Board Approves Budget Cuts, Discusses Safe & Supportive Schools & Social Emotional Learning

Recognition
The Lawrence Board of Education on Monday recognized the Southwest Middle School eighth grade Future City Team. As regional champions, the team competed nationally, earning top awards for Outstanding City Essay and Best Integration of Equity in Designing the Built Environment Using Nature-Powered Solutions. Southwest’s teams won $2,350 this year to support additional Future City projects. Aaminah Ahmed, Owen Bork, Logan Callaway, Aedan FitzGerald, Nicky Johnson, Sorcha Keating, Violet Meinershagen, Alex Oral, Liam Pleskac, Neel Sabarwal, Katherine Stancil, Eli Stone, Emi Stone, Tristan Thomas, and Jacob Wang make up “Team Mexico City.” Coaches include Dani Lotton-Barker, Angela Chowdhury, and professional engineer mentor Chris Storm, who has worked with Southwest Future City teams for 15 years.

Budget Planning
On a 5-2 vote, the school board approved $340,962 in additional budget cuts to administration and the learning coach program, as part of more than $6.4 million in budget savings. The reductions bridge an estimated $4.27 million financial shortfall due largely to declining enrollment and corresponding losses in state aid. The cuts also free some funds for reallocation to board priorities, including improving staff salaries and replenishing contingency reserves. Board members Kay Emerson and Carole Cadue-Blackwood voted against the package, indicating that they preferred to remove the cut to learning coaches.

Superintendent Dr. Anthony Lewis thanked the board and staff, students, parents, and community partners involved in the budget planning process. “These are difficult discussions and decisions that had to be made because of changes in enrollment and funding. I appreciate our school community's engagement, input, support, and patience as we worked to help the board balance the budget and free funding to address priority needs, including improving staff salaries.

Dr. Lewis said that in the days ahead, district and building administration will continue to work closely with Human Resources staff to examine data around spring retirements, resignations, and non-renewals. “We will implement these budget reductions in a way that keeps student needs at the forefront and protects our current staff as much as possible. We will work to communicate staffing and programming changes in a thoughtful and timely manner,” he said.

“These budget cuts will require changing the way we do business. There will be losses. We will be challenged to do more for our students with fewer resources,” Dr. Lewis said. “I hope that we will also keep in mind that not all change is bad. We can think creatively and do some things differently. We can operate more efficiently. I am certain that we can work together and do some things better, especially as we move forward with the goals of our strategic plan.”

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Safe and Supportive Schools
Noting that the pandemic has greatly increased mental health needs among students and staff, Dr. Cynthia Johnson, executive director of inclusion, engagement, and belonging, told the board that the district uses Social Emotional Character Development Standards to align Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and focus on student knowledge and skill development. Shaped by the local priorities of schools, families, and communities, Dr. Johnson said that SEL boosts academic performance, promotes health and well-being, and helps students understand different perspectives. She added that it isn’t therapy, a distraction from academics, or the teaching of a specific political agenda.

The five competencies of SEL are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Casel, 2017). Lawrence schools use Connect with Kids and Positive Action curricula during morning meetings, advisory period, and classroom discussions. The district gathers information about student needs as well as their input through the annual Kansas Communities That Care Survey, its work with Equal Opportunity Schools, and other student surveys. In Professional Learning Communities, staff provide feedback, analyze student risk screening data, and share ideas for improving SEL instruction and delivery.

Dr. Johnson and several school staff members highlighted for the board some of the ways the district amplifies student voice in this work. The district has developed a Student Mental Health Advisory Team. After a training in March, this team began discussing and asking their peers about existing school resources, additional supports that may be needed, and their school connections through student relationships with trusted adults. The advisory team wants students to be more involved in leading improvements in school support services.

“Students say they need breaks. They just need time to catch up. They need time to connect with that significant adult in the building or they need time to connect with their peers just to regroup,” said Jose Cornejo, district mental health facilitator, of a common theme heard from high school students.

The board, district, and all schools work with a variety of advisory committees to discuss how to best support student needs. As an example, Kelly Walker, Native American Student Services (NASS) coordinator, meets monthly with the Indian Education Parent Committee. Its feedback guides and evaluates programs and services, such as the NASS school supply giveaway, cooking classes, college exploration, cultural events, and other student activities.

Monday’s report also highlighted the work of school equity teams and the early childhood SEL curriculum, which includes a focus on family engagement. The College and Career Academy shared the success of regular student check-ins. Lawrence High touted the benefits of student-led suicide prevention efforts through Sources of Strength.

Jennifer Georgie, West Middle School student support facilitator, said that everyone at West is involved in implementing restorative practices, including student volunteers who co-facilitate SEL in community circles with their peers. “Students are accountable, and they are taking accountability. Teaching 26 years, this is the first time I’ve asked myself, ‘Where has this been? Why haven’t we been doing this before?’” said Georgie.

Preparing to pilot new SEL curricula at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, the district will use monthly feedback sessions during the upcoming pilot to inform final recommendations for resource adoption.

“I wanted to say thank you so much for this presentation,” said board member Kay Emerson. “Business is going to look different moving forward but we still have so many successes here in our district. Lawrence may be going through some challenges but at the end of the day, we are an amazing district.”

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