Commissioner of Education
DeBacker announces resignation

The Kansas State Board of Education accepted the resignation of Dr. Diane DeBacker, commissioner of education, during its regular meeting April 10. DeBacker, whose resignation is effective May 14, 2014, is leaving KSDE to serve as Advisor to the Director General of the Abu Dhabi Education Council and will be relocating to the United Arab Emirates.

The board appointed Deputy Commissioner Brad Neuenswander as interim commissioner.

DeBacker, who is the only Kansas Commissioner of Education to serve on a local school board, was appointed in 2010, having served as interim since October 2009. She has been an administrator at the building and district levels, and has been with the Kansas State Department of Education a total of 11 years, serving as director of school improvement and accreditation and deputy commissioner of the division of learning and innovative services.

Among her many other community service and professional affiliations, Debacker was elected to the Kaw Valley USD 321 board of education in 1999, and served one term, including two years as president of the board.

“Her experiences as a teacher, administrator and elected board of education member has given Dr. DeBacker a unique and valuable perspective in her work with the state department,” said Dr. John Heim, KASB executive director.

“There is little doubt of Dr. DeBacker’s focus on what’s best for the students in our classrooms,” Heim said. “Throughout her years with the state department, she has remained faithful to making good decisions and enacting policies that will prepare our kids for the future.”

Beyond that, Heim said her time as an elected school board member seemed to give Dr. DeBacker a unique understanding of the long-held Kansas value of local control.

“Our state department continues to navigate through federal regulations and significant political pressure while honoring the Kansas vision of a public education system controlled by a locally-elected board of education,” Heim said. “I don’t know very many people who could have done this with the same grace and courage that Diane DeBacker has exhibited time and time again.”

Is the American dream at risk?

KASB President Frank Henderson, Jr.

I was raised in Western Kansas, in a small community called Sharon Springs. It’s like if you were going to go to Colorado for vacation, and you’re driving and you’re driving, and it’s like “are we there yet?” No, you’re not there yet. And you drive some more and you’re probably in Sharon Springs.

My ancestors migrated to Kansas following the Civil War, during the Reconstruction period. They were part of what has been termed the Exoduster Movement. And the reason they did this was because there was a gentleman called Pat Singleton and he stood on the banks of the Mississippi with a sign that said, “Go to Kansas! Go to Kansas! Kansas is the land of Opportunity.”

So, is the American Dream at risk in Kansas? Every child who walks through the doors of our school buildings has the right to dream. And public schools still continue to be the keeper of that dream. We need to protect the vision our forefathers had for Kansas public education, governed by a locally-elected Board of Education.
KASB urges caution on district teacher due process action

Since the passage of HB 2506 school leaders have been contacting KASB with questions about how their districts should respond to the provisions concerning teacher due process (tenure). KASB legal and advocacy staff members suggest that school districts should be extremely cautious about any immediate action because there are a number of unanswered questions regarding the bill.

On April 14, the bill had been presented to Governor Brownback for his signature or veto. Legislative staff members had 10 days to prepare the bill and deliver it to the Governor.

Second, once the Governor receives the bill he has 10 days to either sign or veto the bill, which means he will have until the end of the following week to act. If he does neither, the bill becomes law without his signature. If he vetoes the bill, the veto can be overridden by a two-thirds vote of both the House and Senate.

Third, there appears to be considerable confusion among legislators about exactly what the bill does and what it was intended to do. There are a number of interlocking statutes amended by the bill. It is possible the Legislature could consider a “trailer bill” to clarify the due process provisions during the veto session that begins April 30. Such a bill could re-open the entire issue of due process for debate and amendment. As a result, the issue may not be completely resolved until the end of the veto session, which appears to be no later than May 13.

Fourth, the current bill raises a number of legal issues. In particular, the Kansas National Education Association is arguing that teachers who have achieved due process rights under current law cannot have those rights removed by action of the Legislature. That issue may not be resolved until settled by a court with Kansas jurisdiction.

Fifth, there could well be efforts to amend state law concerning teacher rights next session.

For these reasons, KASB urges school leaders to be cautious in their reactions to teacher due process changes in HB 2506, and to seek advice before taking action regarding teacher negotiations or employment of tenured teachers.

After final resolution of this issue for the 2014 session, KASB legal staff will prepare a more definitive analysis of the legislation to guide school boards, and will provide regional training sessions to update KASB members on the final version of the bill. KASB members will also be asked to develop a position on the issue for future legislative sessions.

Please contact the KASB advocacy or legal staff with questions.

State Board hears about innovative districts, testing problems, fundraising

Although there was nothing in the statute that created them calling for such a meeting, the two superintendents of the recently selected innovative districts appeared at the Kansas State Board of Education meeting Tuesday. Dr. Randy Watson, McPherson USD 418, and Bev Mortimer, Concordia USD 333, reached out to the Board, which had strongly resisted the creation of the plan, and asked for both approval and cooperation. The two even suggested the Board and KSDE join them in moving ahead with the initiative.

The Board also received a report from the Center for Educational Testing and Evaluation (CETE) covering just shy of half of the testing window. The report covered not only some internal problems with accessing the test platforms but also the havoc created by outside attacks, called Distributed Denial of Service (DDOS). CETE reported that 25 percent of all assessments had been completed, but the pace of the last couple of days far exceeded that of earlier. Several districts have stated, after many failed testing attempts, they were not going to try to complete them. Several board members questioned even reporting assessment results because of the uncertainty of releasing incomplete data.

The Board also spent time discussing a narrow part of the federal food guidelines, specifically the sales of non-nutritious food items during the school day for fundraisers. Some board members, noting the widespread practice in some buildings and the incursion on local control, didn’t want to narrow the sales at all. After being told this was an untenable position, the board seemed to reluctantly agree to a position disallowing the practice in some buildings and an organization per semester.

The consent agenda included an item to dissolve the Leavenworth County Special Education Cooperative. A number of county superintendents were in attendance to show their support for the motion and stayed for the legislative report from Deputy Commissioner Dale Dennis. Mr. Dennis covered the exhaustive process the final appropriation bill went through before receiving final approval and the controversial policy changes that were included.
Don’t be a twit, get on the Twitter!

Sometime around 1990 I attended the National School Boards Association Technology Conference in Dallas. The vendor hall was filled with exciting new technology! I recall seeing a 20 pound Apple “portable” computer and IBM was touting their latest System 36 “minicomputer” which was about the size of a Smart Car and had less computing power than your grandpa’s flip phone.

But the seminal moment for me was when I got stuck talking to a salesman from a company called America Online. He was excitedly describing how one could sit in New York and write an electronic message to someone in California! It was free and instantaneous! As I am a technology visionary and savant, my answer was “Why wouldn’t I just pick up the phone and call?” Really? Electronic mail? It will never catch on.

About 10 years later as superintendent in Emporia, I recall visiting with new teachers every year at the beginning year. I would ask them how many had email accounts. In the early years, a smattering of nerds would raise their hands, but after about three years it became a dumb question to ask.

Today we live in a world defined by Moore’s Law. Computing power is increasing exponentially and its power in communication moves equally fast. Living in a house with two teenage girls I have seen Facebook, Vine, Snapchat, YikYak and a host of other social media come and go. One thing that seems to have some staying power is Twitter.

Because we have established that I am a visionary when it comes to technology, I never really saw the power of Twitter. I used it to share and receive news and journal articles and for entertainment value.

After the last weekend of the Legislative Session, I realized the true power of Twitter. It excels as an event-based social media tool. I should have noticed this before because I have watched twitter during KU basketball games to see Fake Jeff Withey’s comments, during the last episode of Breaking Bad to share an experience with like-minded fanboys, and while watching Chief’s games to share the pain. Twitter is about being there even when you can’t be there.

The last weekend of the Legislative Session, even though I was 800 miles away from Topeka, I was up at 2:00 a.m. with all of the rest of those political junkies, sharing in the experience with those who were actually there. It was fascinating to watch and learn. Rumors started, peaked, and ended or became truth in waves that might last minutes or even seconds. Lobbyists and journalists interact with regular folks, exchanging information and sorting through the noise to develop a picture of what is really happening. (Special shout out to @tallman_mark and @tomkrebs1.)

Twitter allows everyone to be part of the action, see different views and perspectives, and share their own.

“There’s no chance that the iPhone is going to get any significant market share.”

Steve Ballmer, USA Today, 04.30.07

By the time the newspaper is printed, it is old news. Skeptics like to quote Michael Scott from the office who said, “Wikipedia is the best thing ever. Anyone, in the world, can write anything they want about any subject. So you know you are getting the best possible information.” Michael’s ironic statement fails to take into account that journalists are now some of the most active voices on Twitter, and their reputations depend on accuracy in tweets as much as in print or on the air.

I am a convert, and new converts are the worst about proselytizing, but school leaders need to embrace social media. Facebook, Twitter, and whatever kids are using now that I haven’t even heard of are essential to communicating both during “events” and for general information. So get on the Google machine, search up The Twitter, start yourself an account, and get in the game.

Kansas districts receive NSBA, partner awards

Congratulations to Topeka USD 501! The district was selected as a winner in the 2014 Magna Awards program sponsored by NSBA’s American School Board Journal. We are also pleased that Seaman USD 345 received an honorable mention. The Magna Awards, supported by Sodexo, recognize districts for outstanding programs that advance student learning and encourage community involvement in schools.

KASB also congratulates Blue Valley USD 229 for being named a Large Student Population District Category top 10 winner in the 10th Annual Digital School Districts Survey by the Center for Digital Education and NSBA. The survey showcases exemplary school boards’ and districts’ use of technology to govern the district, communicate with students, parents and the community, and improve district operations.

Learn more about the awards and winning programs at www.nsba.org.

STEM Innovation Award deadline is June 1

Westar Energy, in partnership with KASB and KSDE, has announced the Westar Energy STEM Innovation Award to promote STEM education and research in Kansas public schools. Two $3,000 awards will be given to educators who best demonstrate innovation in project-based programs that increase student interest in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields applied to electrical energy.

To apply go to kasb.org/Westarstem.
2014 Summer Advocacy & Legal Tour

Coming to a part of Kansas near you! Watch your mail, email, KASB publications and social media for more information in the coming weeks.