



## USD 497 News Release

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**September 11, 2023**

### **Public Budget Hearings**

Monday's Lawrence Board of Education meeting began with public hearings related to the revenue neutral rate and the 2023-2024 budget. No members of the public participated in the first hearing. Three individuals commented during the latter. Concerns raised included rising taxes, opportunities for public participation in setting the budget, city and school district cooperation around community development planning, greater support for classroom management of increasing student behaviors, and various budget expenditures.

### **Budget Approval**

After passing revenue neutral rate and local option budget (LOB) resolutions, the board approved, on a 6-1 vote, the published 2023-24 budget of \$193,092,349, which is based on an estimated tax rate of 52.229 mills. Board member Carole Cadue-Blackwood voted against the LOB resolution and the budget. "I grappled with this decision. I researched it, and I met thoroughly with community members, and at this time, I just don't think it's prudent to...have voted yes, in light of the recent school closures," Cadue-Blackwood said.

"If this board made a different decision than the one that we just made in terms of our LOB, I'm not sure how we would live up to the commitments we have made to our staff in terms of wages," Board Past-President Shannon Kimball said. "We made some really hard financial decisions last year in order to fund those raises, and I think it would be a great disservice to our community to then walk away from the reasons we made those decisions -- to support our staff, students, and our schools."

Kimball added that the board makes decisions throughout the year that determine how much money is spent. The public can weigh in on the budget at every board meeting, any time there is a budget item on the agenda.

By approving the maximum budget authority, the board did not approve how much it expects to spend. The administration must make projections, and then wait on state budget calculations, based largely on enrollment.

"By closing schools, we made it possible to take the steps that we are taking. That made it possible for us to have the money to do the things we are hoping to do in our schools," said Bob Byers, vice president of the board and a member of the Futures Planning Committee. "By setting that max (maximum budget authority) higher, it gives us the ability, if there is more revenue out there that we have access to utilize, to spend it."

### **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)**

The board deferred a vote to sign an MOU formalizing the district's partnership with state and local truancy prevention service partners. It wants to add language to the agreement referencing the board's Equity Policy, structuring a system of data monitoring, and inviting community partners to participate in the district's diversity and equity training.

After additions are made, the MOU of cooperation among the district, the Kansas Department for Children and Families, Douglas County District Attorney's Office, Douglas County Criminal Justice Services – Youth Programs, Center for Supportive Communities, and the O'Connell Children's Shelter will return to the board for approval.

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### **Adult Education Proclamation**

Recognizing the essential services provided the community by the district's Adult Learning Center, the board approved a proclamation supporting September 18-22 as Adult Education and Family Literacy Week. The Adult Learning Center provides adult education, reading and math instruction, English as a Second Language services, and GED test preparation. The center, which served 127 adults last year, is enrolling now for adult GED sessions beginning October 23 and its next English language acquisition class, starting in January.

"You are doing amazing work. The adult education program graduation, of all of the graduations we go to, is one of my favorites because there are always emotions involved in graduations, but there is a different feel there. The program is amazing, and you are doing great work," said GR Gordon-Ross, a board member.

The Lawrence Public Schools' adult education program is one of few in Kansas supported by a school district.

### **Solar Energy Project**

Prairie Park Elementary will be the site of the district's first installation of a solar system. The board approved a \$240,590 photovoltaic energy purchase with DBA Cromwell Solar Inc. After incentives, the district expects that capital investment to be considerably lower. For example, there is a federal government incentive of 30% on projects like this one.

"This allows us to take capital funds and invest them, much in the same way that we did with the (private fiber) Wide Area Network. Over its lifetime, (this project) will return a profit of \$480,000 to the district's General Fund," said Dr. Larry Englebrick, chief operations officer.

The renewable energy project grew out of a Futures Planning Committee recommendation for exploring solar power to both realize General Fund budget savings and to protect the environment. The south-facing sections of Prairie Park's metal roof have a 50-year life expectancy and make the school a prime site for installation.

"One of the things we wrote into this was to have an energy data dashboard available to our students and teachers...so not only would this be a tool to produce energy and reduce our energy consumption and energy bills, it could transcend those goals and also be an instructional tool used in our classrooms," Englebrick said.

Board President Kelly Jones added that she sees the project as an opportunity for district leadership in the development of a community sustainability action plan. "We have heard the community ask us to partner with our city and county leaders. There is an opportunity to consider, what does an infrastructure look like, not only for the school district, but for the city and the county, so we are well prepared for what is going to be an absolute strain on our students' future as it relates to climate change?" Jones said.

### **Legislative Priorities**

The board is getting a jump start on its annual discussion of legislative priorities, thanks to the work of its Policy Committee. Once finalized, the list will create the basis for the board's advocacy efforts and inform local legislators and the community of the greatest needs of the district. Kimball shared that the priorities are organized by the district's five strategic plan goal areas. Others relate to good governance, policies, and practices.

"The Legislature didn't take a lot of actions of a positive nature in terms of what we asked them to do last year, so many of the key points are the same as last year," said Kimball, who added that it would be helpful to have the board approve the document prior to an October legislative pre-session about special education.

Board members and administration will seek input from advisory groups and other community members prior to voting on the 2024 Legislative Priorities.

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**Special Recognition**

The board recognized the Free State High School Swim and Dive Team’s back-to-back Sunflower League and KSHSAA 6A State Championships. The team’s grade point average of 3.901 also earned the title of Gold Scholar Team. Superintendent Dr. Anthony Lewis congratulated the team, their families, and coaches.

He recognized Head Coach Annette McDonald for earning 2023 Girls Swimming & Diving Coach of the Year honors from both the Kansas State High School Activities Association and the Kansas Swim Coaches Association. McDonald stepped down from her coaching duties at the end of the season. She continues to teach advanced algebra and calculus at Free State.

Assistant Swim Coach Jana Skinner is the team’s new head coach, and Brandy Brandt continues to serve as the diving coach.

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