



**Superintendent Report  
Board of Education  
Monday, January 12, 2026**

Hello Members of the Board and Community,

Today is day five of this new semester and a brand new year 2026, and congratulations to all on such a strong start to this spring semester. As I have been out in schools and have joined in PD sessions alongside teachers and school leaders last week, it's clear that we are off to a strong start this January.

Perseverance is our [Character Strong](#) theme for January; our Character Strong curricula defines perseverance as 'pushing yourself to work through challenges and obstacles.' As we return to our work together, I am continually inspired by the perseverance shown across our district by students who continue learning through challenges, by educators who refine their practice every day, and by a community that remains deeply committed to public education.

The weeks ahead will be full and purposeful, grounded in both reflection and momentum. I am grateful for the opportunity to share highlights from across our district and to look ahead at the work before us.

**Board of Education Art Display**

This month's Board Room art display features original student work from **Lawrence High School**, showcasing the talents of Chesty Lion artists taught by **Angelia Perkins** (Photo & Digital Graphics), **Todd Poteet** (Drawing & Painting), and **Emily Markoulatos** (Ceramics & Jewelry).

Art is a powerful language helping students interpret, question, and make meaning of the world around them. In a time when we are inundated with thousands of visual messages each day, the ability to critically engage with them is essential. The pieces displayed here are a reflection not only of technical skill, but also give insight to our students' ability to understand and connect with the impact of their art on the viewer. They represent just a small sample of the hundreds of Lawrence High School students who participate in visual arts courses each year and capture glimpse into the lives and perspectives of students as they navigate their journey toward adulthood.

We are grateful to the educators, families, and community members who continue to support strong visual arts programming across our district.

**2026 Kansas Legislative Session**

The 2026 Kansas Legislative session kicked off today. As legislators return to Topeka, they are entering the second year of the two-year legislative biennium, which means both new and unfinished bills from last year will fill the session. With an already shortened calendar, this carryover means the Legislature

will be off to a quick start. This fast-pace will not deter or distract us; our team is well-prepared to advocate for bills that improve public education, access and opportunities for all Kansas students.

Last week was busy on the advocacy and information sharing front, with multiple community events scheduled directly in advance of the 2026 Kansas Legislature session.

I was so proud to have Lawrence Public Schools represented by our Board of Education and district leadership to tell our story and affirm our board-approved 2026 Legislative Priorities. Specifically, on Thursday evening, January 8, **State Representative Barbara Ballard** invited USD 497 to attend a **pre-session hearing with the Douglas County Legislative Delegation**, held at the Dole Institute of Politics on the University of Kansas campus. We were afforded 30 minutes of thoughtful and meaningful conversations directly with our elected officials to help inform them of our challenges and opportunities.

That event was followed on Friday morning, January 9, with the Lawrence Chamber of Commerce's annual Legislative Priorities Breakfast. **Member Kelly Jones** joined a panel of other educational leaders, and elected officials, and provided a powerful and positive testimonial for sustained support of public schools by the Legislature and local control of educational decisions and policy making that reflect the values and expectations of our school community.

We are encouraged and appreciative of the direct lines of communication we have with our legislators, and are always willing to help to inform their considerations and deliberations related to education and funding topics.

### **AVID School of Excellence Recognition**

Before winter break, [Sunflower Elementary School earned national recognition as an AVID School of Excellence](#), an honor awarded to just 45 schools nationwide out of more than 8,000 AVID-implementing schools. This award marks a significant milestone achievement during the 45th anniversary of the Advancement Via Individual Determination program (AVID).

This designation reflects Sunflower's strong commitment to implementing AVID with fidelity and purpose. AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) strategies are woven throughout the school day, supporting students in building organization, critical thinking, collaboration, and self-advocacy skills. Just as importantly, the recognition affirms the school's culture of high expectations, perseverance, and belief in the potential of every student.

As we continue to expand AVID practices throughout Lawrence Public Schools, working toward 100% districtwide implementation in 2026, Sunflower stands as a powerful example of how consistent systems, strong relationships, and perseverance can create meaningful opportunities for student success.

We are proud of the Sunflower Eagles and grateful to the staff members, students, and families who make this achievement possible.

### **Learning Exchange**

Ahead of the start of our second semester, **on January 5th**, Lawrence Public Schools educators came together for the second session of our **LPS Learning Exchange**, the teacher-led professional learning experience designed to strengthen instruction through collaboration and shared expertise.

Across grade levels and content areas, educators led sessions for one another, sharing strategies, reflecting on practice, and preparing to welcome students back with renewed focus. The Learning Exchange reflects our belief that the strongest professional learning is grounded in the experience and excellence of our own educators.

Last Monday, I had the great opportunity to join in a teacher exchange session on [Conscious Discipline](#) facilitated by Hillcrest Principal Christine Caffey. Conscious Discipline is an approach that leverages brain science and trauma-responsive practices to create safe and productive learning environments for students and learning.

### **Quail Run: A One-of-a-Kind Gift Celebrates Perseverance and Gratitude**

Before winter break, **Sarah Kingsley**, a second-grade teacher at **Quail Run Elementary**, received a deeply meaningful and unexpected gift from one of her students and his family.

The handmade present was an upcycled wooden chair [thoughtfully redesigned and painted by Memphis, a second-grade student, his younger sister, and their mother](#) as a gesture of appreciation.

Delivered personally to Kingsley's classroom, the chair reflects creativity, care, and connection, with details inspired by classroom tools and finished with "Mrs. Kingsley" written across the back.

Now in her second year of teaching at Quail Run, Kingsley shared that the moment was especially meaningful as she reflected on a year filled with learning and growth. **She has since made the chair her classroom reading chair, debuting it during the class's first read-aloud of the year: *Rosie Revere, Engineer*, which is a story about learning through perseverance.**

"The most important thing I learned," Kingsley shared, "was letting the difficult stuff roll off my back—having perseverance."

This moment was shared by the family on social media, going viral on TikTok, and was also featured by People Magazine!

### **Billy Mills Middle School: AVID Students Begin the Year Looking Ahead...and Back**

Students in **Billy Mills Middle School's AVID program** kicked off the new year with a powerful reminder of what is possible when preparation meets opportunity.

AVID alumna [Trinity Shorter, a recent graduate of Howard University, returned to her former middle school to share her journey](#) and answer student questions about middle and high school, college, and life beyond the classroom.

Shorter emphasized the importance of writing, organization, self-advocacy, and reading. These are all AVID-focused skills she credits with helping her earn scholarships and succeed academically and beyond.

### **Free State High School at the Kansas Thespian Festival**

Last month, **Free State High School's Theatre Troupe 5773** earned state-level recognition for their selection to perform *The Addams Family School Edition* at the **2026 Kansas Thespian Festival**. Productions chosen for the festival are selected through a rigorous process, making this honor a testament to the talent and artistry of our students and staff.

On Friday night, Free State Theatre took the stage and performed in front of thousands of students from across the state, with incredible energy in the room and crowd reactions at times reaching a deafening roar. It was an unforgettable experience not only for the actors, pit musicians, and the dedicated stage crew who worked tirelessly throughout the weekend. The Free State Theatre program accomplished an amazing effort, in transporting the entire set in three U-Haul trucks and successfully recreating it inside Century II Concert Hall.

Thank you to **Director Bryce Jones, Pit Crew Conductor Olivia Henning, and Accompanist Joe Piontek, countless parent volunteers,** and all who assisted in making this amazing production possible. We are proud of the Firebird theatre program and the way it continues to elevate student voice and creative expression.

### **Coming Soon! 2026-27 Preschool Enrollment**

We are excited to share that early enrollment for Lawrence Public Schools preschool programs opens **February 2nd** and runs through **March 22nd**. Our preschool programs provide a strong, joyful start for our youngest learners, building foundational skills, curiosity, and a love of learning that lasts well beyond the early years.

Families will be able to apply for preschool opportunities at **Kennedy Early Childhood Center, New York Montessori, Deerfield, Prairie Park, Sunflower, and Woodlawn Elementary Schools**. With six of our elementary sites now offering preschool, we are reaching the halfway mark in providing preschool opportunities across our district. This reflects our continued commitment to expanding access to quality early learning in neighborhood schools.

We encourage families with preschool-aged children to explore these opportunities and take advantage of this enrollment window. We anticipate acceptance notifications sent to families by April 1st based on eligibility and availability. Additional information and enrollment details are available at **[www.usd497.org/preschool](http://www.usd497.org/preschool)**.

### **Upcoming Events**

#### **Launching our Winter 2026 Series - Community Conversations that Count**

During the 2024-25 school year, we engaged thousands of students, staff, families, and community members through Community Conversations and surveys to better understand where we are doing well and where we must continue to grow.

This winter, we are returning to Community Conversations to share updates on our progress with the priorities our community has shared, reflect on our work, and listen closely to how improvement efforts are showing up in classrooms, buses, and hallways across the district. These conversations represent an essential part of our commitment to connection, building trust, and continuous improvement.

In the coming week, we will open our survey platform to receive feedback from our school community.

I also encourage all: students and staff, families and community members to attend one of our engagement events. Alongside other district leaders, I plan to be available to listen and learn directly from the experiences of those who live near, work and attend our schools.

We look forward to hearing what is going well and where we might expand opportunities in our district. The following dates are confirmed for our listening tour, with additional opportunities to be added in the weeks ahead. I am excited to engage with our community to continue building on important strategic work to support every student and their future.

### **One Dream: Honoring Dr. King's Legacy**

We are in the final stages of preparation for our annual [MLK One Dream event, to be held on January 22, 2026, at the Lied Center.](#)

**This year's theme, *Mission Possible 2 – Building Community, Uniting a Nation, the Nonviolent Way***, honors students and staff who live out the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. through compassion and connection.

Honorees are recognized for strengthening community, bridging differences, and creating spaces of belonging. The evening will also feature student performances that reflect the power of voice, creativity, and unity. I invite all to join us for an evening that honors Dr. King's legacy, lifts student and staff voices, and reflects our ongoing commitment to building a stronger and more connected community. Doors will open at 6:00 and the program begins at 6:30.

The strength of Lawrence Public Schools is rooted in a connected community that believes in its children, takes action to support their schools, and remains committed to their success. Now, more than ever, a community in partnership and support is key and critical. Thank you for your partnership, your perseverance, and your continued support of our students and staff.

It is an honor to serve the Lawrence Public Schools and to share in the important work ahead.

Sincerely,



Jeanice Kerr Swift  
Superintendent of Schools  
Lawrence Public Schools