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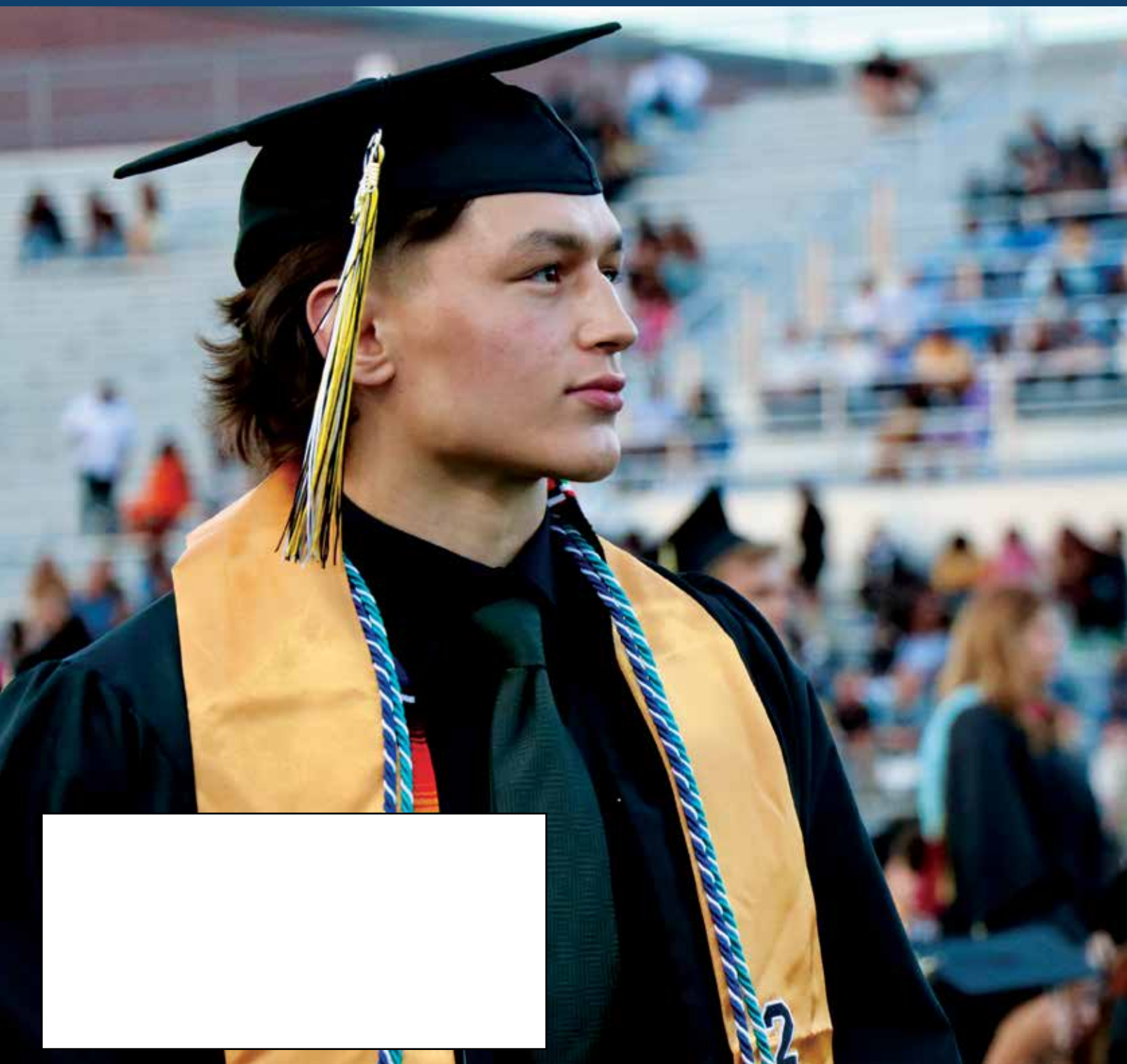
SHAWNEE MISSION SCHOOL DISTRICT

SUMMER 2025



> **New SMSD Early Childhood Center Announced**

> **Portrait of a Graduate Reenvisioned**

> **A Sneak Peek at the New Tomahawk**

When Summer Gets Too Wild
Top ER Docs Within Blocks
If summer fun takes an unexpected turn, it's good to know the area's most trusted emergency care is always nearby. With five ER locations across Johnson County, the expert team at AdventHealth is here for all the bumps and breaks, flips and falls – and more. For the quickest – and easiest – access to emergency care in town, visit GetInQuickerKC.com.
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ON THE COVER: Victorino Gunion, 2025 graduate, at Shawnee Mission West High School commencement.

#OneShawneeMission

Help us share great news from our district on social media at @thesmsd.

INSIDE
Shawnee Mission School District
8200 W. 71st Street
Shawnee Mission, KS 66204

Inside Shawnee Mission School District is published by the Communications Team in the Shawnee Mission School District.

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Schu's News

Updates from Superintendent Dr. Michael Schumacher

I am incredibly excited to welcome everyone to the 2025-2026 school year! It is always exciting seeing students back in the classroom working with our amazing educators. Each new year, I can't help but be reminded of how we serve as a "bridge to unlimited possibilities yet to be discovered" for our students, just as it states in our mission. This year will be filled with struggles to overcome and achievements to celebrate and through it all I know we will keep going together with an eye on the future.

Dr. Michael Schumacher

Our community has done a lot of work illustrating and outlining that vision of the future. We're excited to introduce an updated Portrait of a Graduate this year, one that keeps us focused on our north star for our students. I invite you to read more about it and how it will support our students on Pages 8 and 9.

Each year, Shawnee Mission School District selects a theme for the new year. I'm so proud that this year, the theme gets right to the heart of what we do: "Because Kids." If we ever ask "What is our why?" or "Why are we doing this?" – Because Kids is our answer. As One Shawnee Mission, we remain committed to making sure every single student who walks in our doors is able to achieve their personal best. We are One Shawnee Mission...Because Kids.

ONE SHAWNEE MISSION... because kids

Support Public Education

In Shawnee Mission, we are proud to be a part of a long history of support for public schools in the state of Kansas. Did you know that 90 percent of students in Kansas attend public schools? Our schools educate every student who walks through the door, no matter their background or the challenges they face. We are committed to making sure each student has a personalized learning plan that prepares them for college and career with the interpersonal skills they need for life success.

And yet, we continue to face those who promote using public dollars for private schools. We continue to hear from those who think reducing funding for public schools is a solution. I expect these efforts to continue this year.

I wanted to tell you what you can expect from me and from Shawnee Mission School District. I will continue to advocate strongly for our students. Shawnee Mission will operate transparently and comply with public accountability requirements. The community-led Strategic Plan (adopted in 2024 by the Board of Education) provides clear direction for our work and we will continue to follow that plan. Shawnee Mission will continue to advocate for full state funding for special education services, which has not been fully funded since 2009.

I hope you'll join me in telling our stories of success, holding big and small conversations about the importance of public education, and in continuing to support our students and staff. We know our schools make our community stronger and our students deserve the best education we can offer.

New ELT Member

As you read this column, we celebrate the addition of a new member to the Executive Leadership Team in Shawnee Mission. Sherry Dumolien now serves as the associate superintendent of special education and strategic initiatives and continues her commitment to advancing equitable and inclusive practices for all students. Dumolien has dedicated the past 23 years to public education in various special education roles. In 2018, she became Shawnee Mission's director of special education and then served as chief of special education. Her seat at the executive leadership table strengthens our district by ensuring the needs of all learners, including those eligible for special education services, are considered in every decision we make.

"I am driven by the responsibility to ensure that all students, regardless of their needs, have access to meaningful, individualized learning opportunities," Dumolien shared. "I believe that creative environments where varied learners can thrive together not only benefits students with disabilities, but also enriches the educational experience for everyone."

Join Us as we Read Across SMSD!

All year long we celebrate the importance of reading and belonging for each student in the Shawnee Mission School District. We're pleased to continue Read Across SMSD – modeled after the national Read Across America program. Each month we will feature books for all ages and explore a monthly theme. In May, we were pleased to highlight Kaitlin Shulman, coordinator of belonging and engagement, and students across the district, who spoke about what it means to "Revel in Your Heritage."

Thank you to NEA Shawnee Mission for their ongoing partnership and to the Shawnee Mission Education Foundation for providing access to Read Across SMSD titles. Visit www.smsd.org for new Read Across SMSD videos and resources.

Watch for New Episodes of Our Podcast

Season three of Shawnee Mission Mic'd Up will begin this fall! I'm looking forward to joining Dr. Brittany Gonser, director of professional learning, in providing an in-depth look at those who make us One Shawnee Mission.

New episodes will be shared every other Thursday. Visit www.smsd.org for more information.

New Math Resource Fosters Student Engagement and Belonging

"I'm not good at math."

This common declaration is one that Shawnee Mission School District (SMSD) is striving to eliminate by adopting a new, research and evidence-based math resource.

"We almost, in society, brag about it, like, 'I'm not good at math' or 'I can't do math,'" explained Holly McCarty, SMSD's coordinator for curriculum instruction, secondary math and science. "But we would never say, 'Oh, I can't read.'"

To shift this mindset, SMSD's new math resources are designed to create a more collaborative, problem-based learning environment. This program is called College Preparatory Mathematics (CPM) at the high school level and iReady at the middle school level.

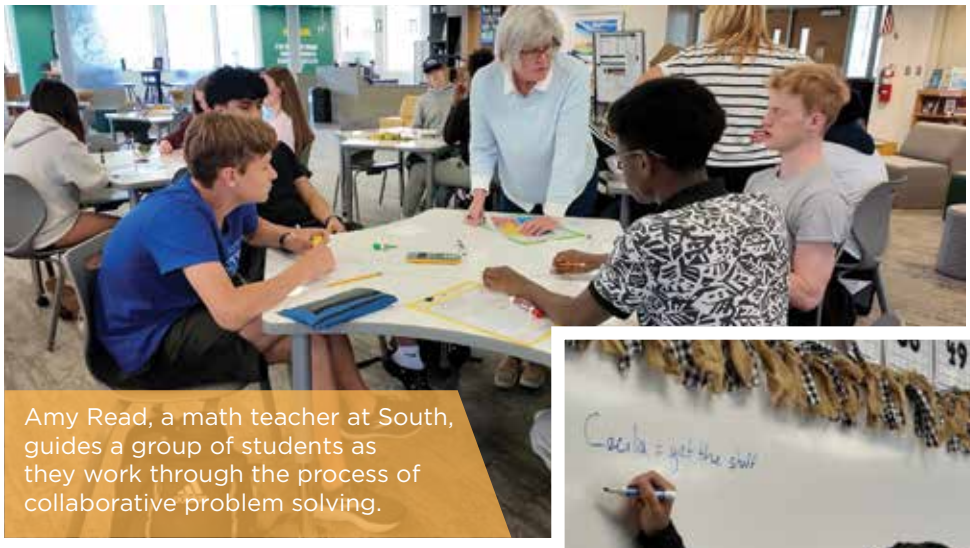
"It's a shift that allows our kids to be much more engaged in the math process," McCarty shared. She emphasized that today's students need to develop critical thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving skills rather than relying on memorization. CPM supports this approach through collaborative learning, problem-based learning, and mixed-spaced practice.

Shawnee Mission Northwest math teacher Heather Ogle is an early adopter of the resource.

"I get excited about planning lessons and seeing how we can get kids involved," Ogle said. "They're coming in genuinely engaged and ready to learn. Whenever I see all the kids in my classroom wanting to learn math, It's great."

She highlighted how CPM's structure naturally builds students' understanding and encourages them to approach problems differently.

With each lesson, students work in randomized groups of four, with each student assigned a specific role. The roles create a sense of belonging so that everyone in the group has a responsibility.



Amy Read, a math teacher at South, guides a group of students as they work through the process of collaborative problem solving.

Students say they enjoy this approach because it's interactive and collaborative.

"It's been nice getting to work with people, talking through things, and diving deeper into the resource," said Lilly Christy, a student in Ogle's Algebra 2 class.

Julian Diaz is also in Ogle's class and says he likes how the group work mirrors real-world situations where teamwork is essential. "You're going to be working with people you don't normally work with," he said. "When we're forced into these environments, it helps us grow as people and in math."

McCarty says the district executed an extensive process for adoption, which included piloting programs, collecting teacher and student data, and consulting state evaluation rubrics. One important goal was to find a resource that helped students solve math problems and understand how they arrived at their answer, she explained.

Ogle was a part of the team that researched different programs and ultimately piloted CPM.

"It made me excited to come back and implement it more," Ogle added.

For families looking to help their students with the new resource, McCarty says, "Continue to ask questions. That's what mathematicians do." She emphasized that, much like advances in technology, education must evolve when research shows better ways to support student success.

"Now that we know better, we can do better," explains McCarty.

Currently Pre-Kindergarten is located in 21 of 34 elementary schools. A new early childhood center has been announced to provide more opportunities for young students.

SMSD To Build A New Early Childhood Education Center

A new early childhood education center will be built in the Shawnee Mission School District. It will serve as a comprehensive hub for Pre-Kindergarten services.

The new facility will feature intentionally designed early learning spaces, a full continuum of classroom options offering flexible placements and transitions for students, a centralized hub for services, increased opportunities for diverse peer interaction, and spaces for screening, training, and care.

This center is being built, in part, as a result of a recommendation from Strategic Plan Action Team 1.3.1, who determined steps to "Increase Pre-K sites, based on facility capacity and district possibilities, to provide equitable access to early interventions and foundational learning through a braided funding enrollment process."

"The team worked hard and moved forward recommendations that are already yielding results," explained Dr. Leigh Anne Neal, chief of strategic initiatives. "Their vision for an intentionally designed early childhood center, coupled with the new pre-kindergarten classrooms that will be added at Tomahawk and Pawnee elementaries this year, is laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning, benefiting our students, families, and teachers."

Jessica Collins, parent, served on Action Team 1.3.1 in support of early childhood education in Shawnee Mission. Her son attends school at the Shawnee Mission Early Childhood Center, and she says the services available are life-changing and she was thrilled for the new building announcement.

"I am looking forward to seeing the program grow!" Collins shared. "A bespoke building will make things so much better for all of the staff which will make the experience better for the students. This also sends the message that the district recognizes the importance of early childhood. These years are critical to development and to see the district investing in this way is so exciting!"

Shawnee Mission begins providing early childhood opportunities with service to children ages birth to three through Parents as Teachers. Shawnee Mission also offers Pre-Kindergarten in fee and no-fee options at 21 of 34 of Shawnee Mission's elementary schools. In addition, the district serves children ages three to five who are eligible for special education services. These services include a peer model program, which provides opportunities for all students to interact and learn in a common environment.

Special education services are a vital component of the Shawnee Mission School District's comprehensive educational system, said Sherry Dumolien, associate superintendent of special education and strategic initiatives. These services provide specially designed instruction that supports students in making ongoing progress throughout their school experience.

"We're excited about the opportunities this space will create—particularly for our youngest learners—to build connections, benefit from early interventions, and engage with a dedicated team committed to supporting their success from the very beginning," Dumolien added. "This environment reflects our commitment to inclusive practices, where all students are valued members of the school community and learn alongside one another in supportive, collaborative settings."

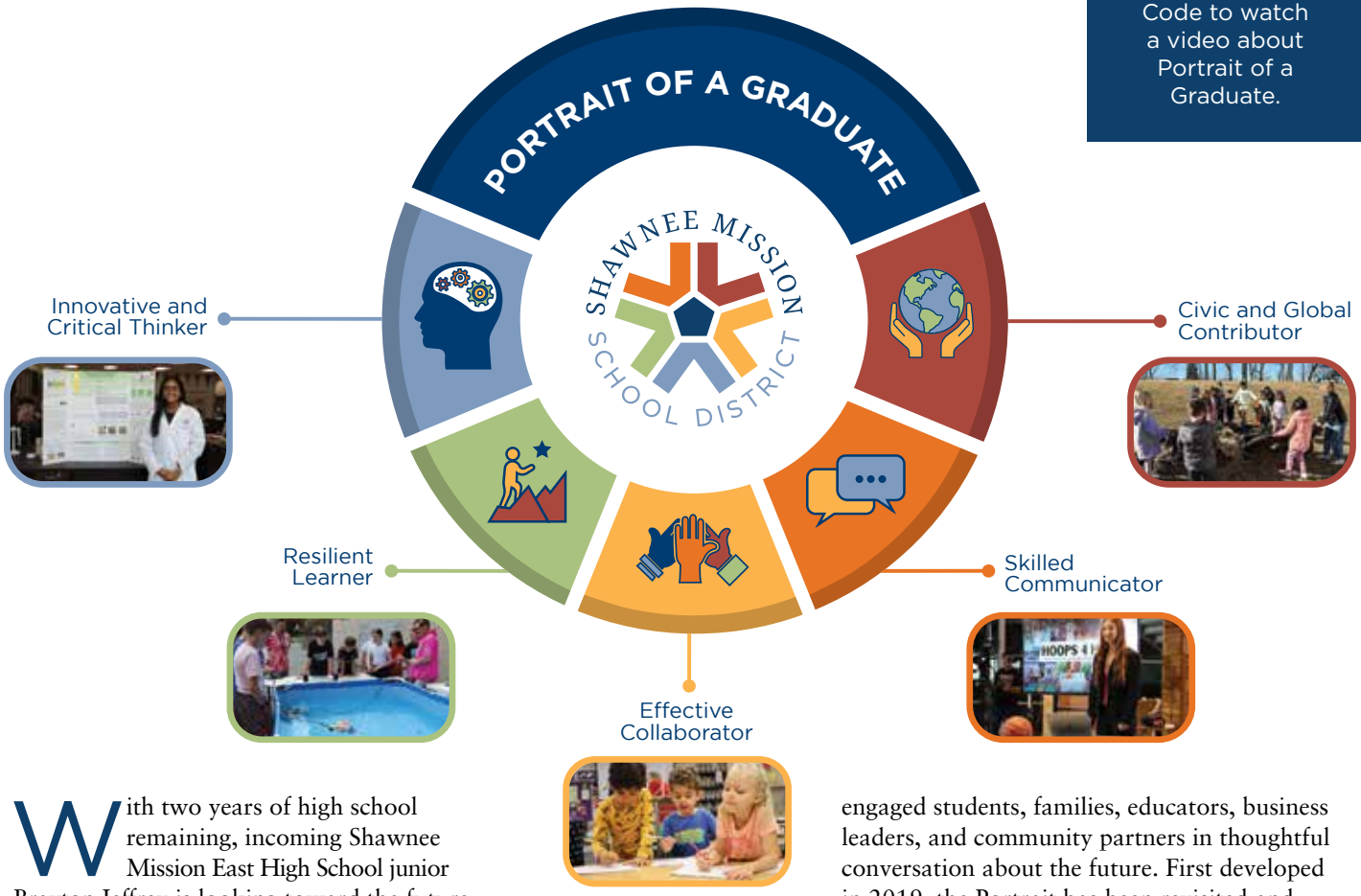
The designated location will be the site of the former Katherine Carpenter Elementary School, which was demolished this spring. School construction will be funded with $26.9 million available through the 2021 Bond authorization. In May, the Board of Education hired the architectural-engineering firm of Hollis and Miller Architects for architectural-engineering services for the construction of the new early childhood center. The Board also approved Newkirk Novak Construction Partners to serve as the construction manager.

Enroll Now in Pre-K and Kindergarten in the SMSD!

Enrollment is currently open for Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten in the Shawnee Mission School District. Use the QR code or visit https://qrco.de/SMSDenroll for more information.

Portrait of a Graduate Reenvisioned

Follow this QR Code to watch a video about Portrait of a Graduate.



With two years of high school remaining, incoming Shawnee Mission East High School junior Braxton Jeffrey is looking toward the future. He's holding conversations with teachers and trusted adults. He's considering what courses, activities, and experiences will help him get the skills he needs. Along the way, he is focused on Shawnee Mission's reimagined Portrait of a Graduate.

Portrait of a Graduate is Shawnee Mission's vision for what it means to be truly ready for the next step after high school. It outlines the skills, habits, and mindsets that prepare students for college, career, and life success, allowing them to navigate in an unpredictable world.

Jeffrey recalls first seeing the Portrait of a Graduate his freshman year.

"It boosts my confidence and I'm not stressed about graduating because I know I've prepared and I'm confident in my ability," Jeffrey shared. "It's important to have that outlined so you can go into graduation feeling more confident and knowing you achieved a lot."

As a student, Jeffrey has also joined an extensive, community-driven redesign process for the Portrait of a Graduate that engaged students, families, educators, business leaders, and community partners in thoughtful conversation about the future. First developed in 2019, the Portrait has been revisited and re-envisioned as part of the district's Strategic Plan. The process ensured the Portrait remains relevant, with current research and input from our community.

Built by the Community

Every individual who contributed to the redesign was asked a powerful question: What are the most important skills and qualities our students need to succeed in life?

"Because the community helped build it, the Portrait has broad support and a shared sense of ownership. It reflects who we are as a community – and who we want our young people to become," noted Dr. Leigh Anne Neal, chief of strategic initiatives. "It brings coherence to our work as educators, clarity to our goals as a system, and confidence to our families that we are preparing their children for a meaningful future. Most importantly, it highlights that education extends beyond academic achievements to encompass the personal growth and development of students."

Shawnee Mission's focus on Real World Learning is also outlined in the Portrait, ensuring graduates are prepared for higher education and the workforce. By 2030, all SMSD students will graduate with a minimum of one Market Value Asset—which may include internships, industry-recognized credentials, entrepreneurial experiences, client-connected projects, and/or college credit. These assets equip students with in-demand skills and experiences valued by employers.

In addition to contributing to the Portrait redesign, Danielle Pringle, business development manager at Performance Services and Portrait of a Graduate contributor, says she has intentionally worked with middle and high school students discussing career paths for trades and in construction.

"We're in a mad rush to get experienced and certified construction workers in the trades as we are in a nationwide deficit," Pringle explained. "It is especially important to find employees who take ownership, accountability, and pride in their work. It's important so that we as business leaders can find eager students to learn trades and get them prepared and ready for the real world early in high school."

While serving on Strategic Plan Action Team 1.2.1, Kate Herrenbruck, fourth grade teacher at Trailwood Elementary School, contributed input related to interpersonal skills. It was tremendously helpful to have a variety of perspectives redesigning the Portrait, she noted.

"I think this is something we can all get behind – setting goals for our students that will help them become the best versions of themselves," Herrenbruck shared. "We not only care about grades; we also care that they are going into the world as capable, confident humans."

When providing his input on the updated Portrait, SM East student Jeffrey said it was important to him that financial literacy be included. He noted that it is a component of what it means to be a Civic and Global Contributor. He also consulted classmates to understand what they thought would be important to include.

"It honestly means so much to me," Jeffrey shared. "It was amazing, feeling your voice was being heard and representing those who don't always have that opportunity, I thought that was so cool."

Supporting the Student Experience

The Portrait of a Graduate will be reflected in classroom instruction, student goal-setting, counseling, professional learning, and district decision-making.

"Teachers will use it to design learning that builds these competencies," Neal explained. "Students will use it to reflect on their growth and set personal goals. Leaders will use it to shape strategic priorities. Over time, it becomes the common language and compass for our entire system."

Ensuring each student fulfills the Portrait of a Graduate must be sustained work throughout a child's formal education, because the skills and attributes must be cultivated and practiced, according to Blake Revelle, Shawnee Mission West Principal and Portrait of a Graduate contributor.

"Attaining these skills takes more than just easily flipping on a metaphorical switch in high school," Revelle explained.

The portrait helps elementary and middle school students explore and develop all of the skills outlined, and high school students will experience the implementation of these skills in real world settings, he added.

"A high school graduate who possesses the skills and aptitudes outlined in our updated Portrait of a Graduate will not only position themselves to achieve their immediate goals and aspirations, but they will also possess the requisite skills to adapt and continue their lifelong learning to expand and grow into any future steps they might want to pursue," Revelle noted.

As she advises students as a Real World Learning counselor at Shawnee Mission North High School, Britt Sherer says her goal for each student will be for them to be opportunity-ready and that they have the confidence to follow the path that is a best fit for them.

"They will walk out of high school with skills that they know and understand and that can be used whether they take a path towards higher education, a path towards career or a path towards the military," she added.

At the elementary level, students, educators, and families are often focused on steps to get to the next grade level. The Portrait will help everyone, starting in Pre-Kindergarten, envision the future and students' journey to get there, noted Amy Sachse, Merriam Park Elementary instructional coach and Portrait of a Graduate contributor.

"My hope for our future students is that they feel buoyed and empowered by the robust support system here that Shawnee Mission provides," Sachse explained. "With personalized learning plans and Real World Learning opportunities, we are giving students the critical skills needed to leave Shawnee Mission with the confidence to take on the world." ⬟

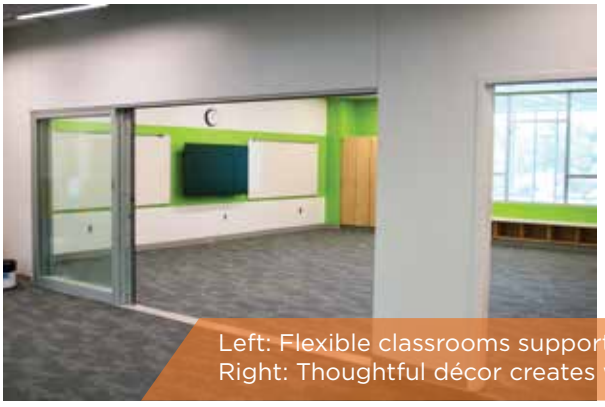
A Sneak Peek at the New Tomahawk Elementary

This fall, students will walk through the doors of a brand-new Tomahawk Elementary School. The fifth and final elementary school rebuilt through the 2021 bond, Tomahawk has been transformed into a modern, state-of-the-art facility.

Inside, classrooms are flexible and open, giving teachers the freedom to adjust the space for large groups, small teams, or individual work. At the center of the school is a welcoming common area, designed for collaboration and connection. Just outside the doors, outdoor learning spaces encourage hands-on exploration and active learning. The images shared are from summer 2025.

Tomahawk features modern architecture with redesigned playground areas that bring active learning spaces to the forefront.

The gymnasium provides a spacious area for physical activity, community events, and school gatherings. Go Tigers!



Left: Flexible classrooms support all learning styles. Right: Thoughtful décor creates welcoming spaces.

Thank You, Community

The new Tomahawk Elementary wouldn't be possible without the incredible support of the Shawnee Mission community.

The 2021 bond allowed for improvements at every school in the Shawnee Mission School District. Whether through major renovations, new construction or essential upgrades, each school–and each school community–has benefited from the community's generosity and support.

Shawnee Mission is a community that values public schools – one that believes in the power of education, supports educators, and invests in student achievement. Tomahawk Elementary is more than a new building, it's a symbol of what we can achieve when we work together …Because Kids.

Working to Make SMSD Vape Free

Shawnee Mission's Student Wellness Specialist

When her son was a junior in high school, Shawnee Mission parent Nicole Churchill found herself supporting him through an addiction to vaping. The challenge became more difficult as he faced an increasing amount of punishment for being caught using vape products. The compounding issues created an "incredibly daunting experience," she shared.

"Not being aware of available resources for students and parents can lead to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt," she said. "It can increase a sense of isolation and emotional distress."

A turning point for Churchill was connecting with Teresa Denk Smajda, who serves as the district's student wellness specialist. Denk Smajda began work in Shawnee Mission following the receipt of a settlement from a class action lawsuit the district entered against JUUL Labs over the impact vaping has on school-aged students.

"She has been an incredible support not only by making us aware of available resources, but reassuring me it is not my fault," Churchill said.

Churchill and her family members are far from alone in their experience. According to the 2022 National Youth Tobacco Survey, 2.55 million U.S. middle and high school students report current vape use. Denk Smajda visits schools across Shawnee Mission, providing education to students about vaping, the marketing tactics that target young people, the addictive nature of nicotine, and resources for quitting. She also supports students who face infractions as they work to make positive changes.

"I've been working to present to students in their school settings and engage with students in a supportive way, using evidence-based techniques to help students reconsider the addictive behaviors," she said. "The goal is to lay blame with the tobacco industry, not the individual."

Sometimes she speaks to students in health, physical education, and science classes, and provides informational tables at lunchtime. She sees signs of progress when she speaks to students who say, "I want to quit" or ask questions about negative consequences of vape. Sometimes, students will not speak to her directly, but she'll notice all of her "My Life, My Quit" informational cards on the topic have been taken.

"When I started I said to myself if I could even get one person to quit, that was a win!" she said.

Another win arrived when Denk Smajda was honored with the Kansas Tobacco Control Champion of 2025 award, an honor given to individuals who advocate for tobacco control policies and work to engage youth in tobacco control and prevention activities. She also was invited to speak this summer on how to talk to youth about vaping at the 2025 National Conference on Tobacco or Health in Chicago.

Her work will continue this year, speaking and providing information to students and parents as well as supporting student-led efforts to reduce tobacco use. Resources for students and families to address the issue are also available here: https://qrco.de/healthresources.

Churchill said she hopes more in our community will learn about Denk Smajda and the resources that are available to help. The resources Denk Smajda provided Churchill led to some of the first signs of hope.

"I saw the self-blame lift, replaced by a newfound sense of self-worth and hope," Churchill shared.

If you are interested in having Denk Smajda speak to a student or parent group, please contact her at TeresaDenksmajda@smsd.org. Use the QR code to visit a resource page.

Teresa Denk Smajda, center, accepts the award for Tobacco Control Champion of 2025.

Joy Partin, left, pitches her business to the judges as the audience looks on.

Student Entrepreneurs Pitch Big Ideas at Startup Show case

The energy was electric at The Culture House in Oak Park Mall on Wednesday, April 30, as Shawnee Mission students stepped into the spotlight for the first-ever Startup Showcase.

Hosted by the Shawnee Mission School District (SMSD) Student Chamber, Shawnee Mission Education Foundation, and Overland Park Chamber of Commerce, the event brought together student innovators, business leaders, and student and community supporters for a fast-paced, Shark-Tank-style pitch competition.

Real World Learning in Action

From handcrafted jewelry to a nonprofit all-girls basketball camp in Kenya, the ideas spanned industries and interests. The format challenged student participants to distill complex businesses into compelling three-minute "elevator pitches," explaining their product or service while under the pressure of a ticking clock and live audience.

Judges asked about pricing strategies, business plans, and scalability. The panel provided personalized feedback on marketing, operating, and growth.

"I was impressed by the students' understanding of business practices and the markets they were trying to reach," said Jim Brown, a retired vice president for HCA who served as judge. "They had great detail about their products, customers and what they felt they needed to do to make sales. They were poised and responsive."

Building a Future of Possibility

The Startup Showcase was more than a competition, it was a Real World Learning experience that connected classroom ideas with practical business experience. Students gained valuable skills in public speaking, time management, and responding to feedback under pressure.

"These real world experiences empower students to choose college majors and careers based on insights gained from pursuing business ideas that genuinely inspire them," shared Dr. Tiffany Dixon, SMSD Chamber sponsor and business teacher. "We're excited for students to take even more ownership of the SMSD Chamber as we continue to grow!"

Looking Ahead

As the showcase concluded, the focus in the room shifted from competition to collaboration. Several judges expressed interest in mentoring student entrepreneurs.

The top five finalists also received complimentary memberships to the Overland Park Chamber of Commerce, expanding their networks and strengthening their connections to the local business community.

"The enthusiasm from students, families, and the community is exciting to see," shared Dixon.

The excitement is spreading beyond the district. The SMSD Student Chamber's success is gaining statewide attention as a unique approach to Real World Learning. With interest growing across Kansas and next year's plans already taking shape, the Student Showcase has proven to be a launchpad for student entrepreneurship.

And the winners are...

First Place: Joy Partin, Shawnee Mission West senior, owner of Joy's Jewelry, featuring handmade earrings.

Second Place: Ada Knechtel, Shawnee Mission West incoming junior and founder of AK Creates, a custom stationery business.

Third Place: Halley Vincent, Shawnee Mission North incoming junior, owner of Seven Stories, a bookstore that focuses on curating books and building a community of readers.

"I'm beyond excited that this is a thing that has been created for students like me and upcoming entrepreneurs," shared Vincent after the awards ceremony.

ONE SHAWNEE MISSION...

because kids ACHIEVE!

NATIONALLY RANKED

SM East, SM North, SM Northwest, SM South and SM West High Schools are ALL ranked on the U.S. News and World Report list of Best High Schools in the United States. Shawnee Mission East was ranked #3 in the state of Kansas.

MARKET VALUE ASSETS

SMSD aims for every student to complete a resume-worthy achievement, known as a Market Value Asset (MVA), by 2030. This could mean earning nine hours of college credit, earning an industry-recognized credential, completing a client-connected project, or completing an internship. As of June 2025, 76% of the class of 2025 have completed one or more MVAs!

RECOGNIZED FOR EXCELLENCE

Comanche Elementary and Shawanoe Elementary were named Challenge Award winners by the Kansas State Department of Education. The Challenge Awards highlight schools for outstanding achievements based on Kansas Assessment Program (KAP) results in math and reading, especially for students from ethnic minority groups and those who qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

NATIONAL RECOGNITION

The Shawnee Mission NJROTC team finished first in armed regulation, second in color guard, third in armed exhibition, and fifth overall in a virtual National Championship.

CULINARY PROGRAM SUCCESS

A student barbecue team, "Caught Smokin," earned the Grand Champion title at The Students Lit About Barbecue (SLAB): Scheels National High School Barbecue Association Championship.

TALENTED PERFORMERS

Eight SMSD students were named finalists in the Shooting Stars Program by the Arts Council of Johnson County. Further recognition was awarded to Shawnee Mission South's Nia Gosier, 1st in Theatre, Iason Wilson-Brown, SM South, 2nd place in Winds and Percussion, and Aubree Smith, SM West, 2nd place in Voice Classical.

ATHLETES IN ACTION

During the 2024–25 school year, more than 7,800 Shawnee Mission students participated in athletics. A major highlight was the successful launch of middle school football, with 265 student-athletes joining in its first season. Across the district, athletes also brought home 12 state championships, both team and individual, showcasing excellence in competition.

Leadership Shawnee Mission 2025: Leadership Starts Here

Summer marks the return of one of the Shawnee Mission School District's most prestigious experiences: Leadership Shawnee Mission.

Hosted by the Shawnee Mission Education Foundation, this invitation-only program brings together a select group of rising juniors and seniors from across the district for an intensive two-week leadership development experience. Students are nominated by a faculty member for their potential, promise, and resilience.

This summer's cohort, representing all five high school attendance areas, was a diverse group united to learn, grow, and lead. Through a partnership with Better Humans LLC, students engaged in learning designed to build communication, problem-solving, and decision-making skills. They explored personal leadership styles, learned how to work with different personalities, and practiced navigating complex group dynamics with empathy and confidence.

"One of the biggest focuses in this program has been learning about ourselves as a leader and those different leadership styles and how they can mesh together," shared Charlotte Millard, SM Northwest incoming senior. "It's really helped me grow."

Students also took their learning outside the classroom, spending a day at Johnson County Park and Recreation's TimberRidge challenge course. Through team-building and high-climbing activities the students worked to build trust, overcome fear, and communicate effectively — lessons that will serve them well in every area of life.

"What we do here is pretty wonderful," said Sergio Nunez, Horizons senior. "I didn't know what to expect, but it's been one of the best things I've done."

A key component of Leadership Shawnee Mission is its career mentorship program. Each student is matched with a professional in a field aligned with their interests, creating opportunities for inspiration and real-world guidance.

"Our mentors can help us, not only now, but also in the future," said SM Northwest senior Ben Hissong.

Dr. Paige Geiger, professor at the KU School of Medicine and mentor in the program, emphasized the power of early exposure. "I know when I was that age, I had never met a scientist, I'd never met someone who does biomedical research, like I do now…and so knowing that exists, and getting to pick that person's brain and find out why they got into that, is an incredible opportunity."

Leadership Shawnee Mission isn't just about personal growth. It's about creating a ripple effect, equipping students to take what they've learned back to their schools and communities, and fostering a new generation of leaders.

"These students are not only developing confidence and critical leadership skills, they're also building a network," said Kim Hinkle, executive director of the Shawnee Mission Education Foundation. "They now have a circle of peer leaders and mentors they can turn to for support. I'm so proud of this class of leaders and am excited to see how they shape the future."

For many participants, Leadership Shawnee Mission was their first formal leadership opportunity. Some might be the first in their family planning to attend college. All have shown determination, academic promise, and the ability to rise above challenges.

In the end, Leadership Shawnee Mission is more than a summer program, it's an experience that leaves students changed. They return to school not only as leaders, but as friends and collaborators, inspired to make a lasting positive impact.

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