



USD 497 News Release

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Administrative Announcement



Superintendent Dr. Jeanice Kerr Swift announces the appointment of Elementary Curriculum Director Denise Johnson as interim principal of Prairie Park Elementary School, effective July 1. The school board approved the appointment. Johnson succeeds Jason Townsend, who upon completion of his second year as principal June 30, has accepted a principal position in the Garnett schools.

“We are delighted to share that in naming Mrs. Johnson as interim principal, we have selected a leader well known to the Prairie Park school community and a hard working, respected, and long serving member of our district. She has built solid relationships and will work alongside this strong Prairie Park team, parents, and community to keep students at the center of the work throughout the coming school year,” said Dr. Swift.

“I was delighted to recently connect with the Prairie Park staff and to hear their desire for someone who would prioritize relationships, build confidence, consistency, and trust; and serve as an effective bridge to the school’s next chapter. We achieved all these priorities in naming Denise to this interim building leadership role,” Swift added.

This is Johnson’s 20th year in our district, teaching at Hillcrest Elementary and supporting educators districtwide on the Curriculum and Instruction Team. She helps lead our focus on literacy. Earlier this month, 123 educators completed LETRS, a two-year, evidence-based professional development opportunity covering skills in teaching phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing. By 2026, more than 80% of our educators will have completed LETRS. Johnson previously served as an elementary principal and teacher in DeSoto for ten years and an elementary teacher in Topeka USD 501 five years. She earned a bachelor’s degree from Emporia State University and master’s degrees from Emporia State and Kansas State University.

“It is with great joy and deep commitment that I step into this role at Prairie Park. At the heart of every great school is a foundation of strong relationships among students, staff, families, and the community. When children feel seen, heard, and valued, they thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. It will be an honor to partner with Prairie Park students, staff, and families to foster a school culture rooted in joy, belonging, and high expectations for all,” said Johnson.

“Literacy is a powerful key that opens doors to opportunity, confidence, and lifelong learning. As I transition from curriculum director to interim principal, I am excited to bring a strong districtwide literacy focus to Prairie Park and deepen our commitment to building a community of readers and writers. As a proud partner in every child’s academic journey, I will work to ensure every student feels successful, accepted, and empowered to grow as a learner,” she said.

An interim appointment enables our district to conduct an inclusive and comprehensive principal search.

“We look forward to working together and engaging with Prairie Park staff, parents, and community through a robust principal search, beginning next fall, to select a long-term leader for Prairie Park school.

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