



USD 497 News Release

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Board Hears Cellphone-Free Learning, 2025 Budget, & Program Enhancement Updates

Cellphone-Free Instructional Environments

Elementary and Secondary Directors Jayci Roberson and Dr. Waymond Ervin shared an update about the implementation of cellphone-free instructional environments to improve students' academic focus and achievement as well as their mental health and social-emotional well-being. This follows the board's approval in the fall of new policy and guidance regarding student use of cellphones and electronic devices at school. These define districtwide expectations, in place since January, that students focus on learning with cellphones off and put away during the instructional day.

Dr. Ervin said that data from high school walkthroughs showed a drop in the visibility of student cellphones in a sample of morning classes from December (39% LHS; 25% FSHS) to February (3% LHS; 2% FSHS). Middle schools continue to focus on consistency and clarity of expectations and engagement strategies to support teachers. He said that middle schools also are working to support students in establishing healthy person-to-person interaction and habits. "Some of our middle schools implemented lunch conversation cards...giving students things to talk about," said Ervin.

High school staff were surveyed about the progress of the new cellphone-free expectations. Among staff remarks were the importance of consistent enforcement and a celebration of fewer negative student behaviors. One staff member shared, "It is truly the best thing for students."

Elementary students may not use personal cellphones at school; however, our district provides iPads for educational use at all school levels. Roberson said that screen use at the elementary schools is highest during indoor recess, activity time, and at the end of the day. Other observations are that elementary students show short attention spans, resist transitions, and attach to digital tools. She said that elementary teachers also expressed a need for support with engagement strategies, as well as curriculum balance and management strategies not involving technology.

"Our goal is to focus on play, teacher-led learning, and face-to-face interaction at lower elementary, and then, structured academics for research, projects, literacy, and math tasks to prepare (older) students for middle school," Roberson said.

"This isn't just work for today, it's work for tomorrow," said Superintendent Dr. Jeanice Kerr Swift. She also shared her gratitude for the board's leadership of this important change.

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2025 Budget Update

Executive Director of Finance Cynde Frick shared a spring update about the 2025 budget. She gave an overview of district funds, revenue sources, and changes in state and federal aid due to Kansas legislation and executive orders of the president.

Frick reminded the board and community that our district's General Fund and Local Option Budget pay for most daily operating costs, including staff salaries and benefits, supplies, utilities, transportation, etc. Special Revenue Funds have a specific stated purpose. Some examples are At-Risk (teacher salaries and benefits for state-approved at-risk interventions), Special Education (salaries and benefits, supplies, equipment, training, transportation, etc.), Capital Outlay (facilities, equipment, technology, etc.), and Contingency (savings).

Revenue sources include state and federal aid and local taxes. Just like a family's budget, concerns arise when costs outweigh revenues. Frick said that our district spent \$29 million on special education services last year but received only \$15 million in state and federal aid for these mandated services. This causes the district to transfer money from its General Operating Fund to cover the shortfall.

On a positive note, Frick said that minimum cash balance goals set by the board in January of 2022 will be met by June 30, 2025. "Next steps with contingency planning will need to take into account higher levels of uncertainty, though," she said. Our district's current Contingency Fund is about 5% of the General Fund.

"We really run on pretty tight margins in public education," said Past President Shannon Kimball, debunking a common misconception that school districts are flush with reserves. "There is an unfounded narrative being passed around about fund balances for districts," she said. Cash balances fluctuate throughout the school year as districts use them to manage ongoing expenses during periods when revenues have not yet been received.

"We really are being very realistic about the challenges we face," said Swift.

"I appreciate you, Dr. Swift, adding the comment that we have to be realistic, because with all that is going on in the world, we don't know what is going to happen next," said board member Carole Cadue-Blackwood.

Citing recent tornadoes that destroyed several Missouri schools, GR Gordon-Ross agreed with Cadue-Blackwood. "As we've talked about contingency, Carole said it best, that 'We don't know what we don't know.' I think it's good to keep in mind that there are other things we don't know. There are lots of reasons to have those funds available."

"Our goal is to build the fiscal strength and responsibility of the district, so we don't have to ride the big roller coaster," said Swift, adding that "no one is coming to save us." She said that there is a need for organizational discipline toward effectiveness and efficiency.

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2025-26 Program Enhancements

Based on community input shared in the fall, Swift previewed educational program enhancements planned for the 2025-2026 school year. These include:

- Expanding access to early childhood educational opportunities by opening neighborhood preschool classrooms, one each, at Sunflower and Woodlawn schools,
- Amplifying science by adding it to the elementary art, music, and P.E. specials rotation,
- Expanding New York Montessori into upper elementary,
- Continuing the development of STEAM-focused programming at Liberty Memorial Central Middle School under the umbrella of Project Lead the Way curricula; and
- Enhancing our Jayhawk Blueprint partnership with KU that offers college coursework to Free State and Lawrence High students.

“It is important to note that every one of these next steps comes directly from the feedback of students, staff, parents, and community members,” said Swift. “These enhancements are about opportunities for students and reducing disparity gaps.”

Legislative Update

Kimball shared that this is the last week of the regular Kansas legislative session. A veto session is scheduled April 10-11. “There are few education policy bills still alive,” she said. While the Kansas Senate passed SB 87, a tax credit voucher bill, the House took no action on it. SB 47, directing local school board procedures, did not make the House calendar; however, Kimball warned that both could reappear in Conference Committees.

She said that the House passed a budget bill with an additional \$10 million in special education funding, substantially less than what the Governor had proposed. The Senate maintained the inflationary increase built into the school funding formula but included no new dollars to fund education.

About 14% (\$280 million) of Kansas school revenues come from federal funds, including special education funding. Kimball corrected another myth that the U.S. Department of Education controls learning standards, which are under the state’s purview, and school curriculum, a local decision. The USDE provides technical expertise around civil rights protections, distributes federal funds, collects national data, shares educational best practices, and serves as a watchdog for school accountability.

Board President’s Report

President Kelly Jones shared that she went to the State Capitol to advocate that the Legislature fully fund special education and stop funneling public dollars to private schools through voucher bills. Jones also spoke to mounting legal challenges of President Trump’s executive order dismantling the USDE.

“It has been pretty heartbreaking from an education standpoint to watch what has been happening at the federal level,” she said.

Later in the meeting, Jones expressed, and received unanimous support from board members, a firm commitment to ensuring Native American Student Services continues to support students if those federal funds are cut.