



**Board of Education  
Superintendent Report  
Monday, July 27, 2026**

Hello Members of the Board and Lawrence Public Schools Community,

As we wrap July and look ahead just a few days to the beginning of the 2026-27 school year, I am pleased to share the following highlights from across Lawrence Public Schools.

**Free State High School Earns Top Honors at Blue Star Awards**

Lawrence Public Schools is proud to recognize Free State High School students and staff for their outstanding achievements recently at the [2026 Starlight Theatre Blue Star Awards](#), one of the nation's premier high school musical theatre recognition programs.

Free State students and educators earned three Blue Star Awards:

- **Piper Northrop – Outstanding Lighting Design**
- **Harper York – Outstanding Performer in a Featured Role for her portrayal of Grandma**
- **Free State High School Orchestra – Outstanding Orchestra**

These awards represent an extraordinary accomplishment considering more than 60 high schools from across the Kansas City metropolitan area participate in the program each year.

These accomplishments reflect the dedication of an outstanding team of students and staff. Special recognition goes to **Free State Assistant Director of Choirs Olivia Henning, Free State Theatre Director Bryce Jones, Free State Music Director Lauren Thiessen**, the professional and student musicians in the pit orchestra, and the many students who contributed both on stage and behind the scenes. Their collaboration, creativity, and commitment helped make this award-winning production possible.

**Additional Details:**

The Starlight Blue Star Awards, established in 2003, annually recognize excellence in high school musical theatre throughout the Kansas City region and are among the largest programs of their kind in the country. More than 5,000 students participate in productions evaluated through the program each year. Free State's production received widespread recognition for both student performance and technical excellence.

**Lawrence High School Alumni Association Announces Hall of Honor Class**

Congratulations to the five individuals selected for induction into the [Lawrence Lions Alumni Association Hall of Honor](#), an honor recognizing graduates and community members whose

lives and careers have made lasting contributions to their professions and communities.

The inductees this year are:

- **Kim Murphree**
- **John Nalbandian**
- **Jim "Punkin" O'Connell**
- **Dr. Quentin Lamerle Rials (Class of 1995)**
- **G. Craig Weinaug (Class of 1970)**

**Additional Details:** The Lawrence Lions Alumni Association Hall of Honor recognizes graduates of Liberty Memorial High School and Lawrence High School, as well as individuals who have made significant contributions to the schools and their communities. The 2026 induction ceremony will be held during Lawrence High School Homecoming weekend on October 11 and is open to the public.

### **AVID Institute for Educators and Administrators**

Last week, a team of Lawrence Public Schools educators administrators attended the [2026 AVID Summer Institute in Kansas City](#). Participants collaborated with educators from across the country while strengthening instructional practices that prepare students for college, careers, and life beyond graduation.

The team participated in professional learning focused on creating engaging and rigorous classrooms, supporting multilingual learners, strengthening instructional systems, and collaborative goal setting.

District teams also worked together to ensure greater clarity, alignment, and coherence as they continue expanding AVID implementation across Lawrence Public Schools. Educators returned with practical strategies, renewed inspiration, and a shared commitment to increasing opportunities for every student.

**Additional Details:** The AVID Summer Institute brings together educators nationwide for professional learning centered on instructional excellence, student opportunity, and leadership. Lawrence Public Schools plans to implement AVID districtwide as part of its commitment to college and career readiness.

### **West Middle School AVID Student Ambassadors**

One of the highlights of this year's AVID Summer Institute was celebrating six Lawrence Public Schools students who were selected to serve as **AVID Student Ambassadors**.

As recent **West Middle School graduates** and **incoming freshmen at Free State High School**, they represented both their school community and the district while supporting one of AVID's largest national professional learning events. Recognized students include **Amelia Abrahamson, Neriah Emmanuel-Okpara, Leah Groves, Hannah Kimball, Juliet Paez-Rincon, and Kayley Alarcon-Lopez**.

Throughout the conference, these students shared their experiences with educators from across the country, assisted with conference activities, and strengthened their leadership, communication, and collaboration skills while earning valuable community service hours. Their participation provided educators with an authentic student perspective on the impact of AVID while showcasing the opportunities available to Lawrence Public Schools students.

**Special thanks to West Middle School teacher Kathleen Gates** for her leadership in preparing and supporting these outstanding student ambassadors. We are incredibly proud of the way these students represented Lawrence Public Schools, the AVID community, and the strong foundation they leave at West Middle School.

**Additional Details:** Lawrence Public Schools continues to implement AVID districtwide to support college and career readiness through rigorous instruction, student organization, and leadership opportunities. Student Ambassadors serve as representatives of the AVID student experience while interacting with educators from across the United States and internationally.

### **Paraeducator Hiring Fair Connects Candidates with Schools**

Lawrence Public Schools recently hosted an [ESP Paraeducator Hiring Fair](#) as part of our continued efforts to recruit outstanding employees to support students across our classrooms.

The open-house event welcomed **32 candidates**, providing opportunities for principals and special education administrators to meet individually with prospective employees, discuss available positions, and learn more about the valuable experiences each candidate could bring to our schools.

Thank you to our Human Resources team, and to everyone who helped make this event welcoming, engaging, and successful. Paraeducators play a critical role in supporting classroom instruction, student learning, and individualized services throughout Lawrence Public Schools, and we look forward to welcoming new team members who will make a meaningful difference in the lives of our students.

Recruitment efforts continue as the district prepares for the beginning of the school year.

### **Building Leaders Prepare for the New School Year**

As anticipation builds for the start of the 2026–27 school year, [Lawrence Public Schools principals and district leaders recently gathered for two days of Back-to-School professional learning](#) focused on preparing for another successful year.

Building on last year's work around clarity, culture, and capacity, this year's learning was grounded in the theme: ***In Partnership for Students: With Intention and By Design***. The theme reinforces the importance of working collaboratively, creating greater synergy across the district to support student success.

Throughout the two days, leaders explored effective instructional leadership, strengthening a culture of dignity and belonging, refining systems to better support students, using data to guide continuous improvement, and deepening partnerships with families and the community. Time was also dedicated to collaborative planning and aligning priorities so every school begins the year prepared to support students, staff, and families from the very first day.

### **Family Engagement in Education: Creating Effective Home and School Partnerships**

A cross-functional team of Lawrence Public Schools staff recently attended ***Creating Effective Home and School Partnerships*** at the **Harvard Graduate School of Education**. Representing elementary, middle, and high school levels, along with mental health, social work,

Native American Student Services (NASS), and the Lawrence Diploma Completion Program, the team explored research-based strategies for strengthening authentic partnerships between families and schools.

The symposium, led by nationally recognized faculty, including Karen Mapp, the author of *Everyone Wins! The Evidence for Family-School Partnerships & Implications for Practice*, was a five-day intensive program focused on strategies to demonstrate how authentic family partnerships directly improve student attendance, academic performance, school climate, and educational equity across all grade levels. Participants also explored evidence-based frameworks, engaged in collaborative learning with colleagues from across the nation, and applied new learning to the development of district-specific action plans.

The institute focused on *Building the Foundation for Effective Family Engagement*. Grounded in research showing that family engagement is one of the single strongest predictors of student success, the training also introduced the ***Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Version 2)***. The framework emphasizes that true engagement goes beyond event attendance. It requires building the knowledge, skills, confidence, and relationships of both educators and families.

Throughout the institute, the team explored critical topics, including:

- **Family Communication to Reduce Absenteeism**
- **Advancing Equity Through Family Engagement**
- **Understanding Family Experiences and Measuring What Matters**
- **Building District Systems for Sustainable Family Engagement**

We want to honor our team and extend a huge thank you for attending the institute, **Tina Mitchell (Director of Equity, Family, and Community Engagement)**, **David Farve (NASS Coordinator)**, **Elizabeth Crickard (Transition Specialist, FSHS)**, **Annette Kenoly (Teacher, Adult Completion Center)**, **Amanda McCoy (Librarian, Sunflower Elementary)**, **Ray Pelsma (Mental Health Professional, FSHS)**, **Lynisha Thomas (Social Worker, LHS)**, and **Carissa Welsh (Social Worker, LHS)**.

The Stronger Connections Grant funded this impactful professional development and strategic planning initiative. Team members in attendance completed the pre-institute coursework, active learning hours, and strategic planning sessions, and earned an official Certificate of Participation from Harvard.

### **Choice Campus at Centennial Update**

Renovation work continues to make steady progress at the Choice Campus at Centennial, and will open this fall; I recently toured the building to see the work firsthand and the thoughtful transformation taking place.

The renovation reflects the Lawrence Public Schools commitment to being good stewards of taxpayer resources by preserving and repurposing much of the building's existing structure and materials while reimagining the interior to better support teaching and learning for high school students in a nontraditional learning environment.

Flexible learning spaces will meet the individualized needs of students, ensuring the environment is as adaptable and unique as the educational pathways offered through the Choice Campus.

Questions about Centennial Campus may be shared with Principal Zach Harwood [zharwood@usd497.org](mailto:zharwood@usd497.org)

**Additional Details:** The Choice Campus at Centennial is designed to provide flexible learning opportunities for students through personalized pathways, credit recovery, and credit advancement. Renovations are focused on creating collaborative, adaptable learning environments while maximizing existing district resources.

### **Welcome Staff & Families to 2026-27 School Year**

During the coming days, excitement continues to build as we welcome our new educators, preparing all staff for the school year, and opening our doors to families through dozens of events across the district. These include *Meet the Teacher Nights*, curriculum nights, and many Back-to-School events.

In all the flurry of back-to-school activities, we are moving forward ‘with intention and by design’ to connect and support in ways that matter, so that every student, staff member and family feel warmly welcomed, connected, and ready for a successful start to this 2026-27 school year.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this Superintendent Report, and for the honor of serving the Lawrence Public Schools.

Sincerely,



Jeanice Kerr Swift  
Superintendent of Schools  
Lawrence Public Schools