Abilene community buy-in solidifies progress for bond issue, financial literacy program

Two years ago, Abilene USD 435 officials engaged community leaders to find out what direction to take. They received a lot of input, interest and investment that is guiding the district’s actions on a daily basis.

“We have people really interested in education who said, ‘This is where we needed to be.’ Young, old, retired, business people — these leaders took over and got the information out to the community,” said Gregg Noel, president of the Abilene school board.

Approximately 70 people from the community provided recommendations for the district.

Brian Jordan, KASB’s assistant executive director of leadership services, along with district officials helped organize that information into what became Abilene Public Schools’ strategic plan.

The plan includes five major “pillars” that focus on student development, facilities and technology, community engagement, learning partnerships and professional learning and improvement.

The process led to a proposed $24.2 million bond proposal. Input from the community leaders “kept bumping it up,” Noel said. Ultimately, he said the attitude was “let’s just go for what the needs are.”

Last year, voters approved the bond issue by a wide margin and launched a district-wide renovation and building plan for the district, which has approximately 1,600 students.

But members of the community weren’t focused only on bricks and mortar, said Abilene Superintendent Dr. Denise Guy.

They felt the district could help students hone their real-world skills, such as creating a personal budget, balancing a checkbook, applying for a loan and making sensible financial decisions.

So, the district added a financial literacy course as a requirement to graduate high school.

Guy said the district, prompted from community input, also installed a “positive action” curriculum that provides life-coping skills. In addition, every student has received an iPad that is used as a tool to help them learn.

Noel said community support and Guy’s leadership have paved the way for progress in the face of state funding problems and uncertainty about the school finance formula.

“It does take leadership and strategic planning and looking into the future and challenging ourselves. I feel like we are clicking on all cylinders right now,” he said. ~Scott Rothschild, srothschild@kasb.org

Students ponder over an assignment using classroom iPads purchased as part of Abilene USD 435’s one-to-one initiative this year.

Schools included in government efficiency study

School districts will be analyzed as part of a state government efficiency study, according to language by the Legislative Budget Committee.

The Legislature has set aside $3 million to hire a private company to conduct a comprehensive analysis of state government.

Budget leaders are putting together the request for proposal for contractors to bid on the project.

KASB welcomed the analysis and urged legislators to take a comprehensive look at audit recommendations. “We understand the Legislature’s interest in studying school funding as part of a study of efficiency in state government. We urge them to focus the study on improving results, not just cutting spending,” KASB said.

A link to KASB’s full statement can be found here www.kasb.org/wcm/_NB/15/NB0804d.aspx

The Legislative Budget Committee, which is composed of the chairs, vice chairs and ranking minority members of the House and Senate budget committees, worked on the RFP.

State Sen. Ty Masterson, R-Andover, and chairman of the Senate Ways and Means Committee, proposed language aimed at ensuring the analysis would look into the budgets and operations of school districts.

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Kids data provides challenges for schools

Kansas fared OK in a recent report on the well-being of children, but some trends related to poverty will impact student success and give educators more to think about before KASB’s Invitational School Finance Summit on Aug. 28, in Topeka.

The annual Kids Count Data Book by the Annie E. Casey Foundation closely mirrors recent KASB research, including a report on student outcomes and new analyses that are being released over the course of several weeks leading up to the summit. Here is a link to the report: www.aecf.org/resources/the-2015-kids-count-data-book/

“The issues of children’s health and poverty are inexorably linked to their achievement in the classroom and must be considered in the school funding debate,” said Mark Tallman, KASB’s associate executive director for advocacy. “The Kids Count data and KASB research should help policy makers when developing a new school finance formula,” Tallman said.

The current block grant school funding system was designed to be temporary until officials could write a new permanent formula.

KASB officials say they hope the Invitational School Finance Summit will bring educators and legislators together to start the conversations needed to build a sound funding system for Kansas.

The Kids Count data shows that in overall child well-being, Kansas ranked 15th out of the 50 states and the District of Columbia in 2015, the same spot as last year. In education measurements, Kansas ranked 12th, which was also the same ranking as last year’s report.

KASB has put together the Kids Count data at this URL: www.kasb.org/KidsCountOverview.

Kansas Action for Children, which provides state-level data for the report, noted that while Kansas ranked above average in many areas, since the Great Recession Kansas has had one of the largest percentage increases in the country of children living in poverty.

This raises concerns in education because generally a greater percentage of children from poverty will need additional assistance in school, and this requires additional funding. For example, Kansas in 2013 (the latest statistics available) had higher rates

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Members of the Emergency Safety Intervention Task Force recently held their first meeting and raised numerous questions about a new law regulating the use of restraint and seclusion on school children.

“All of us have the same interest, keeping our students and staff safe. We have different positions on doing that,” said Dr. Joan Robbins, director of special education at Blue Valley USD 229.

The 17-member task force was established by House Bill 2170 and has been charged with studying and reviewing the use of emergency safety interventions, or ESI, and making recommendations to the Legislature on or before Jan. 20, 2016.

The task force elected Jim Porter, a member of the State Board of Education, as its chairman. Porter is a Republican from Fredonia and retired school superintendent.

The task force elected as vice chairman, Rocky Nichols, who is executive director of the Disability Rights Center of Kansas and a former Democratic legislator from Topeka.

In addition to establishing the task force, HB 2170 made several significant changes on when and how a student could be restrained or secluded and how schools must handle complaints from parents if they believe their child was improperly restrained or secluded.

The law, which took effect June 4, states that, “Emergency safety interventions shall be used only when a student presents a reasonable and immediate danger of physical harm to such student or others with the present ability to effect such physical harm.” The law also requires that, if a student is subjected to ESI, the student’s parent or emergency contact person be notified the same day.

Members of the task force raised many questions on how educators would determine whether a student is posing a danger, how to address confidentiality issues, what constituted an ESI incident, and what counted as notification to a parent.

Nichols said he believed schools were under-reporting use of ESI, but Robbins said she believed schools were over-reporting to ensure they weren’t violating the law.

The Kansas State Board of Education is considering proposed regulations to implement the new law, but state Rep. John Rubin, R-Shawnee, who was one of the main proponents of the legislation, said he believed the specific language of the statute should be used in the regulations.

Rubin said he planned to contact State Attorney General Derek Schmidt and the Kansas Department of Administration to see if that could be done.

Laura Jurgensen, an attorney with the Kansas Department of Education, said the department has been advised by the department of administration that regulations can’t be exactly the same as the statute, but she added that the department would comply with whatever the attorney general and department of administration ultimately decided.

Questions or comments regarding the Emergency Safety Interventions law and regulations or potential issues for changes can be directed to task force member Sarah Loquist, KASB attorney, at sloquist@kasb.org or by phone at 800-432-2471. ~Scott Rothschild, srothschild@kasb.org

USA|Kansas has moved in with KASB on Arrowhead Road

“Family” has moved in with KASB.

United School Administrators of Kansas recently left its downtown digs to headquarter out of the KASB building at 1420 SW Arrowhead Road in Topeka.

“This will put us more in the center of organizational activities,” said G.A. Buie, executive director of USA|Kansas, who also noted the KASB facility hosts numerous meetings.

Buie, who has spent 24 years in education, said he would like USA|Kansas, KASB and other education-related groups to work more closely. “If we don’t unite and work together, the people who would love to see education fail are going to win,” he said.

USA|Kansas is comprised of members of 10 school administration associations and represents more than 2,000 administrators statewide. The organization has three employees and contracts with three more.

USA|Kansas moved into the former insurance offices of KASB and the KASB insurance division moved up to newly formed office space on the third floor. ~Scott Rothschild, srothschild@kasb.org
Each July, Kansas school boards receive reports from their superintendents on the unencumbered cash balance of specific funds as of July 1. As districts struggle with tough choices as budgets get adopted over the next month, questions are expected to be raised about whether cash balances are too high.

Districts have cash balances for three major reasons. The first is to have money on hand to pay expenses that come due before the income to pay for those expenses arrives. This is called “cash flow.”

It is similar to individuals who need money in their checking account at the end of the month to cover rent or a house payment due at the first of the month before the next payday. That doesn’t mean the person ended the month with “extra” money. Likewise, school districts need money on hand in areas like special education and food service at the start of the year to begin operating until state, federal and local revenues such as student fees come in.

The second reason for cash balances is if income turns out to be less than expected, or expenses run higher than budgeted. This is called having money for contingencies.

For an individual, that means keeping extra money on hand in case of working fewer hours or receiving smaller commissions than planned, or having an unplanned expense. For school districts, it means state aid might be reduced mid-year (as happened last spring).

The third reason for cash balances is to allow for planned expenses in the future without borrowing. For individuals, this might mean saving for a vacation or home improvement. For school districts, it means building up funds for a new school bus, roof repair or textbook purchase.

Critics of school district balances have noted the total amount at the start of the year on July 1 has increased significantly, from about $1.16 billion in 2006 to $1.71 billion last year. However, as a percentage of total school district expenditures, cash balances increased from approximately 25 percent of expenditures prior to 30 percent during and following the economic recession of 2008 through 2010, and has been declining since 2011. (Cash balances and total expenditures for 2015 have not yet been released by the state.)

School district balances accelerated at exactly the same time when districts faced delays in state aid payments, reductions in state funding levels and general uncertainty over future funding. In fact, the Kansas Senate passed a resolution specifically encouraging districts to build up reserves to address the revenue when federal economic stimulus funding ended in 2011. That is exactly what happened statewide.

The facts are: school districts have actually been cutting cash balances compared to budgets, school balances are actually lower than comparable state balances, and districts continue to face uncertainty in state revenues.

The Legislature has recognized much of the money in district cash balances cannot be used for regular operating purposes. In fact, school districts have about 30 different “funds” established by the Legislature to allow tracking of how school districts spend their money and make sure it is spent for appropriate purposes.

Over 70 percent of cash balances in school district funds are essentially restricted because they are raised from special mill levies, federal funds or student fees, or are required for special education programs or insurance reserves.

However, in recent years the Legislature has given districts more flexibility in shifting money from special funds to general operations, beginning with Senate Bill 111 in 2012. The largest is the contingency reserve fund, but there are about a dozen other “operating” funds where the Legislature has allowed more flexible use.

Like total cash balances compared to total expenditures, the money in these flexible funds increased as a percentage of state and local operating budgets in the late 2000s, but has started to decline.

July 1 cash balances in school district flexible funds were about 6 percent of the combined general and supplemental general (or local option budget) fund budgets in 2006 through 2008, rose to around 10 percent in 2011 and 2012, and dropped back to 9 percent last year.

By comparison, the state of Kansas is supposed to have an ending balance of 7.5 percent in the State General Fund, although this requirement is frequently not followed. The ending balance acts as a kind of contingency reserve for the state, but in order to manage its own cash flow needs, the state each year has to borrow from other state funds using what are called “certificates of indebtedness.” However, these certificates must be repaid by the end of the fiscal year.

The combination of ending balance plus certificates of indebtedness has never been less than 12 percent of the state general fund since 2006, which means the state’s cash flow and contingency funds are higher as a percentage of budget than school district flexible funds for the same purpose.

The current projection for the state general fund is it will end the current fiscal year with a balance of $67 million, or 1.1 percent - assuming the Governor makes an additional $50 million in spending cuts. This means if revenues are just 1.1 percent below estimates, the state will face a revenue shortfall which could require cuts in spending, including school district state aid. Last year, state aid was reduced by $50 million in the middle of the year.

The choice local school boards face: whether their budget plans should reduce cash balances to avoid spending cuts now, or hold on to those balances in case the state makes additional reductions.
School board meeting checklist

KASB recently hosted two Board Leadership Workshops. New board presidents and vice-presidents have been learning about the important role they play in conducting a highly focused and productive board meeting. Many great questions related to procedures and operating principles have been shared and discussed. Most of the questions revolve around these simple guidelines so we thought it would be appropriate to share with all board members to provide a quick refresher.

- Analyze your board agenda items.
  - Consent agenda for routine items?
  - Notation for each item with expectations and recommendations from the superintendent?
  - Is there a place for public comment on the agenda?
  - Do you start the meeting on time?
  - Is it evident that all board members are prepared? Board packets are opened and read before the meeting.
  - Is there a high trust level with employees? Use administrative/staff reports as an opportunity to ask questions and become more informed; treating all employees as professionals.
  - How would an outsider rate the performance (behavior) of the board?
  - Are there agenda items that should be handled administratively? Is the board micromanaging?
- Is the president running the meeting effectively? Is the board focused on the district vision and mission?
- Are you prepared for conflict that may surface? There could be a “surprise.”
- Are there items that surface under “hidden agendas”? Another “surprise”?
- Do you clearly identify time limits to groups making presentations?
- Do board members ask questions in the meeting that should have been addressed prior to the meeting?
- Do all members feel they are valued and contributing to the board?

KASB workshop helps board members become better leaders

Nearly 50 school officials from across the state recently attended a KASB Board Leadership Workshop to learn how to improve their schools through collaboration and community engagement.

“The more knowledge you have helps you become a better leader,” said Lynette Turney, who is president of the Belle Plaine USD 357 School Board.

Brian Field, president of the Geary County USD 475 School Board, said the leadership training conducted by KASB provided important information on legal and ethical issues that boards face regularly.

The all-day session, led by Dr. Brian Jordan, assistant executive of leadership services for KASB, focused on how to run an efficient and effective board, evaluate the superintendent, present the district’s message and advocate for schools.

Both Turney and Field agreed that being a school board member continues to change.

“You’re not just an elected official, you’re representing the community,” Field said.

He said social media has made school board members more accessible.

Turney said Belle Plaine is having great successes in academics and community.

“The challenge is in the unknown of what our governor may be presenting to us,” as a new school finance plan, Turney said. Brownback and his allies in the Legislature have implemented a two-year temporary block grant for schools with the intention being to put together a permanent school finance system after that time period.

Turney and Field said talking with school officials from other parts of the state and sharing their concerns, challenges and solutions helps them become better board members. ~Scott Rothschild, srothschild@kasb.org

Education officials discuss governance issues at the recent Board Leadership Workshop at KASB.
Proposed settlement reached in Westar rate case

Most Kansas school districts would see a 4.1 percent rate increase in utility bills under a proposed settlement reached in the Westar Energy rate case, officials said. The proposal represents a significant reduction in Westar’s original request of a 9.8 percent rate increase.

David Springe, consumer counsel of the Citizens’ Utility Ratepayer Board, which advocates on behalf of residential and small commercial ratepayers, said the settlement was a good deal.

“They (Westar) gave up a lot of money,” Springe said. In addition, the agreement would lower shareholder profit to 9.35 percent. Westar had initially sought 10 percent.

The agreement between Westar and staff of the Kansas Corporation Commission was scheduled to be presented to the KCC on Aug. 17. The three-member KCC has until Oct. 28 to rule on the proposal.

Attorneys representing KASB and Wichita USD 259, the largest school district in Kansas, have recommended approval of the settlement, which is approximately half of Westar’s original rate filing.

Earlier this year, Westar sought a $152 million increase for all ratepayers, which included a 9.8 percent increase to its approximately 250 school district customers.

KASB intervened in the rate case, asking the KCC to reduce or eliminate the proposed rate increase for school districts.

KASB Associate Executive Director Mark Tallman explained state aid for school district operating budgets was reduced during the last school year and will be frozen at the level for the next two years under the block grant system. He said any increase in utility costs will require districts to shift funding from support for instruction and student success.

The proposed settlement would reduce the original rate request to $78 million from $152 million. Of that $78 million increase, about $2.1 million would be paid by schools.

Most households would see a $5 to $7 per month increase — 5.3 percent — under the plan.

Most of the revenue from the increased rates would go toward required environmental upgrades at the La Cygne coal-fired plant.

~Scott Rothschild, srothschild@kasb.org

2015 Fall Summit schedule announced

Six summits, held in conjunction with USA-Kansas and KSSA starting in late September and running through the first two weeks in October will focus on critical issues in education by bringing together education leaders, policy makers and experts from all across Kansas to share information, ideas, the latest research and what’s on the horizon for Kansas education.

■ 9/29/15 Sublette Service Center
■ 9/30/15 Oakley Service Center
■ 10/01/15 Salina/Webster Conf. Center
■ 10/06/15 Olathe TBA
■ 10/07/15 Girard Greenbush
■ 10/08/15 Clearwater Service Center

Watch your KASB communications for more information and registration details.

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Governmental Efficiency Study continued from page 1

“The USD’s (unified school districts) makes sense to me. It’s half our budget,” Masterson said.

Masterson, one of the authors of the temporary block grant school finance system, said the study may provide information needed to develop a permanent school finance system.

State Sen. Laura Kelly, D-Topeka, and ranking minority member on the Ways and Means panel, however, said she was concerned the efficiency study would suggest cuts but not the impact of those cuts on parents and students.

But other LBC members said they wanted a wide-ranging study. “I think we should cast the net very broad and winnow it down,” said Sen. Jim Denning, R-Overland Park, who is vice chair of Ways and Means.

Masterson’s proposed language was approved. It says that the first objective of the study is to “Conduct a comprehensive diagnostic analysis of the state’s budget, or state authorized entities’ budgets, to identify business processes, spending trends and outliers.”

House Appropriations Chairman Ron Ryckman Jr., R-Olathe, said he hoped to launch the study Oct. 1, with preliminary results completed by January.

Last year, schools were analyzed by the K-12 Student Performance and Efficiency Commission and in 2012, Gov. Brownback appointed a School Efficiency Task Force. In addition, the Legislative Post Audit Division conducts efficiency audits of three school districts each year. ~Scott Rothschild, srothschild@kasb.org

KIDS Data continued from page 2

of poverty, children whose parents lacked secure employment and teens not in school and not working, than in 2008. Kansas also increased in rates of children in single-parent families, children in families where the household head lacks a high school diploma and children living in high-poverty areas.

The Kids Count education data showed that in four major categories, Kansas improved in two — the percentage of fourth-graders proficient in reading and high school students graduating on time — worsened in one area with the percentage of children attending pre-school decreasing and remained the same in the percentage of eighth-graders proficient in math.

The Kansas Education Report Card for 2015, which was released earlier this year, shows that overall Kansas ranks eighth in educational achievement, which covers a broad spectrum of measurements. And each state that ranks ahead of Kansas spends more per student than Kansas; some of those states spend much more.

In fact, Kansas ranks ahead of 17 states that spend more per pupil. Here is the web address for the report card: www.kasb.org/KSEdAchievementRptCard.

Further KASB research has identified Kansas’ peer states in demographics and numerous other variables. Of those seven peer states, five spend more than Kansas per pupil and none have better student outcomes.

Here is the link to the peer states comparisons: http://kasbresearch.blogspot.com/2015/07/knowing-your-peers-revisited.html. ~Scott Rothschild, srothschild@kasb.org

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August/September At-A-Glance

**August**
- 26 Certified Staff Eval Workshop, Topeka
- 27 McREL Principal Eval Training, Clearwater
- 28 School Finance Summit
- 29 KASB Board of Directors, Legislative Committee & Workers Compensation Fund Trustees Meetings

**September**
- 1 McREL Principal Eval Training, Topeka
- 2 Deadline to Declare Candidacy for President-Elect Designee
- 7 Labor Day/KASB Office Closed
- 8-9 Kansas State Board of Ed Meeting, Topeka
- 9 School Safety and Security Workshop, Topeka
  McREL Principal Eval Training, Greenbush
- 10 New Superintendent’s Day with KASB
- 12 KASB Nominating Committee Meeting, Topeka
- 16 Certified Staff Eval Workshop, Sublette

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