



USD 497 News Release

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Newly Elected Board Members Sworn Into Office and Next Principal of Sunset Hill Elementary Announced

Board Member Installation

Two re-elected board members (Kelly Jones and Shannon Kimball) and one first-time elected board member (Matt Lancaster) were sworn into office by deputy county clerk, Jamie Shew.

Bob Byers was formally appointed to complete the term of a resigned board member, concluding in January 2028. He was also sworn into office by the deputy county clerk.

Byers was then elected as board vice-president through July 2026 (passes 6-0).

School Board Recognition Month

Dr. Swift shared remarks of gratitude and appreciation acknowledging January as School Board Recognition month, in addition to the history of board governance and local oversight of public schools. She thanked the board for advancing the shared mission of supporting the success and well-being of all students. She also acknowledged the board for legislative outreach and tireless advocacy efforts in support of public education.

Superintendent's Report

Dr. Swift shared a wide range of updates and highlights from throughout Lawrence Public Schools, including:

- Gratitude and pride for student artwork currently on loan from **Lawrence High School fine arts department** and displayed in the board room of the Educational Support Center.
- Prior to Winter Break, **Sunflower Elementary was recognized as 1 of only 45 schools nationwide for excellence in exemplifying the mission and impact of AVID.** Approximately 8,000 schools are AVID partners in the U.S.
- **Free State High School** Theatre Troupe 5773 was recognized for their selection to perform *The Addams Family School Edition* at the **2026 Kansas Thespian Festival.** This performance took place on Friday, January 9, in Wichita.
- The **early enrollment window for 2026-27 Preschool applications is open from February 2 thru March 22.** Next year there will be a total of 6 preschool programs located throughout the district (Sunflower, Woodlawn, Deerfield, and Prairie Park), in addition to Kennedy Early Childhood Center and New York Montessori. More information and updates

available www.usd497.org/preschool

- **Community Conversations are being scheduled for Winter 2026.** These community engagement opportunities will serve as opportunities for feedback to be received and assist with the district's update of the strategic plan. Planned sessions are as follows:
 - **New York Montessori** — Jan. 20, 6:00 p.m.
 - **Educational Support Center (Boardroom)** — Jan. 28, 6:00 p.m.
 - **Hillcrest Elementary** — Feb. 5, 6:00 p.m.
 - **Woodlawn Elementary** — Feb. 10, 5:30 p.m.
 - **Billy Mills Middle School** — Feb. 17, 6:00 p.m.
- The Lawrence community is invited to attend the district's annual **"One Dream" MLK celebration**. This year's event will be held at the **Lied Center on Thursday, January 22**, beginning with a student art gallery at 6:00 p.m. and program beginning at 6:30 p.m., featuring student musicians from Lawrence Public Schools, and staff and student honorees from each school building.

[Read](#) and [watch](#) the full Superintendent's Report online.

LEA/KNEA Legislative Priorities

President of the Lawrence Education Association (LEA), Emerson Hoffzales, and LEA advocacy chair, Dr. Tom Barker, shared their legislative priorities with the board and noted common ground of shared values. They highlighted the need for testimony to be provided throughout the Kansas Legislature session, and sustained funding for public education.

Consent Agenda

The board approved a consent agenda of internet connection to Wakarusa Valley; purchase of middle school choir uniforms; purchase of bakery box truck; first-read of board policy JBCC (enrollment of nonresident students); first-read of board policy JQI (adult students); first-read of board policy KM (visitors to the school); first-read of board policy BCBK (executive session); first-read of board policy HAK (enrollment of ratification procedures); personnel report; monthly vouchers; donation report; meeting minutes (December 8, 2025); and special meeting minutes (December 17, 2025). Consent agenda was approved with a 7-0 vote.

Sunset Hill Principal Announcement

Per the board's approval of the personnel report, Courtney Ellis was announced as the next principal of Sunset Hill Elementary, effective July 1, 2026. She is currently serving in the capacity of Assistant Principal/Athletics Director at Billy Mills Middle School.

Enrollment Analysis and Address Locator Build and Launch

Dr. Larry Englebrick, Deputy Superintendent, provided an informational presentation and recommendation to engage with RSP & Associates to provide a demographics study and enrollment analysis, in addition to the development and launch of a web-based address locator tool. The work is to include data modeling, three-year analysis of student migration, five-year enrollment projections, and other related services, at a total of \$35,000 to be funded from the general fund. Approved with a 7-0 vote.

First Reading of Policy DD – Fund Balance

The board discussed a new policy that would provide clarification of the district's fund balance as a percentage of annual operating expenditures (12-20%) to ensure fiscal responsibility and maintain case reserves for unanticipated expenses of revenue shortfalls. This helps to maintain a strong bond rating, ensure stable tax rates, and avoid cash flow borrowing with interest expenses. First read approved 7-0.

Board Reports & Commentary

Board President Gordon-Ross congratulated newly elected and appointed members to the board; the Policy Committee provided an update on the development and review of policy; Equity Council reported increased community participation, and ongoing review of current and future enrollment trends and projections. Multiple members noted positive interactions with state and county elected officials during legislative outreach efforts last Thursday and Friday, in addition to a preview of considerations by the 2026 Kansas Legislature.

Access a link to the [full meeting agenda](#) online.

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