to receive its full At Risk Funding to support students. The form replaces the application for free or reduced-price lunches. USDA has extended free meals for all children through the 2021-2022 school year.

In addition, Johnson shared a concern that the Contingency Reserve Fund has dipped to a low balance of $1.2 million or 1.41% of the published General Fund Legal Max (unaudited). By comparison, a monthly district payroll costs $6.2 million. “The only way to build this back up is through purposeful underspending and a transfer from the General Fund to this reserve fund,” Johnson said.

PUBLIC COMMENT

A group of 15 students and former students attended the board meeting to protest what they described as a widespread concern with sexual assaults, treatment of victims, and consequences for offenders at Lawrence High School. Three students read written statements.

Dr. Lewis shared, “The Lawrence Public Schools and this Board of Education are committed to providing for all students and staff a safe, positive, and productive learning environment free from discrimination and harassment. We appreciate students, parents, and staff reporting to us any safety concerns they have or that they hear about, because open communication is how we keep our schools safe.

“When a safety concern is brought to our attention, we take it seriously. Safety concerns are not swept under the rug, they are brought into the light so they can be resolved. We immediately conduct a thorough investigation, and if the situation warrants it, we report the concern to our law enforcement partners for their own criminal investigation.
Based on investigation findings, we take appropriate action in accordance with Board Policy, the Athletics and Activities Code of Conduct, and the Student Handbook. In order to protect the privacy rights of all of our students, we have a responsibility to keep student disciplinary matters confidential. I understand that this can be frustrating for some who want to know more information about the results of an investigation or the consequences,” said Dr. Lewis.

Board President Kelly Jones thanked the students for attending and committed to reviewing board policies, administrative procedures, and how both intersect with gender equity.

RECOGNITION
Dr. Lewis recognized Jones during her final board meeting as president. As is tradition, he presented Jones with a piece of student work, a photograph entitled “The Construction of Optimism” created by Alexia Maune, a Lawrence High 2021 graduate.

“We feel that Alexia’s story behind her work spoke to the challenge of leadership during the pandemic, and Kelly’s efforts to construct optimism and continue to glimpse hope in spite of the gray days,” said Dr. Lewis.

“It has been a rough year ... it has been like nothing I could have imagined,” said Jones. “I try to lead with humility, compassion, and most of all, gratitude. I can only do that if I am fully informed, so I studied. I studied very hard.”

Jones added that she was grateful that the board passed an equity policy this year. She also mentioned a dark side of the year with death threats made toward her family. “We need to think carefully, Lawrence, about how we engage in civil discourse,” said Jones.

Dr. Lewis also presented this year’s Outstanding Citizen Awards to several community partners that assisted in providing free children’s meals when the Kansas Governor closed public school buildings because of the pandemic.

Congratulations to the district’s 2020-2021 Outstanding Citizens:
- Hugh Carter, The Chamber
- Dena Johnston, Lawrence Schools Foundation
- Chef Rick Martin
- Emily Peterson, Merchants Pub and Plate and Lawrence Restaurant Association
- K.J. Abel Ruch, United Way of Douglas County
- United Way of Douglas County
- Jill Jolicoeur, Douglas County
- Jeff Ward, Fields and Ivy Brewery
- Matt Llewellyn, 23rd Street Brewery
- Rick Renfro, J. Wilson’s
- Kate Gonzalez, Global Café
- Shantel Grace, Ramen Bowls
- Doug Holiday, Biggs BBQ
- Brad Ziegler, Six Mile Chop House and Big Mill
- Caitlin Franz-Quinn, Cheesy Street
- Demetrius Kemp, volunteer
- Kiley Luckett, volunteer
- Gary and Angie Rexroad, volunteers
- Bret Dillingham, volunteer

“I want to thank each of you and your organizations for demonstrating what a caring community can do when it thinks creatively and works together to fulfill an identified need in service to others,” said Dr. Lewis.

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