May 10, 2021

Board Recognizes Student Honors and Approves New Equity Policy

The Lawrence Board of Education recognized a variety of student honors when it met on Monday:

- West Middle School's Regional Champion Future City Team, recipients of the national Best Future City Project Plan Award.
- Free State High's Class 6A Kansas State Speech Championship Team and individual Kansas Speech Champions: Timothy Huffman, Emily Bial, and Molly Roecker.
- Kansas Debate Coaches' Invitational Coach of the Year Kelly Thompson, FSHS.
- FSHS Kansas Music Educators Association All-State Honor Ensembles.
- Lawrence High NSDA Academic All-Americans: Jake Shew, J. Riggins, and Helen Viloria; and the individual Kansas Speech Champion in Prose, Gretchen Bannwarth.
- LHS Kansas History Day State Champions in Senior Group Documentary: Zora Lotton-Barker and Lili Christensen, national qualifiers.
- LHS senior Zeke Mayo, recipient of the DiRenna Award presented to the top basketball player in the Kansas City metro area.
- Sunflower League Basketball Coach of the Year Mike Lewis, LHS.

The board’s agenda focused on equity, the common thread woven throughout all initiatives of the district’s strategic plan. The board approved a new equity policy developed by its Policy Committee at the request of Superintendent Dr. Anthony Lewis. The Policy Committee sought input from the board’s Equity Advisory Council, Parents of Color, and Native American Student Services Parent Advisory Committee, among others, during its development. Board President Kelly Jones called it an umbrella policy to provide direction for the development and implementation of systemwide equity and justice strategies.

The policy directs the board and staff to work together to “aggressively and efficiently eliminate inequitable practices, systems, and structures that create advantages for some students and families while disadvantaging others.” It states, “Lawrence Public School employee behaviors shall contribute to a school district 1) where students’ educational outcomes cannot be predicted by race, socioeconomic status and/or other historically marginalized identities; and 2) where all students and staff are engaged in a positive and academically rigorous environment where educational equity is woven into every single department or division.” Review the new policy at [www.usd497.org/SchoolBoard](http://www.usd497.org/SchoolBoard).

Concerned about achievement disparities between white students and students of color, the district began focusing on educational equity during the 2009-2010 school year, involving the board and staff in Beyond Diversity training. Staff teams began attending and presenting at the Pacific Educational Group’s (PEG’s) National Summit for Courageous Conversations, participating in book studies, and involving students and families in equity discussions. The district hired an equity facilitator, created a Staff of Color affinity group, and supported several staff members in earning PEG affiliate practitioner licenses. Each school developed an Equity Team.

“It’s important to acknowledge that the district’s achievement gap exists because of gaps in opportunity and access,” said Leah Wisdom, director of equity, instruction, and student services. Wisdom said that through access, representation, meaningful participation, and high outcomes, the district can dismantle systemic inequities and remove barriers.

MORE
The district began collaborating with the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP Center) around the development of its Culturally Sustaining Resource Criteria. Staff use this tool when selecting, reviewing, or adopting instructional resources. It helps to guide staff in ensuring equity-centered curriculum that builds consciousness, reflects students’ cultural repertoires and views them as worthy of sustaining, and stimulates social improvement.

This year, the district engaged the MAP Center in an Equity Context Analysis Process (ECAP). The ECAP involved several data collection activities, including staff, student, and parent/guardian questionnaires and school site visits and staff interviews. The MAP Center will aggregate the data and develop a district summary of elements of educational equity that are currently evident and areas that may be opportunities for growth related to advancing educational equity.

“I appreciate the board bringing this policy forward and taking it from the boardroom to the classroom. If we choose to really leverage this policy, not just as another sheet of paper, we really can ensure that, as the policy indicates, some of those predictable reasons that students underperform are no longer a concern. Really putting this policy in action can truly be part of our legacy work,” said Dr. Lewis.

During an equity report to the board, staff addressed how the district’s strategic plan aligns to the strategies embedded into the new board policy. Equity Facilitator Dr. Danica Moore said that the CSRC supports the reduction and/or elimination of micro-macroaggressions, enhances the delivery of content, and helps identify better resources to sustain student identity.

“The power (in the use of the CSRC) is in the process of conversation and multiple perspectives. Diverse perspectives are crucial,” said Wisdom. Curriculum and Instruction Specialist Annette Kenoly added that the tool can be applied broadly, not only for use in analyzing social studies resources.

Deputy Superintendent Dr. Anna Stubblefield updated the board on the district’s use of restorative practices as part of the social and emotional support provided students. The district has trained its middle school staff in the use of restorative practices designed to repair harm, involve affected stakeholders, and transform relationships. High school staff will begin the training in the fall. The district collaborates with the Kansas Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution to provide this staff training.

“The (equity) policy really means nothing if we are not doing anything. Our (equity) work is messy, it’s fluid, and it’s adaptive,” said Wisdom.

She said that the district must commit to making sure that foundational structures are in place, giving school equity teams explicit roles, and embedding equity in professional learning for administrators, among other action steps. Wisdom said that the district must embed key equity competencies into its ongoing practice and culture for equity-centered leadership development. She added that the district monitors progress through the ECAP, data collection during classroom walkthroughs, student achievement (academic, behavioral, social, and emotional) data, and student and school climate survey results.

In other business, the board approved a Calendar Committee request to shift the first day of school for students in grades 1–5 from August 18 to August 19. This change will provide kindergartners a half-day of transition on August 18.

The board deferred approval of its governance and operating procedures manual, intended to enhance and facilitate a positive board culture. Board members continue to discuss whether they support the board electing its officers versus the present method of the top two vote getters in the school board election becoming president and vice president.

###