



USD 497 News Release

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Board Approves Certified Negotiated Agreement Ratified by Teachers With 95.5% Support

“With all voters, the agreement passed with 95.5% support, one of the highest levels over the last ten years,” said Josh Spradlin, who represents the Lawrence Education Association on the negotiations team and teaches science at Liberty Memorial Central Middle School. “The amount of things we got done this year, including things that took multiple years to reach agreement on, is big!” he said.

The board unanimously approved the certified negotiated agreement. It includes a 4.077% increase to the certified salary pool, totaling \$1.9 million. The agreement adds \$1,400 to the salaries of all certified staff, as well as payments for horizontal and vertical movement for continuing education and additional years of service. The board will continue to provide fully-paid single medical, dental, and vision insurance at a 21.7% increased premium cost, totaling \$8,725.44 per full-time employee this year.

The agreement includes increased stipends for additional assignments to reduce contracted services costs and improve the potential for hiring for positions, such as speech language pathologists and occupational and physical therapists. Elementary and virtual school staff sponsoring student clubs outside the duty day and staff supporting identified high school activities and athletics will receive increased stipends. It also raises staff pay rates for extra duty assignments and reimbursements for accumulated illness leave.

“I want to thank the team... for the amount of time, collaboration, research, and dedication it takes to really make a difference for our district,” said Kristen Ryan, executive director of human resources.

Board President Kelly Jones encouraged negotiations team members to continue to focus on increasing the base salary, making the working environment stronger and better, and working together toward getting educators across Kansas the wages they deserve at all stages of their professional careers.

2024-2025 Student Handbook

The board pulled the 2024-2025 Student Handbook, which carries the weight of Board Policy, from its consent agenda for clarifying discussion before it approved it on first reading. Consolidated from elementary, middle, and a high school documents into a single handbook, it didn’t reflect current cell phone policy in place at each school level. These policies may be found in 2023-2024 Student Handbooks available on school websites.

With a goal of ensuring productive, respectful, and safe learning environments, the Board Policy Committee is currently discussing policy and procedural changes regarding the appropriate use of cell phones by students during the school day. The board and administration support high school teachers in making the choice not to allow cell phones during class, per the current high school cell phone policy. They also understand high school staff members' concerns with current policy, liability, and student distractions and harmful use of cell phones, and are considering these concerns during the discussion of policy changes.

Jones said that when school resumes in August, the board and administration will seek and consider additional input from staff, as well as feedback from students and school families.

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Recognition: Student Leadership Academy

The board met the LMH Health Summer Leadership Academy's sixth class made up of Jack Bosh, Juan Carlos Casimiro Mendoza, and Sylvia Oparaji, LHS seniors; Maia Bradley and Rick Liljestrom, LHS graduates; and Lois Xie, Munira Yunusah, and Austin Drewry, Free State seniors.

With her mother working as a nurse and her father having a home healthcare agency, Oparaji knew she wanted to follow in their footsteps, but said that she was unsure of what steps to take. "The Academy helped me get my foot in the door," she said. Oparaji shared that the experience also enhanced her public speaking skills and taught her to ask more compelling questions.

Bosh said that he has an interest in working in diagnostic radiology. "I gained an understanding of the business aspects of how a hospital works and learned the importance of communication skills," he said of the internship.

Wanting to be a brain surgeon, Drewry said that he entered the Academy to be sure of his career path before he goes into debt in medical school. He shared that something he learned from the experience is that leadership is an action, not a position. "You don't have to be a CEO to be a leader, you can be an intern," Drewry said.

All Academy interns complete a capstone project. Some of the topics they are researching include "The Impact of Race-Based Health Care on Black Trust," "Black Women and Maternal Health," and "The Impact Immigration has on Children and Families." Academy interns also earn scholarships to support their postsecondary dreams.

Recognition: District Annual Awards

With its Outstanding Citizen and Service to Public Education Awards, our district annually recognizes individuals and community groups for championing public education and supporting the work of staff, students, and our schools. Superintendent Dr. Anthony Lewis presented 2024 Outstanding Citizen Awards to three executives behind the development and success of the LMH Health Summer Leadership Academy: Erica Hill, director of health equity and strategic initiatives and finance director of the LMH Health Foundation; Russ Johnson, the hospital's CEO, and Sheryle D'Amico, senior vice president of strategic integration. Hill and D'Amico both called the Academy a highlight of their careers.

Dr. Lewis also presented Outstanding Citizen Awards honoring Ken Sarber, LMH Health director of education, and Angie Loving, University of Kansas interim vice provost. They lead their organizations' longstanding partnerships as Project SEARCH job sites. "Ken and Angie lead their teams with a strong commitment to teaching employability skills through on-the-job training and workplace internships for young adults with disabilities who are transitioning from high school to adult life," said Dr. Lewis.

Sarber said that he learns more from the students than they learn from him. "It is my greatest joy to see the interns working at the hospital," he said. Loving called her association with Project SEARCH a highlight of her career at KU, thanking the student interns, their parents, and the Project SEARCH staff and job coaches.

The superintendent presented the Outstanding Service to Public Education Award to Debbie Harman, a 37-year veteran of Junior Achievement, serving the last 28 years as the Lawrence and Douglas County director of the program that inspires and prepares young people to succeed in a global economy. "If you do not know Debbie, I can tell you that she is a force of nature. No one person does more to raise funds, recruit volunteers, and support our educators in improving the financial literacy of our scholars than Debbie. This program reaches every elementary and middle school in our district," said Dr. Lewis.

"We wouldn't be able to reach nearly 5,500 students in Lawrence without Dr. Lewis' unwavering support," said Harman. She also thanked district curriculum directors, school principals, teachers, and students; the Junior Achievement board, staff, and volunteers; and her family.

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Recognition: Superintendent's Final Meeting

"This is our last formal meeting with Dr. Lewis as a board. I appreciate being able to see the community members we are honoring tonight from the relationships that have grown because of Dr. Lewis' work. I'm also glad to hear from the students because that's when Dr. Lewis lights up!" said President Jones, adding her thanks to the superintendent for his six years of service to our district and community.

Dr. Lewis highlighted some district accomplishments during his tenure:

- Achieved the highest graduation rates in 16 years with the percent of students graduating in all racial/ethnic subgroups increasing or maintaining since 2018.
- Implemented historic staff salary increases totaling \$6.65 million in 2023-24.
- Expanded college preparation with 456 students taking at least one concurrent course.
- Grew workforce readiness with 342 students earning business and industry certifications and 48% of high schoolers enrolled in courses in 22 career pathways.
- Launched College and Career Center Academy offering alternative path for high school students, earning National School Boards Association Magna Awards Grand Prize.
- Opened Kansas' first public Montessori school. The school has a waiting list to enroll.
- Developed a districtwide private fiber wide area network (projected \$3M General Fund savings).
- Installed district's first solar energy project (projected \$480,000 General Fund savings).
- Approved an innovative STEAM learning program to grow enrollment at Liberty Memorial Central Middle School.
- Earned Kansans Can Silver Star Recognition in Student Social-Emotional Growth and Copper Star Recognition in Students Academically Prepared for Postsecondary.
- Trained more than 200 educators in the science of reading (LETRS).
- Joined the Kansas Teacher Retention Initiative to measure and improve employee engagement and retention.
- Launched mentorship program partnership with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Kansas.
- Secured a \$500,000 Stronger Connections grant to support student behavioral health.

He praised the board, teachers and staff, and students. "To all of our previous and current students, you are the reason we do what we do. You are the reason we come to work every day. Your curiosity, intelligence, creativity, and perseverance are just so awesome to watch. We have some amazing, talented students. Thank you for allowing me the privilege to play a small part in your growth," he said.

Dr. Lewis said that he had some parting words to the community. "Progress and unity can only be achieved when we come together. Most of the time we have the same goal in mind. It is the route we take to get to that goal that sometimes causes disagreement. We can honor and appreciate different and varying perspectives. Let us embrace and welcome diversity of thought. Always assume positive intent. Focus on building bridges and fostering collaboration."

"Every scholar in our district deserves the ability to succeed. Work toward a future where every single student in this community has the opportunity to thrive," he said.

Executive Session

The board met in executive session to discuss non-elected personnel, and specifically, the interim superintendent search.