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USD 497 News Release

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Board Discusses Improving Reading Instruction, Approves New Secondary Courses

The Lawrence Board of Education on Monday heard a strategic plan update about the district's focus on cohesive curriculum and data-informed decisions, including the foundational work of teaching all students to read. The report included an overview of structured literacy initiatives and meeting the expectations of the Every Child Can Read Act and state requirements associated with teacher training to identify students with dyslexia and to intervene to support their reading progress. District administration also shared with the board that most of its elementary professional learning time has shifted focus to improving reading instruction.

With relatively flat reading scores a national, state, and local concern, teacher training in the science of reading has become a key focus area for many school districts, including Lawrence Public Schools. The Kansas State Board and Department of Education invested \$15 million to provide Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling or LETRS training. The Lawrence school district earmarked \$300,000 of its federal ESSER funds to pay elementary educators to participate in the training.

The district has an eye toward student improvement and a goal that by the end of the 2025-26 school year, 75% of K-10 students will score as low-risk or on-track on the Spring FastBridge "aReading" or "earlyReading" assessments. Of its elementary educators, 225 or 78% are currently participating in LETRS training. All of the district's early childhood and elementary principals are taking part in LETRS training for administrators.

Veteran educator Kendra Luna, a Sunset Hill Elementary first grade teacher, encourages other educators to jump in, even if they have 20 years of teaching under their belt. "This is really great (training) for all teachers, from first-year teachers up to teachers with 30 years of experience. It also gives us a scope and sequence for how we need to be explicit in teaching reading." Luna has supported her colleagues in sharing with school families students' reading progress, interventions, and simple ways they can continue to help build reading skills at home.

At Sunset Hill, 100% of educators are participating in LETRS training. Principal Jeremy Philipp said, "Our teachers are phenomenal, and they bring a skill and an art to what they do. (This training) adds more tools to their toolbox. Investing in teachers' professional development is one of the biggest investments we can make, because we want to build them up as professionals."

Philipp also issued a challenge. "We need to figure out how to keep this momentum moving... We are a cohort of learners just like our kids are. I challenge the district to put our brains together to see how we can continue this progress. With flat data, we have to think differently."

The board purchased a new primary reading resource, Benchmark Advance, last year, and the district is using FastBridge, a norm-referenced national assessment, to track student progress on learning reading skills that increase in difficulty from fall to winter and to spring. Administrators shared Fall 2023 "earlyReading" scores for students in Grades K-1. They showed an increase of 8.8% of students on track or at low risk compared to Spring 2023. In addition, Fall 2023 "aReading" scores for students in Grades 2-10 showed an increase of 2.5% of students on track/low risk compared to Spring 2023.

"We are also trying to improve our data literacy as a district... The FastBridge assessment is a formative assessment we use to inform us about which skills students are mastering and which ones require additional instruction," said Chief Operations Officer Patrick Kelly. He added that this data helps teachers answer the questions: "What do my kids not know yet?" and "What do they already know?"

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The fall early reading assessment data continues to reveal disparities in the progress of students in the racial subgroups of African Americans and Native Americans. Board member Erica Hill asked about the root causes of these disparities and what the district is doing about them.

“When we think about equity, literacy is equity,” said Superintendent Dr. Anthony Lewis, noting the district’s ongoing focus on high expectations for all students, understanding the students being served, and culturally responsive teaching. “It’s going to take our teachers, parents, and community,” he added of working together to improve.

The board also heard an overview of the district’s curriculum review process and approved revisions to the review timeline and new secondary courses. The high schools will add to their course catalog: Algebra 1 in Manufacturing Processes, Entrepreneurship, and Design; Geometry in Construction; Integrated Algebra/Geometry 1 and 2; and Production Methods. Middle schools will add Project Lead the Way App Creators. No courses were recommended for deletion this year.

“These are data-driven decisions based on student needs,” said Shaun Hanson, director of secondary curriculum, of the course additions. “We are looking at our postsecondary effectiveness and math goals when making these decisions.” Hanson said that not all students leaving middle school are ready for Algebra 1, so the district wants to help fill the gap in pre-algebra knowledge and skills for some students entering high school.

The high school enrollment process occurs at the end of January/early February.

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