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March 2025
NEWSLETTER



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ON the COVER



"There's no such thing as a mistake, just an opportunity to learn," said Chef David Weakley to his Culinary students after they made a last-minute change to their meal just hours before a visiting Kansas Teacher of the Year team was set to arrive for a luncheon at the Lawrence College and Career Center. After finding that their original appetizer was overdone, the team of Free State, LHS, and Academy students pivoted to prepare fries as a substitute. The students rose to the occasion, cooking and serving a delicious plated lunch for their esteemed guests, all educators nominated by their school districts for state honors. The meal featured soup, chicken breast, broccoli, fries, and a dessert of pumpkin, white chocolate crème brûlée.

"This was the students' first meal service. Despite some nervousness they demonstrated great work, even adapting to a few curveballs in the kitchen," said Principal Mark Preut.

Our 2024 Lawrence Elementary Teacher of the Year, Kristin Oswald, Schwegler's librarian, hosted the visiting KTOY Team. Greeted by Superintendent Dr. Jeanice Kerr Swift, the team also visited Schwegler, West Middle School, LHS, Peaslee Tech, and Community Connections at Pinckney. They learned about how Lawrence Public Schools prepares students for college, careers, and life, including our AVID, Farm 2 School, Career and Technical Education, Community Transition, and CharacterStrong programs.

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LAWRENCE Public Schools



Dr. Jeanice Kerr Swift
Superintendent

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USD 497 Executive Director of Communications Julie Boyle and Multimedia Communications Specialist Andrew Beaven produce this newsletter in partnership with the Lawrence Journal-World.

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Board Meeting Calendar

The Lawrence Board of Education meets at 6 p.m. on the second and fourth Mondays of each month, unless otherwise announced, at 110 McDonald Drive.

Upcoming Meetings:

March 10 & 24

April 14 & 28

May 12 & 27

June 9 & 23

Find it at **www.usd497.org**

- New Student Registration
- Job Openings
- School Menus
- Board of Education News
- Superintendent Messages & Reports

School Board Shows Unanimous Support for Dr. Swift as Superintendent



The Lawrence Board of Education on February 24 unanimously approved hiring Interim Superintendent Dr. Jeanice Kerr Swift as superintendent of schools, effective July 1, 2025, through June 30, 2028, pending the successful negotiation of a contract.

President Kelly Jones had announced Swift's selection February 21, sharing that after carefully considering district leadership needs, data from extensive community engagement, and applications of candidates from across the region and country, it became evident that Swift is the most qualified candidate.

"She possesses the vision, experience, and dedication necessary to continue advancing the district's goals. The committee sees no need to further extend the search process at additional expense to the district and community," Jones said.

Serving as Lawrence interim superintendent since August 30, Swift is a lifelong educator, most recently leading the Ann Arbor Public Schools in Michigan as superintendent for more than a decade. She also held district and school administrative and teaching roles in Colorado, and taught in Texas public schools.

"For me, it's about how you treat people. I think what you bring to the district is connection. You have demonstrated that you have passion to help students achieve their best, and you keep us moving forward," said board member Bob Byers to Swift.

Board Vice President GR Gordon-Ross said that he appreciated Swift showing the board where our district is doing well and where changes need to be made. "I have been impressed with your ability to synthesize the input from all stakeholders and bring back that feedback, both the good and bad, and start to work on how we are going to get there," Gordon-Ross said. "All seven of us (board members) will be right there beside you as you take us forward."

"I am honored and deeply grateful for the opportunity," said Swift, adding her appreciation for the community engaging in conversations with our district and schools throughout the fall. "I feel like we have a clear and collective direction, and we are ready to get to work and move forward."

Swift is the tenth superintendent to lead Lawrence USD 497 since district unification in 1965.

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Community Input Sets Direction for Schools

Superintendent Dr. Jeanice Kerr Swift invited students, staff, school families, and community members to gather in conversation from September to December to discuss school district strengths, challenges, and priorities for the future. Through 55 in-person community conversations and 1,193 completed surveys, our district and schools collected an extensive amount of input. Partners with the University of Kansas analyzed the data and five common themes emerged:

1. **High-Quality Teachers and Staff**
2. **Academic Excellence, Student Support, and Enhanced Program Offerings**
3. **Safety and Discipline**
4. **Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging**
5. **Transparency, Communication, and Engagement**

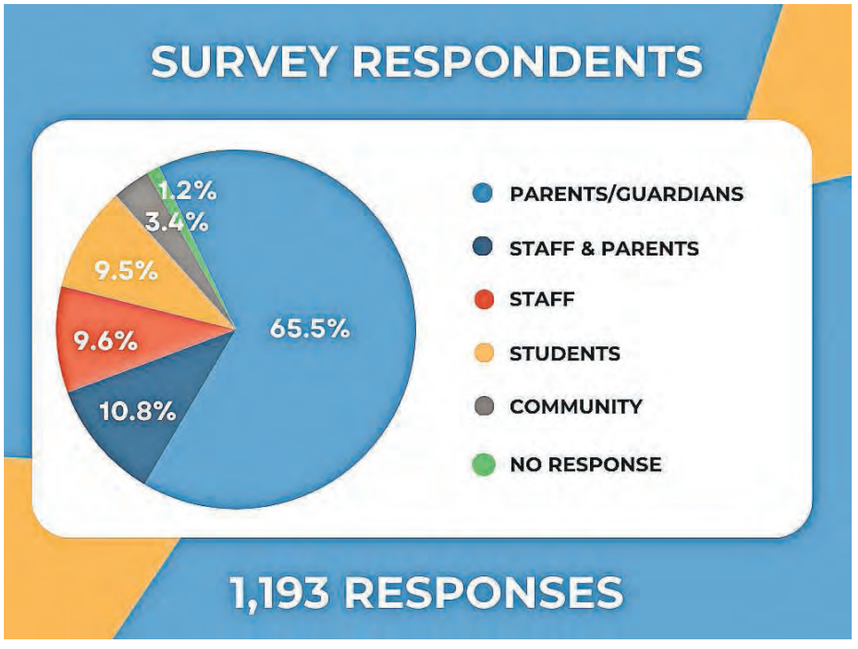


"This report provides that North Star direction," said Dr. Swift. "We have our marching orders and our direction from the community."

Swift said that our district will use the feedback to guide strategic decisions by developing a plan for long-term sustainability. "The path forward is rooted in opportunity, partnership, and accountability," she said. "This report is proof that in Lawrence the center still holds, and that center is the heart for every child in our community."

"I just want to say thank you to Dr. Swift, KU, and the team for the work. You've really laid a great foundation for when we're ready for the next strategic plan. We have the framework and the vision, and we know what the community wants," said Board Vice President GR Gordon-Ross.

"I'm very excited about the work you have put together. It is really good to see that there is coherence in the feedback," said Past President Shannon Kimball. "This is the foundation of the strategic planning process."

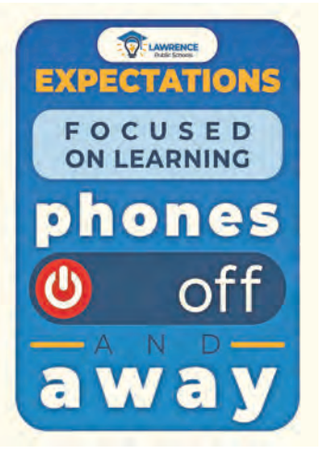




Focused on Learning and Curbing Cell Phone Distractions

Acting on one of the top requests of teachers and parents heard during fall community engagement, Lawrence Public Schools implemented cellphone-free instructional environments in January. "Abuzz with conversation" is how a school resource officer described the change observed in a middle school cafeteria with students socializing during lunch with their phones off and put away.

Community feedback called for our schools to address some of the most negative aspects of cellphone use - addiction, distractions, anxiety, depression, social isolation, and unsafe behaviors, such as misuse of social media and cyberbullying. The U.S. Surgeon General had already issued a summer opinion about electronic devices and screen time and a statewide task force made recommendations to the Kansas State Board of Education that led to new guidance for public schools.



"With all things we do, it is about education," said Kiley Luckett, district director of mental health. "It is about teaching students a skill and helping them understand why it is beneficial to them. We have to teach them."

Prior to the change, Luckett had visited two high school classes, where she asked students to turn on their cell phone notifications to help them become more aware of the frequency of distractions occurring during class. Luckett reported that in two 20- to 25-minute classes of approximately 25 students, there were 101 and 167 cell phone interruptions, respectively.

The school board approved a new cellphones and electronic devices policy and administrative guidance in December. "The goal is about one thing – lifting up the teaching and learning in our classrooms," said Superintendent Dr. Jeanice Kerr Swift, of districtwide expectations that students focus on their learning with their cellphones turned off and put away during instructional times. The guidance is developmentally appropriate, ranging from no student cellphone use at elementary schools to high school students having the freedom to use their phones responsibly during non-instructional times, such as lunch and passing periods.

Swift called it a community-wide endeavor to support systemic change. "We are preparing students to go to college and for adult life; it's best that they learn to manage their cell phones. We know big changes like this are hard, but they are worth the effort," she said.

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Recognizing Outstanding Staff

Culture of Health Champion

Live Well Douglas County named the Lawrence Public Schools' Nutrition and Wellness Team a 2024 Culture of Health Champion. The award honors the team's work last summer to provide meals to Douglas County children. Expanding access to food beyond its annual summer congregate meal sites, the team, led by Director Julie Henry, set up a drive-thru at the Youth Sports Complex south of Lawrence, enabling families to pick up free summer meal kits each week to prepare at home for their children. The team served 74,288 breakfasts, 1,932 snacks, and 88,689 lunches to children in the community.





LHS Band Director Honored Regionally

The Northeast Kansas Music Educators Association honored Mike Jones, LHS Director of Bands, with its Outstanding Band Director Award. The organization also will nominate Jones for the state KMEA Outstanding Music Educator award.

"We all know the difference that Mike makes at LHS -- the love he has for this school, the students, and our Fine Arts Department," wrote Mariah Barnett, LHS director of orchestras in her nomination of Jones. "For me, Mike has been a great mentor and supporter when stepping into this job. He always responds with kindness, patience, and caring, while also bringing a wealth of knowledge and experience to the table."

Our thanks and congratulations to Mike Jones!

Class Act Award Honors New York Secretary

A handmade poster decorated with a shining sun and a rainbow heart hangs outside the office door at New York Elementary and Montessori. It reads, "Jori, NY ♥ U!" Another sign near it reads in a young child's handwriting, "It's a good day to have a good day."

New York staff and students returned the love and care they say they feel from school administrative assistant Jori Roberts by celebrating her as our district's fall Class Act Award winner. Lawrence Education Achievement Partner Truity Credit Union further sweetened the surprise with a check for $500.

A teacher described Roberts as "the happy heart at the center of our tiny school." Another said, "She is our rock."





Foundation Honors MS Band Director

The Lawrence Schools Foundation presented its Dedication to Education Award and $5,000 to SWMS Band Director Deborah Woodall-Routledge in December. Family, friends, and past and present colleagues and students made it a special surprise.

A colleague wrote of the summer Novice Music Program, "Sixth-graders get a week-long opportunity for a hands-on introduction to band and orchestra instruments. Deb and her colleagues are the reason why more than 4 out of 5 Lawrence students play a musical instrument. By high school, more than half will still play in band or orchestra."

Another peer wrote, "She has seen firsthand how music helps students grow. And by coaching tennis -- girls in the fall and boys in the spring -- Deb has helped students make sports and music an 'and' not an 'or.'"

The sons and daughters of another anonymous group of Foundation donors, "The Bobs," followed their parents' lead and created this award to honor a certified teacher or paraeducator who goes the extra mile to help kids who need it most.



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Free State Debate Captures State Title

"Public speaking has become something I no longer fear," said Free State senior Cooper Elo. "Before Debate, I would get nervous going in front of the class to talk, but after taking four years of both Debate and Forensics, I've become a much better speaker."

After advancing as the top team at regionals, the FSHS Debate team finished with an impressive 10-2 record to capture the Kansas 6A 4-Speaker Debate State Championship title. Congratulations to the affirmative team of Elo and Gilly Falin, the negative team of Cooper Hefty and Nathan Peltier, and alternates Breahna Randall and Anwen Williams. Additionally, four 2-speaker teams competed at state for the Firebirds. Parker Hopkins coaches FSHS Speech and Debate.

"Debate has refined my argument skills and allowed me to participate better in high-level English classes. Also, Debate makes AP or regular government (classes) so much easier," said Elo, adding that there is no downside for students trying Speech and Debate.

"It's a low stakes, easy to pass class that opens up a potentially lucrative activity for post-high school scholarships and job opportunities. It also allows you to refine skills that tend to be hard to refine, like public speaking and note taking," he said.

Elo plans to study either political science on a pre-law track or environmental protection and criminal justice after high school. He also would like to help coach or judge debate.

FSHS last won the state title in 2019. The Firebirds placed third last year and second in 2023 and 2022. This year's topic? "Resolved: The United States federal government should significantly strengthen its protection of domestic intellectual property rights in copyrights, patents, and/or trademarks."





Elo and Falin will continue to debate this spring and compete at the National Speech and Debate Association Tournament.

Williams credits her participation in Debate to contributing to most of her achievements in high school. "I've learned how to conduct research, argue, reason, and provide concise analysis. I've also grown more confident in writing skills overall, and my ability to create and defend a point. My public speaking rhetoric and word economy has also improved substantially," she said.

Williams plans to attend the Georgetown University Walsh School of Foreign Service with a major in International Political Economy. She's also excited to potentially coach debate.

One of Randall's favorite things about participating in Debate is learning more about the world. "A lot of things I've learned in Debate, I didn't know before. I'm constantly learning about politics in the U.S., or even in other continents as well. I feel like I am more well informed than I would have been otherwise," she said.

"I also love making new friends through Speech and Debate. I've met some of my best friends through Debate here at Free State, but I've also created connections with students from all over Kansas," Randall said.

She said that she wants to use the skills she has learned in Debate to study political science and to "change the world around me and support those that need it."

Lawrence Schools Foundation Celebrates 40 Years

Raising more than $145,802.35 during its 2024 Community Campaign, thanks to 339 generous donors, the Lawrence Schools Foundation celebrates 40 years of supporting Lawrence Public Schools students, staff, and classroom needs.

Partnering with the Lied Center in February for its ninth annual Ovation! districtwide talent show, the Foundation showcased a wide variety of performances. Selected by audition, middle and high school student acts included aerial artists, vocalists, musicians, dancers, and poets. Since the event's inception by LHS alumnus Graham Edmonds in 2016, Ovation! has raised more than $110,000 for the Foundation to support needs and enhancements in our schools.



Min/Max Photography

LHS senior Renee Dvorske directed this year's production and received the $500 Graham Edmonds Standing Ovation Award. In addition to celebrating talented students, the Foundation presented Crystal Apple Awards to two outstanding teachers: Emily Boedeker, Woodlawn and New York Elementary music teacher, and Kirsten Hermreck, WMS teacher and coach. Lawrence Education Achievement Partner Truity Credit Union presented each educator with $1,000. Student and staff award winners are pictured here by Min/Max Photography.



Min/Max Photography

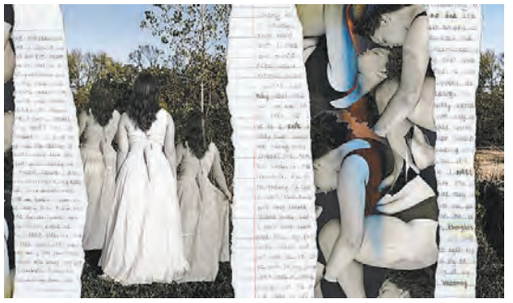




Lawrence High's Visual Arts Department Roars!

LHS student artists perform exceptionally well in visual art competitions across the country after honing skills under the guidance of teachers Todd Poteet, Drawing and Painting; Angelia Perkins, Photography; and Emily Markoulatos, Ceramics and Metalsmithing.

YoungArts



Junior Lola Brown and senior Adele Erickson earned national YoungArts awards for their photography and painting, respectively. They now have access to mentorship, financial awards, and a lifetime of creative, professional development as part of an intergenerational community that helps artists connect, create, and collaborate. Brown's photo is pictured.

5-State Professional Photo Competition



Senior Henry Farthing earned a national YoungArts Award last year that led to studying at the Pratt Institute in New York over the summer. Farthing's photo "Penny" won second place at the 41st annual 5-State Professional Photography Competition.

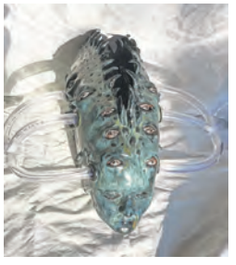
"Looking back at this work from where I am now, I am able to see the overarching themes of these seemingly spontaneous pictures; my instincts to capture moments of emotional intimacy and community in a place like New York gave me a sense of belonging and family in an unfamiliar landscape," wrote Farthing.

Scholastic Art & Writing Awards

The Scholastic Art and Writing Awards is the oldest teen art competition in the U.S. In its Midwest Regional competition, LHS students earned an American Visions Award, 1 Gold Key Portfolio, 2 Silver Key Portfolios, 1 Honorable Mention Portfolio, 15 Gold and 8 Silver Keys, and 11 Honorable Mentions. Gold and Silver Keys place artists' work in the top 1% and 5% of entries submitted. Honorable Mentions recognize the top 15% of entries.

From 4,000+ entries, only five students in each region receive American Visions Awards and qualify to advance, along with Gold Key winners, to the national competition at Carnegie Hall in New York City.

Junior Ru Yother won big with ceramic sculptures, including "Multivocal Auspex," recognized as an American Visions Nominee. Yother also won 2 Gold Keys.





Senior Celeste Stinson earned a Gold Key Portfolio Award for "The Consequences of Ballet," in addition to 2 Gold and 2 Silver Keys, and 2 Honorable Mentions.

Henry Farthing earned a Gold and Silver Key for Photography, and an Honorable Mention for their Portfolio, "Matchstick Cathedral."

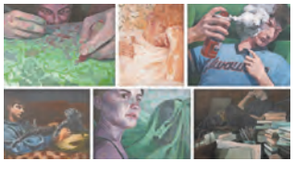
Lola Brown's photography received an Honorable Mention.



Earning top recognition in multiple categories, senior Sophia Graves won 4 Gold Keys and 2 Honorable Mentions in Painting, Digital Art, Jewelry, and Mixed Media.



It's unusual for sophomores to win a Scholastic Award; however, Ari Kamat's painting, "Distractions," pictured here, earned a Gold Key, and Wren Jay received two Honorable Mentions in Painting.



Senior Connor Rayome's Painting Portfolio "Everyday Musings" brought home a Silver Key.

Senior Adele Erickson earned a Silver Key Portfolio for "Body of a Woman," 2 Gold and 4 Silver Keys, and an Honorable Mention.





Not having a fashion design course didn't hinder junior Lily Havener from designing, constructing, photographing, and submitting her Silver Key work in Fashion.

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School of Visual Arts Competition

In addition to earning 3 Scholastic Gold Keys, including for "All-American" pictured here; and 2 Honorable Mentions, Simn Robinson's photography was accepted to the School of Visual Arts' competition, "We the Place," in New York. This exhibition of student work from around the globe showcases perspectives that explore the civil and the civic.

HS Visual Arts Competition

Of 640 entries submitted to the 28th Annual High School Visual Arts Competition at the Tim Murphy Art Gallery in Merriam, Kansas, only 100 were accepted, and 21 of those belonged to LHS students! Special congratulations to Ru Yother, 1st place, pictured here; Lola Brown, 2nd; and Wren Jay and Jayden Moore, 3rd.



Drexel University Photography Competition

Lola Brown and Henry Farthing have photos displayed in the Drexel University Photography competition in Philadelphia, one of the most preeminent programs in the country.

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Points of Pride



Deerfield fifth graders tried a variety of instruments in preparation for advancing to middle school next year.



Putting their school's motto, Cordley Cares, into action, Amy Spurlocks's first graders began collecting change in January. They wanted to help the relief efforts in the communities of Altadena and the Palisades affected by the California wildfires. Service learning projects help children further understand their CharacterStrong lessons about kindness and empathy. The class counted the change collected in a jar each day. "My students showed up and showed so much compassion. I'm overwhelmed and so proud of their efforts. Just being able to see the joy on their face as they saw us surpass our goal has been one of the most rewarding experiences I've enjoyed as a teacher," said Spurlock, whose class donated $625 to the American Red Cross.



The University of Kansas Bands hosted the 23rd annual Prairie Winds Festival in February, bringing high school students from across the region together to work with the KU Music Department faculty. The event concluded with a concert featuring the Crossroads Wind Symphony, KU Wind Ensemble, and special guests PROJECT Trio. Free State student musicians Alex Kerr, Halas Kober, Benjamin Jennings, and Crosby Kober participated. Eric Bradshaw is the FSHS director of bands.



LHS students traveled in February with teachers Carrington Porter and Josh Hart to the University of Chicago for the Model United Nations conference. Students acted as delegates solving global issues and learning about diplomacy and international relations. These students earned verbal commendations: Anne Woolverton, representing Carrie Nation in the Coney Island Amusement Association, 1907; Adelle Spiess, representing Amatbel of Komare in Empress Zenobia's Rise to Power, 267; and Holden Pike and Devyn Ridings, representing India in the UN Security Council.



Hillcrest kindergartners celebrated their 100th day of school in February. Students made colorful paper crowns to commemorate the occasion and a few did their best impressions of being 100 years old.



The West Junior Players performed "Beetlejuice Jr."in February, under the direction of Brian Williams, speech and theatre teacher.



Congratulations to these student standouts in the Douglas County Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge: brothers Daniel and Lawrence Dao, Lawrence Virtual School, first place, $1,250 prize, and state qualifiers (pictured); Felix Kirkland, LHS, second place, $1,000; Abhirup Maity and Grayson Barker, BMMS, third place, $500; and Daniela Pena, Boonta Singmanich, and Luzhilari Mathurin, LHS, honorable mention, $200.



Maci Perrins correctly spelled "astringent" to best other students participating in the Douglas County Spelling Bee in February. The SWMS sixth grader earned her third trip to the statewide competition, where she placed second last year.



Cordley marked its third Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action in February. Principal Becky Reaver said that their activities centered around an essential question – How does celebrating the bravery of Black and African American changemakers inspire us to courageously speak up for ourselves and our community? Staff and students read "Brave" by Stacy McAnulty. Students made their own capes. During a culminating schoolwide assembly, students heard from Marlon Wesley, a Cordley parent and civil rights advocate, and participated in an indoor march carrying signs they made about issues of importance to them.



SWMS social worker Tracy Williams and physical education teacher Jackson Mallory received a $2,000 grant to launch a Unified Club to bring together students with and without disabilities to build meaningful relationships, promote acceptance, and create an inclusive environment where everyone feels valued. The Unified Club will empower students to advocate for social justice and inclusivity while developing their leadership and collaboration skills.



For AVID Career Day, Hillcrest welcomed a variety of visitors from across the community to share with students what they do for a living. The Hawks spent the day with current industry professionals who introduced them to a host of different occupations, such as EMTs, veterinarians, pharmacists, event coordinators, firefighters, graphic designers, forensic pathologists, police officers, and architects, among others.



FSHS Theatre staged the madcap farce "You Can't Take It With You" in early February with alternating casts of 29 students under the direction of Bryce Jones, theater and language arts teacher.



The All-City Choir Concert at the Lied Center of Kansas in February brought together our four middle school choirs -- 134 members strong and each wearing their school colors -- under the direction of guest clinician Dr. Lawrence Abernathy, a Kansas City choral artist, conductor, and tenor. The middle schoolers performed a selection from the Latin Requiem Mass, an 1864 hymn, a gospel groove, a Swahili tune, and a percussive song, "Storm," that captured the energy of thunder and lightning.

The FSHS and LHS choirs performed separately, and then combined as a 90-voice ensemble dressed in black-tie attire. Directed by Joshua East and Olivia Henning, FSHS, and Dr. Dwayne Dunn, LHS, the student musicians performed five pieces, including Latin and German motets, a Leonara Speyer poem set to music, and "Nyon Nyon," which explored the diverse sounds of the human voice with a vocal orchestra effect.

Between performances, students and staff honored Dunn, who plans to retire at the end of the school year after 13 years as director of choral activities at LHS. His students described him as a pillar, their mentor, and a legend who taught them much more than how to sing.

(continued on page 14)



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Our home equity guide is ideal for navigating the ins and outs of using the equity in your home.





Lawrence Public Schools celebrated the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the week of the holiday that bears his name. High school student emcees Anwen Williams, FSHS, Jesse Johnson, LVS, and Juan Casimiro-Mendoza, LHS, challenged our school community to protect respect, courage, and responsibility in Dr. King's spirit and to continue working toward his dream. A gallery featured student artwork and writings about Dr. King.

Our district presented awards to students and staff nominated by each school for embodying the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr. through their daily actions. Our 2025 Spirit of MLK Awards honored: Trey Downing and Maria Pope, BMMS; Daniel Zogry and Isabelle Stanley, Community Connections at Pinckney; Nora Kemp and Kellie Magnuson, Cordley; Rohan Trivedi and Ashtyn Mathes, Deerfield; Jade Taylor-Borges and Helen Barbee, FSHS; Tala Hassan and Shannon Berquist, Hillcrest; Levius Green and Catherine Glidewell, Langston Hughes; Baden Masenthin and Audrey Pope Trowbridge, LHS; Elisa Clements and Mickey Overton, LVS; Manha Ossen and Jake Davis, LMCMS; Isobel Moore and Ryan McAdoo, New York; Cora Rose Younker and Regina Hammerschmidt, Prairie Park;Ellis Thornton and Mindy Nickles, Quail Run; Penny Miller and Jennah Bauswell, Schwegler; Teagan McGee and Danita Long, Sunflower; Dallas Stowers and Tiffany Easley, Sunset Hill; Tala Chahine and Amanda Stevens, Southwest MS; Adelaide Boedeker and Brian Williams, West MS; and Kaliyah Stallings and Courtney Otter, and Woodlawn.

We love our community partners! RunLawrence donates the proceeds from its annual Thanksgiving Day Run held at Woodlawn Elementary to our school marathon clubs. This year, our clubs will share $10,200! Thank you, RunLawrence!



SWMS appreciates parent and community partners sharing information about their jobs and work skills with students during Career Day. The Bulldogs gained firsthand knowledge about working in nuclear engineering, footwear sales, parent education, law, healthcare, business management, and other careers.



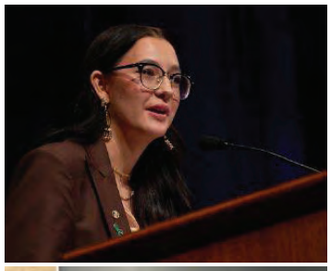
LMCMS students experienced a crash course in a few of the technical training programs available at Peaslee Tech. The Mustangs toured the facility in January, learning firsthand from current Peaslee Tech students and staff, and gaining some on-the-job experiences with quick lessons in carpentry, HVAC, welding, automotive service, and assembly line production.



Classified support staff started the new year at a professional learning conference tailored to their needs. Superintendent Dr. Jeanice Kerr Swift welcomed them and former teacher turned comedian Devin Siebold entertained them with his humor and a message emphasizing the importance of laughter in creating safe and positive learning environments for students. In addition to leadership, wellness, classroom management, and other topics, staff connected with colleagues from across the district and community partners.



Middle schoolers looked to the future during tours of the high schools in January. Student LINK Crew ambassadors guided the prospective Firebirds and Chesty Lions through a comprehensive tour of their future schools, exploring classrooms, cafeterias, and libraries. Students also met with counselors for a rundown of the numerous course offerings available to them.





LHS senior Arabella Gipp, who credits the Boys and Girls Club of Lawrence with shaping her into the person she is today, earned the Club's title of 2025 Youth of the Year for the third time. The recognition program celebrates students who embody the values of leadership service, academic excellence, and healthy lifestyles.

"It's never easy," Gipp said of taking the stage. "Every year I'm still just as nervous and shaking, but it's special every time. Getting to represent the Club I grew up in and made me who I am, and to have the opportunity to do it not just once, but three times, is something so incredible."

The daughter of Jessica Gipp, Arabella is an active member of the LHS journalism and video programs, and she also finds time to serve as a leader in the Keystone Club. She plans to attend Johnson County Community College to study graphic design and ultimately pursue a career in digital media.

Gipp will now represent Lawrence in the Kansas Youth of the Year competition. She won the title in 2022. State winners advance to regional competitions, where they compete to advance to the National Youth of the Year event.

Sunflower fifth grader Aiden Kong earned Junior Youth of the Year honors. His speech focused on the support of his mentors as he faced racism as a Korean-American, and ultimately, his pride in being exactly the person he is.

(Courtesy of Boys and Girls Club of Lawrence with photos by Carter Gaskins.)



Woodlawn celebrated the Lunar New Year at its weekly morning opener with help from the KU Lion Dancers. Emily Boedeker, music teacher, arranged for the special guests and involved students in reading books, learning about Lion dance folklore, and playing instruments along with Lunar New Year melodies.



Trevor, a Project SEARCH intern, likes to skateboard, jet ski, and swim. He's learning independent living and workplace skills, including about how certifications can help him in the job market. Trevor has Servsafe and a Servsafe Manager certificates from Culinary class and is working on an EPA certificate in hopes of getting a paid HVAC job, like the professional mentors with whom he works at KU. Watch a video and read more about Trevor and other Project SEARCH interns in their newsletter at Facebook.com/projectsearchconnects.



In celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, BMMS students and staff gathered in the gym for music, poetry, and words of wisdom. The assembly featured performances from the LHS Choir and the BMMS 8th Grade Band, a reading of Langston Hughes' famous poem "I Dream a World," and student and staff speakers. The school recognized retired teachers Betty Norwood and Jill Jevens and listened to current and former Cougars reflecting on the legacy of Dr. King.



Krista Hoy's kindergarten class at Langston Hughes learned about Martin Luther King Jr. and his activism toward equal rights. Photo by Kristy Wempe-Bellinger, school secretary.

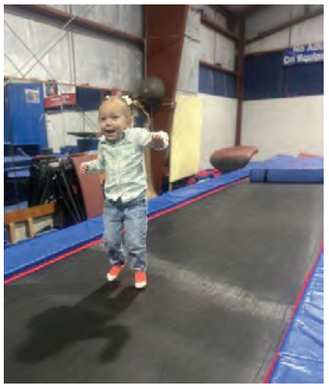


Members of the FSHS Key Club – Oliver Coles, Kian Colistra, Alan Shao, Max Bolick, Mira Edie, Emory Lacle, Richard Li, Eli Roust, John Hindman, Colton Ochs, Carter Jones, and Roiri Coleman – visited Deerfield and Quail Run in February to read books and promote literacy in K-2 classrooms. They shared with their younger peers why being a strong reader is important to them as high school students and asked about the kids' favorite stories. They read and discussed books they had selected. This same group, plus Sam Lee, prepared and served a spaghetti dinner at the LINK kitchen in downtown Lawrence on the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Educator Jacob Larson sponsors the club.



LHS basketball standout Brynnae Johnson is among nine KC-area players nominated for the 2025 McDonald's All-American Games. Nominated by coaches, athletic directors, principals, or members of the selection committee based on criteria such as accomplishments on the court, fundamental skill level, and basketball IQ, the players will participate in a 5:30 p.m. game on April 1 on ESPN2 from the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, New York. The Lady Lions are coached by Jeff Dickson.

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After being cooped up due to bitterly cold temperatures, snow, and ice, Parents as Teachers families ventured out of the house to burn off some energy with their little ones. Lawrence Gymnastics Academy hosted an Open Gym Group Connection, during which children jumped, flipped, and ran to their hearts' content! Parent educator Stacie Daniels serves as our PAT coordinator.



FSHS Theatre earned Gold Honor Troupe status for its dedication to the artform, performance, and community at the Kansas Thespian Festival in January. Morgan Sponholtz will advocate for the performing arts after re-election to a second term as a state thespian officer. By audition, Kiefer Bullock received a Kansas Thespian Scholarship; Owen Börk won Outstanding Supporting Actor honors, and Piper Northrop earned Technical Thespy "showcase" distinction for earning a perfect score for the lighting design of the school's production of "Footloose." Other students – Kouri Demelash, Emi Stone, Owen Börk, Ava Talbott, Anders Benson, and Piper Northrop – received Superior and Excellent ratings for musical performances, short film, and lighting design. Bryce Jones is their theater director.

The Lawrence College and Career Center recognized early graduates from the Academy in December. Congratulations to Ryan Carlson, Audri Keeton, Dominic Johnson, Miles Berger, and Elliott Geisler.



Lauren Mitchell's kindergartners at Schwegler 'visited' eight countries, where they learned about different holidays celebrated around the world. With their passports in hand, they had a blast learning together.



The WMS Cheer Team sponsored a food drive, collecting 1,872 items for Just Food. Kirsten Hermreck coaches the team.



Wendy Mathis' Forensic Science class at the College and Career Center completed its arson investigation project by burning their structures. Students observed fire behavior and the way that fire spread within the structures from the point of origin. Consolidated Fire District #1 firefighters talked to the students about wind-driven and back-burn fires.



Hillcrest second graders of Rachael Cunningham, Ann Dominguez, and Shelby Tosee have been planning and building their own cardboard cities, deciding what a community needs. They asked questions of and received advice from Lawrence Mayor Mike Dever and City Manager Craig Owens.



Parents as Teachers' December Group Connection included lots of messy and sensory play with a winter theme. Families made fake snow and gingerbread playdough to take home and learned the benefits of sensory play. Parent educator Stacie Daniels is our PAT coordinator.



Lawrence High senior Zana Kennedy won the Susan Massy Award, given annually to the Kansas Student Journalist of the Year, and $1,250. Now, she will perfect her portfolio for submission to the national competition in April in Seattle. Kennedy is the third student working under the guidance of LHS journalism adviser Barbara Tholen to earn this prestigious honor in four years. Alumni Maya Smith and Cuyler Dunn won the award in 2024 and 2022, respectively.



Sunset Hill students glimpsed a time before internet search engines after receiving their personalized dictionaries from members of the the Lawrence Breakfast Optimist Club. The club provides dictionaries to all fourth graders annually. The Eagles excitedly flipped through the pages of their new books, testing their searching skills.



Thanks to Deerfield's partnership with Dillons, each student received a red rose to take home and give to someone to brighten their day.



Mental Health Director Kiley Luckett led SWMS students in Kendra Metz's Student Success class through several cooperative games designed to allow them to strategize to be their best, encourage others, and build their leadership skills.





Countless student-made projects encompassing science, technology, engineering, art, and math lined the walls and hallways at LMCS during Student Showcase Night. Scholars proudly pointed out their work on display to their friends and families. The exhibits boasted a bounty of examples of the project-based learning that the new STEAM focus at the school has introduced.

The showcase spanned across four floors and featured original story books, delicious chocolate chip cookies from cooking class, stop-motion animations, eco-columns, mouse-trap cars, handmade orthopedic boots, custom Mustang string bags, an aluminum T-Rex, and a motorized Lego robot, just to name a few.

In addition, students shared educational projects, such as their research about the Americans with Disabilities Act and using their findings to design and engineer their own model access ramps. Another exhibit gave visitors the opportunity to make environmentally-conscious melodies with a variety of drums fashioned from recycled materials like coffee canisters, plastic bottles, buckets, and tin cans.

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The American Red Cross presented FSHS senior Lucas Fearn its Lifesaving Award. Last fall, Lucas successfully performed the Heimlich maneuver to assist Firebird educator Jacob Lewis. We are grateful for Lewis' safety and Fearn's quick actions. Fearn is pictured with his parents, Lewis, and American Red Cross Executive Director Jane Blocher.



Excited upon returning from fall break, everyone in Emily Boedeker's music class at Woodlawn showed off their grooviest dance moves, including learning to dance with partners.



LMCMS's theater crew wowed their fellow Mustangs with their performance of "Emma! A Pop Musical." The dancing, smiling, and singing started before the curtains rose with scholars prepping for show time by rehearsing their lines, fine-tuning the sound equipment, and lending a helping hand to classmates with their costumes. Blair Waite is theater director.



Team STEAM Robotics represented Lawrence Public Schools at the Kansas Association of School Boards Annual Convention. Students showcased their competition and summer camp robots, talked to school board members from across the state about the benefits of hands-on STEM learning, and highlighted STEM offerings in our district. Jeannie Merritt mentors Team STEAM.



Kendra Metz and Corbin Albaugh, SWMS Student Success teachers, invited students to write notes of thanks to teachers and staff. They displayed students' notes of appreciation in the school trophy case for everyone to enjoy, then delivered them to recipients' mailboxes in December.



Quail Run students created posters honoring Ruby Bridges, who was six years old when she integrated an all-white school in New Orleans in 1960. Students waved their posters as they walked around their school together on Ruby Bridges Walk to School Day in November. Some of their posters included words of encouragement, such as "You got this Ruby!" "You are brave." "We love Ruby Bridges."

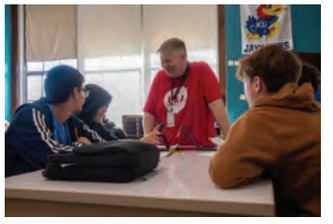


To celebrate Veterans Day and local veterans, the FSHS choir and orchestra held a performance during a special assembly in November. They sang the National Anthem and performed the Armed Forces Medley, featuring the official songs of the military's service branches. Several veterans spoke about their experiences serving and shared their ideas about how students could serve our community.





Early Childhood Education Child Development Associate candidates, who are FSHS, LHS, and Academy students of Dr. Kelly Welch, successfully completed rigorous assessments in the biological, cognitive, and social-emotional development of infants and toddlers to earn their CTE certificates of mastery.



Josh Spradlin's science class at LMCMS did some mental exercise, tackling the physics of sports. Student groups researched a variety of sports and created visual flipbooks detailing the history, science, and different forces at play for their chosen activity.

The class came up with a slew of unique examples, like the law of inertia in figure skating, projectile motion in baseball, Newton's third law of motion in cheerleading, the effect of gravity in bowling, and even friction in playing cards.



Indigenous rapper and fancy dancer Christian Parrish Takes the Gun, known professionally as Supaman, put on an inspiring show for BMMS, sharing lessons about Indigenous culture through songs, dancing, and stories of his life. "The world ain't happening to you. You're creating your reality. That is the power that you have," he told students. Along with Supaman's performance of the Fancy Dance tradition, BMMS sixth grader Donovan Azure-Saldana, pictured here, took center stage and demonstrated the Grass Dance style for staff and classmates.



Six FSHS student journalists — Lilly Wall, Nick Sprecker, Mallory Thompson, Richard Li, Phoebe Morris and Avery Smiley — traveled to Philadelphia in November for the fall National High School Journalism Convention. Current and former students earned individual awards: Chloe Cook, News Photography, 3rd Place; Anders Benson, Environmental Portrait, Honorable Mention; Luna Hu, Illustration, 3rd Place; Allison Mayhew, Newsmagazine Cover, 2nd Place; Mallory Thompson, Best of Show Sports Photography, 3rd Place; and The Free Press newsmagazine, Best of Show 7th Place. Richard Li earned a Superior rating in the National Student Media Contest for Yearbook Cover/Endsheet Design. Jared Shuff is Free State's journalism adviser.



Third graders peeked behind the curtain at the Lied Center during Third Grade Theatre Arts Day. Professionals guided students through a crash course in several subjects relating to performing arts and theatre production. Students learned how to move like performers with dancing and juggling. They found out how to bring characters to life with puppetry, makeup, and acting. They also went on stage to see all the work that goes into putting on a big production.