



USD 497 News Release

Julie Boyle, Executive Director of Communications
110 McDonald Drive Lawrence, Kansas 66044
785-330-1662 / jboyle@usd497.org

July 12, 2021

Board Elects Officers, Extends Superintendent's Contract, & Hears Academy Update

ELECTION OF BOARD OFFICERS

At its annual organizational meeting Monday, the Lawrence Board of Education unanimously elected Erica Hill as president and Shannon Kimball as vice president for the 2021-2022 school year. "This is a responsibility that I take very seriously so thank you for this opportunity," said Hill.

SUPERINTENDENT'S CONTRACT

As part of its Consent Agenda, the board voted to extend Superintendent Dr. Anthony Lewis' contract through the 2023-2024 school year. Dr. Lewis joined the school district in July of 2018.

BOARD MEETING SCHEDULE

The board approved its 2021-2022 meeting schedule, opting to continue meeting twice monthly on the second and fourth Mondays. The focus of meetings will shift to include one business and one report meeting per month. The vote followed the board's consideration of a proposal to reduce the frequency of its meetings to once a month.

COLLEGE & CAREER ACADEMY REPORT

Lawrence College and Career Academy Principal Dr. Bill DeWitt shared with the board an update about the first year of the program, which developed out of a grassroots effort to provide students an alternative to a traditional high school setting. The program serves students in grades 10-12 from both Lawrence high schools. The Academy opened in the Lawrence College and Career Center in March of 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of public school buildings in Kansas and a shift to remote learning.

The Academy prepares students for self-sustainability through learning academic, career, social, and emotional skills. It supports students through graduation, career path employment, and successful completion of a wide variety of post-secondary educational opportunities. By the end of the 2020-2021 school year, the program had served 67 students. At present, 80 students, including 37 seniors, have enrolled for the fall.

"Our goal is to graduate all seniors," said Dr. DeWitt, adding that Academy students participate in daily wellness check-ins and flexible learning pathways while benefiting from community partnerships.

He shared with the board some common reasons students drop out of high school, including poor attendance and grades, a lack of credits and/or academic skills, pregnancy, or economic reasons, such as needing to work and/or help support their families. Dr. DeWitt added that students drop out because they do not like high school or feel welcome there. Some students prefer an alternate educational route, such as through the diploma-completion or GED programs.

MORE

Page 2- July 12, 2021, School Board Meeting

Issac Riffel is entering his third and final semester at the Academy. “This is a fantastic school,” he said. “The relationships built between staff members, students, and teachers are incredible . . . You’re not only a student at the Academy, you’re a young professional learning something new every day . . . It is the best high school experience I ever had,” said Riffel.

Free State and Academy student Michael Douglas Winebrenner shared sentiments similar to his peer. “When I first joined this school, I felt an immediate sense of community, unlike my former schools . . . This school has helped me improve both academically and socially,” Winebrenner said.

After entering the Academy ready to drop out of school, Lawrence High senior Gracyn Garrett said, “This place was my last resort . . . I didn’t expect to last the full semester.”

Now Garrett is on track to graduate this fall with her ServSafe certification in food handling, Childhood Development Associate credential, Certified Nursing Assistant license, and her high school diploma.

“It is no flattery nor exaggeration to say that this school saved my life. They (the Academy staff) have given me the materials to build my skills and the confidence to know that my past doesn’t define me,” Garrett said.

Board members appreciated hearing from the students. “Your words have been so inspiring,” said Kimball to the Academy students. “Thank you for coming here and sharing your stories.”

Hill added, “Dr. DeWitt, thank you for your leadership of this program. It is changing lives.”

###