USD 497 News Release

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Board Discusses new ELA Resource, Data-Informed Decisions, & Administrative Comparisons

Recognition

The Lawrence Board of Education on Monday recognized several student and staff honors. Free State High Theater honors include four Superior Ratings, qualifying students for the International Thespian Festival: Mary Green, Solo Musical; Beckett Hutchinson, Monologue; Julia Ruddy, Solo Musical; and Mary Kate Shultz, Playwriting. Shultz also earned the Larry Shue Playwriting Award. Free State received the Honor “Gold” Troupe award.

The board congratulated Kansas School Counselor of the Year Amanda Atkins of Sunset Hill Elementary, and recognized Lawrence High School journalism and graphic design teacher Barbara Tholen, 2022 Kansas Master Teacher; Cuyler Dunn, the Kansas Scholastic Press Association’s Kansas Student Journalist of the Year; and LHS national Pacemaker Award Finalist honors for the Red & Black yearbook. Kenna McNally and Sophia Kaufman were 2021 Red & Black co-editors and McNally and Kate O’Keefe are 2022 yearbook co-editors.

State Board Member Visit

Kansas State Board of Education member Ann Mah provided an update about statewide education issues, including legislative bills, teacher retention concerns, and innovative program ideas for districts to “grow their own” teachers. “We know now that more than 25% of superintendents plan to leave their jobs this year,” said Mah.

In light of the state board’s one-month suspension of Kansas Commissioner of Education Dr. Randy Watson for remarks last week that perpetuated a harmful Native American racial stereotype, Mah explained that the state board manages personnel complaints by considering the employee’s history of work and pattern of behavior as well as whether they have shown remorse and made amends. Mah said that the state board felt one bad mistake should not end what she called a 40-year stellar career and it believes in the restorative justice process.

Lawrence school board member Paula Smith said that she did not accept Watson’s personal apology. She asked that Tribal Councils be at the table with the state board discussing a comprehensive plan for moving forward. Smith requested Watson create an action plan for self-learning, review the report of the Governor’s Commission on Racial Equity and Justice, commit to removing the use of Native mascots and related imagery in public education, and hire a cultural competency coach, among other concrete actions. Lawrence school board member Carole Cadue-Blackwood referred Mah to a list of recommendations emailed to the state board by the Kansas Association for Native American Education. Smith and Cadue-Blackwood are Native American.

Board member Kelly Jones told Mah of her disappointment in the state board’s unanimous vote on Watson’s suspension when the Governor called for his resignation. “It’s hard to understand a commitment to racial equity when that’s the vote,” said Jones, adding that the state board should heed the Kansas Association for Native American Education’s call for curriculum reform that respects Indigenous peoples and nations. “I think this is an opportunity for action in the face of a state legislature that is clearly opposed to supporting schools in their equity work,” she said.
English Language Arts Resource

The board approved, on a split vote, a new elementary English language arts resource to replace a discontinued resource. The adoption follows staff review of state guidance for supporting students with dyslexia, a committee’s evaluation of 14 resources, and a pilot of three of them by 18 teachers across three grade levels. Taking the pilot group’s top choice of a different resource in mind, the Curriculum and Instruction Team looked at the cost difference between the two resources and funds needed for upcoming science and social studies curriculum review cycles. It recommended the purchase of the pilot group’s second choice, Benchmark Advance print and digital resources for grades K-5, on a six-year contract for $882,900 from the Student Materials Revolving Fund. This fund is based on student fees. The savings between the two resources was $583,300 over the life of the contract.

“Does Benchmark have everything we wanted? No,” said Kristin Hase, curriculum specialist, noting that the district can supplement it with existing resources. “With the cost, we feel like Benchmark Advance is a good second choice,” she said, adding that the pilot group said it could support the purchase of either resource.

Data-Informed Decisions

Principals, teachers, and staff shared how they are using data to support student improvement. The district’s strategic plan includes a focus on data-informed decisions and ensuring data is available, accurate, accessible, and actionable.

“We use our data to drive every decision we make in the classroom. It gives us a look at each individual student and helps us determine if their IEP goals are what they should be or if we need to change them. Because our kids are at such a range of skills, we use data to determine how we are meeting the needs of each student, individually, and students as a group to prepare them for moving into kindergarten,” said Trish Wills, early childhood special education teacher.

First grade teacher Sherrie Murray described how Schwegler Elementary teachers use their Wednesday collaboration time to discuss data and plan instruction, and use pre-tests, midpoint assessments, and post-tests to determine which strategies are most effective. “Common formative assessments are a powerful tool that provide immediate feedback so we can tailor our instructional practices,” said Murray.

Academic interventionist Rosemary Blum said that Southwest Middle School has responded to student questions about why they have to take District Common Assessments (DCA) with a tool for students and teachers to discuss students’ answers, correct answers, and students’ reflections. “We hope that this piece can work with teachers, students, and parents because we don’t want the DCA to be a mystery to anybody,” said Blum.

Graduation Data

Executive Director of Data and Technology Dr. Zachary Conrad presented district and state graduation data. The district graduation rate was 84.2% in 2015 and in 2021. The graduation rate improved slightly from 82.7% in 2020. State graduation rates were 85.7% in 2015 and 88.1% in 2021, the latter reflecting a .2% dip from the previous year.

Free State’s 2021 graduation rate of 89.8% is lower than in 2020 (90.1%) while Lawrence High’s most recent rate of 80.6% is slightly higher than last year’s 79.4%. Lawrence Virtual School has improved its graduation rate during the past five years from 52.1% in 2016 to 77.6% in 2021. Executive Director of Inclusion, Engagement, and Belonging Dr. Cynthia Johnson shared numerous strategies the high schools use to support students at risk of not graduating. “While we’re not there, I think we’re heading in the right direction,” said Superintendent Dr. Anthony Lewis.

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KASB Report: Administrative Comparison

Upon the request of the school board, Britton Hart, Kansas Association of School Boards’ assistant executive director of leadership services, provided an administrative data comparison. He used data collected through the Kansas State Department of Education’s Superintendent Organizational Report, noting that it is self-reported and unaudited.

Hart shared data for 17 school districts comparable to Lawrence, the seventh-largest district in Kansas. He looked at the ratio of Central Office certified administrators to K-12 enrollment, free and reduced-price lunch enrollment, special education enrollment, and number of school buildings. In terms of total Central Office certified administrators, Lawrence reported 20; the state average was 18.1. Hart said that Lawrence was third among the 18 schools in terms of the ratio of administrators to K-12 enrollment.

“Each district is drastically different in how they draw up job descriptions, identify titles, and really, hand out the work to ensure that the kids are getting their needs met,” said Hart, noting that Topeka USD 501 reported 15.6 Central Office certified administrators, but 63 building administrators. Lawrence reported 20 Central Office administrators and 33 at the building level. “Possibly, a lot of that work being done at the building level in Topeka is being done at the Central Office in Lawrence,” he said.

In terms of the ratio of number of certified building administrators to buildings, Lawrence had one of the lowest ratios, 1.57. Lawrence was seventh overall in having the fewest number of building administrators to school buildings. Lawrence was in the middle of the group of comparable districts in terms of the number of building administrators to K-12 student enrollment.

Hart also shared the number of non-certified districtwide administrators and staff or employees who supervise operations, such as facilities, food service, finance, and technology. The average number reported across the 18 school districts was 300; Lawrence was well below the average at 200 non-certified districtwide operations staff.

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