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USD 497 News Release
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Board Approves Governance Manual, Discusses Feedback about SRO Program

When the school board met at 6 p.m. Monday, it recognized staff and student honors. Superintendent Dr. Anthony Lewis acknowledged the district’s Technology Team for the outstanding support it provided students, staff, and school families during a school year with an increased reliance on technology due to remote and hybrid learning because of the pandemic.

Lawrence High Interim Principal Dr. Cynthia Johnson honored students for numerous art and photography awards, including Connor Jones, who won first place at the 2021 eMagine Media Fest Competition for his animated story "The Little Hitchhiker." Dr. Johnson also commended the LHS Girls’ Swimming and Diving team and Coach Kent McDonald. The team won third place in the KSHSAA 6A State Swimming and Diving Championship during the weekend.

As part of the only action item on its agenda, the board approved a new Board Governance and Operating Procedures Manual developed by its Policy Committee. The stated purpose of the manual is to help the board productively and efficiently govern the district and to enhance and facilitate a positive board culture. It recommends changes in procedures for the election of board officers. The board will select its president and vice president by board nomination and majority vote while considering the support the candidates received from the community during the school board election. The procedural changes related to the election of officers also would enable a board president to serve longer than one year.

Under agenda reports, the board heard about the most recent survey used to gather feedback about the School Resource Officer program, in place in the district since 2001. The City of Lawrence and Lawrence Police Department currently assign four SROs to Free State and Lawrence High Schools to provide mentorship, safety education, crime prevention, and emergency response services districtwide. Last year following several weapon possession concerns in the high schools, the district hosted two community conversations about safety and surveyed high school students and staff about the SRO program. The board’s Equity Advisory Council and Parents of Color committee requested the district survey a wider audience: students in grades 6-12, their parents, and district staff.

This Thought Exchange survey involved 771 participants, 786 thoughts, and 20,504 ratings of thoughts. Top-rated thoughts stressed the importance of building relationships with students, the district providing adequate support and resources for teachers, and the need for strong crisis response training. Survey results indicated that 39% of respondents reported positive interactions with SROs, while 8% reported negative reactions. Most indicated having neither positive nor negative interactions with them. In addition, 50% of respondents reported feeling more safe with SROs in schools, 11% felt less safe, and 39% answered they felt neither more or less safe. The district presented the survey results by gender and race and found no differences in responses across these categories.

Dr. Lewis, who serves on the Governor’s Commission on Racial Equity and Justice, shared with the board the Commission’s initial report made public in December of 2020. The panel studied policing and law enforcement in Kansas. Its recommendations include that schools explore alternatives to SROs, such as counselors. Dr. Lewis said that Lawrence Public Schools has done this. The district employs 52 counselors, social workers, and mental health support professionals and 13 school psychologists. Bert Nash Community Mental Health Center also assigns master’s level social workers called WRAP therapists to Lawrence schools.

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Another recommendation of the Governor’s Commission dealt with revising SRO training requirements to include implicit bias training. The Superintendent meets regularly with the city manager and representatives of the Lawrence Police Department and currently serves on the search committee for the new police chief. Dr. Lewis shared that all Lawrence SROs receive National Association of School Resource Officer training, as well as ALICE intruder, bias-free policing, mental health first aid, and crisis and conflict resolution training. He added that the SROs participated in the district’s Beyond Diversity training this year, which is required of all district staff.

Dr. Lewis told the board that the district identified several action steps related to the SRO program last year, but COVID prevented staff from fully implementing them. “We want all of our staff, administrators, and students to understand the SROs’ roles. I am fully committed to making sure we have effective SROs and that we are using them in an effective manner,” he said. “I’ve talked to our SROs to make sure they are having that opportunity to build positive relationships. As a father of a black male, I appreciate him having the opportunity to interact with a police officer in a positive way.”

Board president Kelly Jones said that she is uncomfortable with the SRO program based on long-term interactions with the criminal justice system that could begin for students in high school. “I don’t believe we have enough mental health staff,” said Jones. “I am telling you this more as a social worker than a board president, there is value in having someone in the room with a social work and mental health background. I would like the district to consider who is with the SRO when they are working with a student.”

Board Policy JCAC Interrogation and Investigations outlines parameters for SRO interviews with students. It states, “When law enforcement officers conduct an investigation and/or question a student(s), the principal shall contact a parent or guardian prior to questioning unless there is the potential for imminent harm to any person or when in the judgment of law enforcement and/or administration the investigation would be impeded. The administrator involved shall document the notification. If a student’s parent or guardian is not present during questioning, the principal shall be present. To the extent possible, reasonable requests from the parent or guardian shall be observed.”

“I strongly feel that one, we’re headed in the right direction, but I also feel strongly...that I don’t want the school resource officers in our buildings and don’t want to downplay the very negative experiences reported with them,” said Paula Smith, board member.

Wendo Kimori, a Free State High sophomore serving as the student representative to the board on Monday night, shared mixed feelings. “To an extent I do feel safer (with SROs at school) if there were to be an intruder or if someone came in armed. In the sense of when there is an incident that is a disciplinary issue or something with a student, I don’t think they (SROs) should be involved.”

The board met Monday in a new larger boardroom at the district’s Educational Support Center. The larger space enabled public attendance with COVID safety measures in place, including physical distancing.