New day for Kansas education

How Kansas schools are using new resources
The Kansas Association of School Boards traveled the state this fall for regional meetings and school visits to promote a “New Day” for Kansas public education and to listen to what educators are doing to increase student success.

We returned to Topeka with a much greater appreciation of the challenges schools are facing and the commitment of those who are meeting those challenges day in and day out.

What we found was a focus on reinvesting, redesigning and getting results.

After years of falling behind inflation and other states in funding, Kansas schools are reinvesting new resources to restore programs and people cut since 2009 and adding new programs to help students, families and communities. Education funding is an investment in the state’s future.

Each of the 10 regional meetings featured presentations from school leaders who are part of the State Board of Education’s Mercury or Gemini school redesign projects, or are implementing other new strategies to improve student success.

And schools are going to measure the results through the State Board’s Kansans Can vision; the new accreditation system and post-secondary success.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

A new day for Kansas education

- Reinvest, Redesign, Results
  KASB 2018 Legislative platform 4-5

- Region 1
  featuring Blue Valley, Basehor-Linwood, Kansas City, Leavenworth, Olathe & Shawnee Mission 6-11

- Region 2
  featuring Ottawa & Paola 12-13

- Region 3
  featuring Parsons & Chanute 14-15

- Region 4
  featuring Abilene & Manhattan-Ogden 16-17

- Region 5
  featuring McPherson, Smoky Valley & Fairfield 18-20

- Region 6
  featuring Wichita, Wellington & El Dorado 21-23

- Region 7
  featuring Beloit & Twin Valley 24-25

- Region 8
  featuring Pratt 26

- Region 9
  featuring Goodland & Colby 27-28

- Region 10
  featuring Ulysses & Liberal 29-30

- President’s Perspective
  School funding is key to the future of Kansas 31

- Gannon V
  KASB summary of response to Gannon V ruling 32
Reinvest, Redesign, Results: Continuing Improvement in Kansas Student Success

(Text of KASB Resolution to the 2018 Kansas Legislature adopted December 3, 2017.)

The Kansas Supreme Court’s ruling in Gannon V is an opportunity to take the next steps to reinvest in Kansas K-12 education, redesign schools to help more students succeed, and improve measurable results for high school completion, postsecondary participation and workforce skills as defined by the Kansas State Board of Education’s Kansas Can Vision.

The school finance formula in SB 19 has been accepted by the Court. The Legislature should now address the Court’s adequacy issues by working with the State Board of Education and local school boards to develop a long-term plan based on the goals Kansas needs to achieve and a credible estimate of the resources required to reach those goals. Such a plan would involve a partnership between the three institutions with constitutional responsibility for K-12 education in Kansas, as well as higher education, other state agencies and local communities.

The Kansas constitution mandates public schools and other institutions to provide for “intellectual, educational, vocational and scientific improvement.” The Court is asking the Legislature to base funding on evidence of the cost of that improvement, using seven student “capacities” the Court and Legislature have approved.

Evidence of cost of adequate funding

The Court noted that two previous studies commissioned by the Legislature and the recommendations of the State Board of Education indicated that more funding would be needed than provided this year and next. We believe there are at least three other indicators of adequate funding.

First, historical patterns of educational funding and outcomes in Kansas.

Second, funding in other states with higher outcomes than Kansas.

Third, the cost of specific programs that have demonstrated success.

Funding and outcomes in Kansas. For decades, educational attainment has been rising, which has provided more Kansans with higher income and reduced poverty. More Kansans are completing high school and postsecondary education than ever before. These trends must continue, based on projections showing an increasing percentage of jobs will require education beyond high school, from technical training to bachelor’s degrees and beyond.

For decades, Kansas has supported this improvement by funding increases that exceed the rate of inflation most years, enhancing programs to help more students reach higher levels. However, Kansas K-12 funding has fallen behind the rate of inflation from 2009 until the current year. Likewise, total K-12 funding as a percentage of total state personal income of Kansans remains far below the average level of the past 25 years, even after additional funding.

Successful states. The most successful states in the nation, based on multiple measures of educational outcomes and attainment, provided significantly higher per pupil funding, even including the additional funding provided by the 2017 Legislature. Of significant concern is that Kansas funding per pupil has been falling compared to other states — especially the most successful states — at the same time Kansas outcomes have falling behind other states.

The most successful states have several common characteristics: high teacher salaries, more instructional staff and smaller pupil teacher ratios, more support staff, and smaller average schools and districts.

Targeted programs. Finally, Kansas districts have had success with specific targeted programs, such as expanded preschool, reading interventions, AVID, Jobs for Americas Graduates and many more. However, funding for these programs remains limited, far below the number of students who could benefit.
Recommendations

KASB recommends the following proposals to improve student success and comply with the Gannon decision:

- Attract and retain qualified, effective educators and support staff
- Provide foundational (base) funding, adjusted for previous and future inflationary increases and reflecting higher achieving and peer states, that will allow districts to recover lost purchasing power of salaries and benefits and provide compensation competitive with other states and professions. Consider setting a goal benchmarked to those measures.
- Fully fund the state professional development and mentoring programs to improve teaching and implement school redesign.
- Address higher education affordability for teacher education, such as tuition, scholarships, loan forgiveness.
- Continue efforts to develop opportunities for school districts to cooperatively improve health insurance benefits or reduce costs without reducing benefits. Any savings from such program should be retained by individual districts.
- Give all students opportunity to succeed
- Continue to increase funding for universal preschool programs, especially for low-income students, including Parents As Teachers; early Head Start, state funded preschool; ensure stable funding for early childhood programs currently funded by Children Initiative’s Fund (tobacco settlement).
- Evaluate necessary funding levels for high risk students (foster care, trauma, homeless, crisis and mental health issues) and consider additional weighting factors or aid programs.
- Ensure adequate number of school counselors, social workers, and psychologists to address social and emotion issues.
- Fully fund special education at the statutory level of 92% of statewide excess cost; increase federal funding.
- Support further initiatives in addressing student social, mental and physical health needs, in both school and community settings.
- Prepare students for postsecondary education and career success
- Address connections and coordination between the K-12 and postsecondary systems; specifically issues such as acceptance of non-traditional high school credit, qualified admissions requirements, credit transfer and higher education service areas to ensure postsecondary institutions accommodate redesigned schools.
- Consider further refinements in tracking of postsecondary success, such as graduation rates beyond four years; on-the-job training and apprentice programs; other measures of workforce skills.
- Ensure an adequate number of counselors or career advocates to provide effective use of individual plans of study and assist in planning for postsecondary transition, especially for first generation college students.
- Support higher education funding to maintain affordability; specifically, fully fund the cost of tuition for high school students in postsecondary career technical education programs; address cost of fees, tools and assessments; and consider funding for high school students in concurrent enrollment academic courses.
- Explore incentives, such as tax credits, for corporate and individual contributions to public school programs.
- Support effective school operations
- Support continued adequate, equitable, stable and reliable funding.
- Address state and local tax policies which are resulting in low revenue growth.
- Maximize local flexibility in using funds, including repeal or modification of the “65 percent for instruction” statutory goal that excludes credit support for students and teachers.
- Provide incentives for cross-district collaboration.
- Repeal or modify the statewide cap on bonded indebtedness to ensure districts can address capital infrastructure needs.
- Evaluate the impact of the new fall election cycle for local boards compared to disadvantages under school calendar.
Blue Valley partnership expands student mental health services

The Blue Valley USD 229 school district’s new mental health services partnership with Children’s Mercy Hospital is showing early signs of success. Assistant Superintendent Mark Schmidt says the district is committed to boosting student well-being as the state’s education vision shifts from focusing merely on test scores to a more holistic view of student achievement.

Like most across the state, the Kansas City-area district is grappling with increasing numbers of students who need emotional and social support.

“We’ve been hearing for years about students dealing with more anxiety as many districts equated test scores with success,” Schmidt said.

USD 229 established a mental health task force of teachers, administrators and school psychologists to gather data and conduct community interviews to identify strengths and service gaps. The task force learned that while the district’s suicide prevention protocol was viewed as a positive, students needed additional help. “Anxiety and depression were the number-one reason parents and students were requesting home-bound services,” Schmidt said.

The Blue Valley task force ultimately issued recommendations that included adding 19 social workers to existing mental health teams of counselors and school psychologists.

Given statewide education budget challenges, however, “we thought that was probably beyond what we could expect to accomplish,” Schmidt said. Fortunately for the school district, Children’s Mercy Hospital contacted USD 229 Superintendent Todd White and asked for collaboration opportunities. “When your missions and goals match up, you can work through any barriers,” Schmidt said.

The partnership allowed the district to hire the recommended 19 social workers and the newly-augmented teams were in place at the beginning of 2017-18. In the first two weeks of school, 230 students received mental health services and teams held 350 parent meetings. “One principal said a social worker saved a student’s life; that made the program worth it,” Schmidt said.

USD 229 is finding its additional social workers use their training and Children’s Mercy’s wider connections to help students and families negotiate a wide range of tough situations.

“A family with two students lost their home recently. The social worker was able to get the family into a shelter, get them reduced fees and transportation to and from school, and made sure all the services worked together. We simply would not have been able to do this previously,” Schmidt says.

Schmidt attributes the statewide increase in student social and emotional problems to a number of factors. He says students are receiving fewer out of school services because of social service funding shortfalls; without those services, kids bring greater levels of crisis into the school building.

While USD 229 was fortunate to use the Children’s Mercy partnership to flesh out its social work staff, Schmidt says the recent increase in state education funding can help school districts across Kansas do more to help their students.”
Olathe school leaders support classroom focus beyond tests

The new superintendent of Olathe USD 233, the state’s second-largest school district, says Kansas is at a pivot point between emphasizing narrowly-focused standardized testing and creating well-rounded students who can thrive in the workplace and are good citizens.

Dr. John Allison, the Kansas superintendent of the year who moved this year from Wichita, the state’s most populous district, applauds the push by the State Board of Education and Commissioner Randy Watson to shift from “test preparation” to broader skills, but says the state will face challenges in implementing the vision.

One challenge is that the current generation of teachers hasn’t been trained to make the change; the high-stakes testing environment inspired by No Child Left Behind required a hyper-focus on assessment results. Another is that in an area like the greater Kansas City area and its growing suburbs on both sides of the state line, test scores are emphasized as an easy – if simplistic – way to compare school districts when parents are deciding where to live. A third is that many parents still place on emphasis on traditional college preparation.

Olathe has several initiatives to broaden its educational focus. Every high school offers students choices among “21st Century Learning Academies” which offer opportunities to explore 15 career areas in their area high school or anywhere else in the district. These programs, ranging from business finance to engineering to sports medicine and exercise science, have a built-in focus on 21st century skills or “soft skills” for employment and citizenship.

The academies enroll around 20 percent to 25 percent of Olathe high school students.

Allison said the relationship between K-12 school districts, community colleges and technical colleges has changed for the better, with postsecondary institutions more willing to look at scheduling and other ways to incentivize high school students to attend.

Olathe is also trying to promote instruction in soft skills in the lower grades, including use of the “Leader in Me” program from Franklin Covey. Allison calls the program “phenomenal,” but notes the expense to implement it in schools can be a barrier.

Allison cites two major challenges to K-12 education: attracting and retaining teachers and the impact of student poverty and mental health challenges.

Although districts in Johnson County have advantages over many areas of the state like attractive urban/suburban amenities, they also face competition from other states, especially across the state line in Missouri, which has been catching up with Kansas in salaries and now offers a better retirement system for young teachers, Allison says.

For students, Allison says the “destruction” of mental health services in communities has created much deeper problems for public schools, which are required to serve all children regardless of their physical and mental health. Districts see students with far more serious mental health and behavior issues, at much younger ages.
Educators at Basehor-Linwood USD 458 are working hard to tailor the district’s schools to meet the high standards of parents and students.

“People moving here expect good facilities and a quality education,” said Superintendent David Howard. And many people are moving to this district of 2,435 students in southern Leavenworth County with enrollment growing by more than 100 students this year.

The rapid growth has meant the district was hurt by the funding freeze from the block grant finance system that was later declared unconstitutional by the Kansas Supreme Court.

“We are very thankful to get off the block grant,” Howard said. During the 2017 legislative session, the Legislature approved a new school finance formula and increased funding by $200 million for the current school year.

Basehor-Linwood is in the midst of redesigning its schools, having joined the state’s Gemini project of altering schools to reflect the Kansans Can statewide mission of leading the world in the success of each student.

The launch date for the Gemini schools is 2020. Howard and Assistant Superintendent Sherry Reeves say conversations are going on all the time with students, teachers, parents and the community on ways to make the schools better fit the needs of students.

The district has pathways for STEM, health care, including a CNA certificate program, and restaurant and event management. In the CNA classroom are “patients” Bob and Cat (Basehor-Linwood’s team name is the Bobcats).

The district just opened its new state-of-the-art CTE building, which stands for Careers. Training. Experience. The building includes a modern television studio, a student-run store and numerous classrooms and spaces custom-made for projects and collaboration. The $5 million, 20,000 square-foot building was part of a $16 million bond issue approved in 2015.

At the high school, students receive a 40-minute advisory period where they can eat lunch, work on projects, take make-up tests and meet with teachers. Administrators say the period teaches students how to budget their time while giving them the freedom to make their own decisions.

The district also is working to foster partnerships with businesses to form apprenticeships, job shadowing, internships and other ways to expose students to career opportunities. “We need to be tailoring what we do around kids, not adults,” Howard said.
Leavenworth proud of community ties

Leavenworth USD 453 has many initiatives in motion this year but one of the most visible was routing Leavenworth High School's fall 2017 homecoming parade through downtown Leavenworth.

It was the first time in years that the parade marched through downtown and represented another way the district is strengthening bonds with the community and local businesses.

Jake Potter, director of public relations for the district of approximately 3,800 students, says the district is proud of its diversity. Some graduates will go on to receive appointments to military academies while others are the first to graduate high school in their family.

The district has active alumni, close relationships with the business community and parent groups, and a supportive education foundation.

It is expanding technical education programs. For several years, three or four students each summer work as public relations interns for the district and help with social media, research and general communications.

Two of the district’s schools — David Brewer Elementary and Leavenworth High School — are part of the Gemini school redesign project. The goal is to “re-imagine what education is going to look like in future years, how we can make it more personal to each student, how we can embed more real world experiences that prepare them (students) for success as soon as they leave here,” Potter said.

Like many districts across the state, Potter said Leavenworth is trying to improve early childhood education and better meet the social and emotional needs of its students.
Shawnee Mission educators want students to find relevance in education

With the help of state educational leadership that is promoting innovation and flexibility, Shawnee Mission USD 512 leaders say they are seeking to help more students succeed in partnership with their community.

Interim Superintendent Kenny Southwick and Assistant Superintendent for Business Rick Atha say the district is changing how it operates to help all students succeed. “We had to make the commitment that ‘all’ really does mean all,” said Southwick.

Key to that goal is letting students find relevance in their studies.

One example is the district’s high-school-level Signature Programs that allow students to explore unique areas of study in preparation for specialized academic and future career opportunities, from culinary arts to medical health studies to law and public safety. Another is Project Lead the Way, which strengthens education in STEM areas (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) in schools. The program will be offered in every SMSD elementary school next year, and the district has one of the largest PLW programs in the nation, says Southwick.

Connecting students to a more in-depth study of their interests creates more engaged students. “Relevance makes rigor possible,” said Atha. “We are really preparing students for their 13th grade.”

The district also seeks to connect education to community workforce needs. “For example, we heard from our city leaders in the area that they couldn’t find enough firefighters, EMTs and policy officers, in terms of both applicants and diversity,” said Southwick. “We created Project Blue Eagle, which allows high school students to choose career strands in law enforcement, firefighting/EMT training or pre-law. They can leave high school certified as a firefighter or prepared to train for police service or further legal training.”

There are now 2,000 students taking at least intro-level courses in these programs, and the district has received donations of equipment and gear. It will retro-fit an old maintenance facility into a training center fire station with an ambulance bay, staffed by students.

Although long regarded as a suburban district serving an affluent population, the Shawnee Mission has experienced demographic changes in recent years, with growth in free lunch eligible students and English Language Learners. It has meant the district must focus on more challenging students without sacrificing opportunities for the most successful students.

Both Southwick and Atha highly praised their teachers and support staff for rising to this challenge.

To support teachers, the districts has offered flexibility in areas like professional development and parent teacher conferences. “We still have a parent teacher conference ‘day’ but we allow teachers to document time they spend contacting parents who may not attend that single event,” said Southwick. “It doesn’t make sense to act as though the only time you can talk about your child is one point in the year.”
As Kansas seeks to redesign schools to prepare more students for the workplace of the future, a massive effort to change the meaning of a high school diploma is already under way in Kansas City USD 500.

The fifth largest district in the state, with nearly 22,000 students, is phasing in a requirement that every high school graduate by 2021 (current ninth graders) must not only pass traditional course units for a diploma, but also complete one of seven endorsements:

- Completion of at least one full year of college (18-30 credit hours).
- Completion of an industry-recognized certificate or credential.
- A score of at least 21 on the ACT or 1060 on the SAT.
- Completion of the International Baccalaureate program or career-related program.
- Acceptance into the military.
- Completion of a qualified internship or industry-approved project.
- An approved plan of postsecondary transition.

Last year, over half of the district’s high school graduates had already met this standard, called Diploma Plus. It means that a KCK graduate has not only completed the “seat time” of academic courses required by the state, but has also demonstrated a level of preparation for college or career – or even completed a credential.

According to superintendent Dr. Cynthia Lane, the concept reflects the research indicating that over 70 percent of future jobs in Kansas will require more than a high school diploma. That is the foundation of the State Board of Education’s Kansans Can Vision. However, the planning for Diploma Plus was under way long before Kansans Can was adopted, backed by employers in the Kansas City community, including area chambers of commerce and the Wyandotte County Economic Development Council.

Transforming the district’s five high schools from traditional secondary schools to Diploma Plus Academies – supported by a $235 million bond issue remodeling and improving district schools – is a key part of the plan. Each high school will offer multiple “academies” based on career paths. Students will be able to select an academy reflecting their interest, either located in their residential attendance area or receive district transportation to any other high school program.

As a result, Lane explains, these programs will be present in every student’s high school experience, without having to go to a separate building.

While the academies are the culmination of the student’s school experience, the focus on blending academics with career focus really begins in the district’s preschool programs. “Our goal is to work with parents to help them envision a future for their children; and then to help students find their interests,” said Lane.

That focus on preparing for the future is present at each level. Elementary field trips include a career experience. Middle school includes project-based, hands-on learning, career exploration and visits to college and career sites. By eighth grade, students pick an academy, and begin developing “real world” experience in their career interests. For example, one high school includes a community health clinic, providing opportunities for students to study community health and nursing on site.

For a district like Kansas City, with often the highest levels of student poverty in the state, equipping more students with skills for employment – especially employment in higher-skills jobs with higher pay – is the only way out of poverty. Many students face extremely difficult home situations, and may well be the first in their family to attend postsecondary education.

“Schools must help students get out of poverty,” said Lane. “That also means helping the community as productive members of society. KCK wants to be involved in helping improve the state’s economy.”
Ottawa schools strive to prepare students for jobs and post-secondary

to help students break out of poverty through education, Ottawa USD 290 has fashioned partnerships with an area community college, county economic development council and local businesses, and voters who approved a $63.1 million bond issue to expand school facilities.

One initiative is the district’s C3 program, which combines district funding, a $20 per credit hour student fee and discounted tuition at Neosho Community College’s branch facility in Ottawa. It allows students to earn a two-year associate’s degree within one year of graduating high school – or less. Through dual enrollment in college courses, students can take 44 of 62 credits during regular high school hours, and the balance after graduation, over the summer or evenings.

In its second year, participation in the program jumped from 70 students to 174 this semester.

Some students enter their career directly after completing the program. For others, it provides a big start on a bachelor’s degree, saving students both time and tens of thousands of dollars in college tuition and living costs. “Parents are thrilled,” said Superintendent Jeanne Stroh, who stressed the program would be impossible without the cooperation of NCC.

The district and community college offered dual enrollment courses before the program was implemented, but cost limited participation. “One of the most heartbreaking things at enrollment was hearing parents say they couldn’t afford the costs of college courses, or only a small number,” said Assistant Superintendent Ryan Cobbs.

Like many districts dealing with a high number of low income students, Ottawa faces challenges in dealing with parents whose families have never been to college.

Schools begin working with parents in the earliest grades, helping them “dream” about what their children can accomplish.

The district has STEM programs in all three elementary schools, after-school programs, and is one of the Project Gemini districts in the redesign initiated by the Kansas State Department of Education.

Another partnership is with the Franklin County Development Council. The district works with local businesses to identify students for internships and work experience that can lead to a job as soon as the student graduates, and may lead to employer-paid postsecondary studies.

These efforts are keeping more students in the community and helping employers fill labor needs.

The bond issue allowed the district to meet another goal: creating more classroom space for lower class size. However, this couldn’t happen until the Legislature boosted state funding, giving the district resources to hire seven new elementary teachers and cut average class size from 25-29 to 14-21.

The bond issue also allowed the high school to add and equip six new science classrooms with labs and a performing arts center as well as student “think tanks,” “We are trying to make our high school more like a community college campus,” said Stroh.
Paola building strong school communities among students

Paola USD 368 is focused on helping students learn to work with and support each other, and at the same time explore a changing world.

For the district, it starts with a unique program for special education kindergartens, providing extra support for attend full day kindergarten.

To give elementary school teachers more planning time – and students more time focused on learning science and social studies – students are taught these subjects by teachers specialized in these subjects two hours per week, with hands-on units of study. Elementary principals say this ensures time for science and social studies is protected and emphasized.

Another district project is “Night at the Museum,” an activity to bring national culture and history awareness to elementary students. Teachers each year visit an historic city in the United States, then integrate the trip into instruction throughout the year. It culminates in a spring event that transforms the school into the city.

Students in grades 3 to 5 are also grouped across several grade levels, along with every school staff member, from teachers to custodians and cafeteria stuff, into “Panther Families.” Students and staff meet weekly to work on social skills, community building and development of the whole child.

Paola Middle School emphasizes science and technology exploration, with a STEM lab in its second year, after school technology clubs and activities, and opportunities to explore Photoshop, coding and more.

Students also produce podcasts on topics of interest to students and the community.

Another initiative is to address social, emotional and character issues by having the whole school reading and discussing the book: “Wonder,” a story of a student with facial deformities entering school for the first time.

Paola High School also features special efforts to help prepare students for their future, with both traditional academics and other “life skills.” Each Monday, students spend time on topics not taught in regular subject-area courses, but that most adults will need to know; such as how to apply for a car loan, or how to respond to a police officer during a traffic stop.

Like most districts, Paola has stepped up step career planning and encouraged more students to explore career and technical education.

The district touts the success of the one-to-one Chromebook program, which administrators say was successfully implemented in the past year with the help of careful planning.

Superintendent Judy Welter sees two major challenges. First, she says the number of students with social, emotional and mental health issues have soared. Second, Paola is concerned about a decline in available teachers, with fewer young people going into education and a shrinking pool of qualified applicants. The district used increased funding this year to boost salaries. Another strategy is developing an education career pathway to encourage high school students to consider teaching.

Paola elementary students meet each week in their Panther Family groups.
Building on the effective practices of a national Blue Ribbon School award for Chanute Elementary School in 2016, school leaders and educators are transforming how students are taught, graded and supported in the district.

Everything is focused on four key questions, said Chanute USD 413 superintendent Richard Proffitt: What do we want students to know? How do we know if they know it? What do we do if they DON’T know it? What do we do if they DO know it?

Teacher teams called Professional Learning Communities identify essential outcomes, called “need to knows,” at every grade level, based on what a student will need to be successful at the next level. “We want to make sure all students learn the essential outcomes,” said Proffitt.

Those outcomes are based on state standards, ACT test requirements and other key expectations. Teachers then prepare “rubrics” outlining what students are expected to know in each area. Students are regularly assessed for progress, and teachers can quickly personalize what they do for the students with either more support or enrichment.

Paired with the focus on rubrics for essential skills, Chanute has moved the use of standards-based grading from the elementary school to the middle and high schools. Proffitt acknowledges there is some controversy over the change, primarily from parents concerned about how the system will be received by colleges looking for traditional grade point averages for admission and scholarships. To address those concerns, the district uses a “conversion scale” to produce a standard GPA to report.

Chanute used increased state funding this year to improve teacher salaries and restore positions cut in recent years of stagnant funding. The district’s next big priority is expanding preschool programs.

Like many other districts, Proffitt says the biggest challenge to improved student success in the district is poverty. Over 60 percent of students are on free or reduced-price meals.

Chanute used some of its additional funding this year to expand its Communities in School (CIS) Program, which provides school-based staff to work with teachers to identify challenges students face in class or at home and coordinate with community partners to bring outside resources inside schools.

The district is also exploring participation in the Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG) program, which works in high schools to provide additional support to keep students from dropping out. Chanute would also like to provide more social workers and increase staff training in issues like trauma.

Serving students better means forming deeper relationships between teachers and school staff and students and families. For example, middle school students are grouped in “houses” with students from three grade levels. The student stays with that teacher for all three years, and the teacher is able to get to know those students and families, becoming advocate, not just an educator.

“The biggest problem is not poverty, but generational poverty,” said Proffitt. “These kids lack hope and expectations. We need to give them both.”
Parsons responds to challenging community and student needs

Parsons USD 503 is working to help its community respond to a series of economic and social challenges.

“We still need to get many kids ready for traditional college, but we need to have more focus on career tech programs that allow them to stay in town and meet our local labor needs,” said Parsons High School Principal Matt Rogers.

Parsons has lost a railroad and faced downsizing of an army ammunition plant, cutting jobs and incomes that haven’t been replaced and pushing more families into poverty. In addition, a cluster of local services, such as a state hospital, results in a high number of foster care students dealing with multiple childhood traumas.

“We have to deal with ACE’s – Adverse Childhood Experiences,” said Rogers. “These experiences keep the child’s brain from developing like it should.” That means school personnel must learn how to work with children whose behavior doesn’t always conform to expectations for a school setting.

Many students come from families where no one has been to college and felt a high school diploma was enough. Even a technical certificate or two-year degree seems out of reach, whether because of academic challenges, cost or the need to support the family.

However, that puts young high school graduates at a distinct disadvantage looking for work, as unskilled jobs disappear and those that remain pay less.

Parsons is trying to develop more career and technical courses, especially in partnership with the local community college, such as a new welding program. The district put a major focus on early childhood, including offering preschool to every student in the district. It has re-started its “grow you own teacher” program with the hope that local students may be more likely to return as teachers than those from other areas.

Other priorities include stressing the need to make school a safe environment for students, building relationships over time so students develop trust and respect, and encouraging programs like Jobs for America’s Graduates, Communities in Schools and Gear-Up. District leaders credit their community for strong support of the schools through business donations of money and equipment, multiple organizations trying to service special needs of children and adults, and partnerships with Labette County Community College.

There are struggles as well. As state funding fell behind inflation in recent years, the district has cut social workers, counselors and summer school to protect classroom teachers.

Despite obvious deep affection for their students, Rogers and Superintendent Linda Proehl says there are attitudes among many students that hinder academic advance: a culture of “instant gratification” that makes it hard to connect current efforts with long-term payoff and seeing school, family and friends as a “security blanket” that makes it uncomfortable to think about leaving for college or a different career path.
Abilene educators follow priorities set in community strategic plan

A strategic plan developed by the Abilene USD 435 community in 2013 has the district poised to enter the state’s new accreditation system and focus on individual student needs.

A community engagement process five years ago, assisted by the KASB Leadership Services department, identified goals that “amazingly enough, were very similar to the state’s road map” for Kansans Can and the accreditation system beginning this year, said Superintendent Denise Guy. That has allowed the district to slide into “year four” of the new, staggered accreditation system, because so much preliminary work had already been done.

If one thing defines the vision of both Abilene and the Kansans Can vision, it is that academics alone are not enough. Whether called behaviors, character traits, life or social skills, these non-academic issues have been firmly joined with reading and writing as part of the basics all students need to succeed.

Abilene’s school leaders say that is what the community – parent, employers and others – believes is needed. It also lines up with results of the State Board of Education’s statewide listening tour and surveys two ago – an overwhelming emphasis on the need to emphasize life and employment skills.

Those demands are increasing at a time when districts across the state report growing numbers of students come to school with significant social, mental health and behavioral issues.

This may seem strange to hear in a stereotypical small, wholesome Kansas town – President Eisenhower’s home, after all, but one school leader cited an article saying “rural America is the new inner city,” with many urban and suburban areas prospering and rural areas losing jobs, income and population, but drawing low income families with inexpensive housing.

“Three years ago, we saw a sharp increase in mental health needs,” said high school principal Ben Smith, leading to increased behavior problems. “We tried to create a climate that was welcoming to mitigate the issues kids were bringing school.”

The schools implemented a positive behavior system to reward good behavior rather than simply punishing bad behavior. The results have been striking, as the school has seen both in-school and out-of-school suspensions and behavior incidents drop by more than half.

The district is grateful for increased state funding that allowed it to fill a new social worker position to help deal with behavior needs, family issues and social workers. But it has a long list of ways to further improve student success.

They include expanding early childhood programs for children who come to kindergarten behind their peers, more counselors, restoring a school resource officer, and an extra position in elementary math.

Everything is focused on more individualized education for each student.

Guy concluded with praise for community support – including passage of a $26 million bond issue – and the school staff, which she said has been stretched thin in trying to do more for students.
Manhattan-Ogden focuses on regional career education

Manhattan-Ogden USD 383 officials are working on ways to inform students about the kind of jobs and careers available within the community.

The district has teamed up with Manhattan Area Technical College and the local chamber of commerce to increase opportunities for students to research career options.

MATC conducted a “tech and tell” event to showcase its career programs and an increasing number of businesses are conducting career tours and field trips for students. The district will hold four Career Exploration Days this year in which Manhattan High School students will learn employment skills, explore career paths and visit local companies.

“It has been one of the most fun and rewarding things I have been involved with this year,” Assistant Superintendent Eric Reid said.

He said the local chamber of commerce has provided a lot of energy and support in the effort. The career information is also meant for teachers so that they can help students decide whether they want to pursue a certain line of work.

Reid said he would like to see more students stay in the Manhattan area to pursue their careers, including becoming teachers and filling other staff positions for the district.

Like all districts, USD 383 has its challenges too. The district grew by approximately 200 students this year. “We’re getting to where we are bursting at the seams,” Reid said.

In these photos, Manhattan High School students participate in a “Tech and Tell” event sponsored by Manhattan Area Technical College and the Chamber of Commerce.
McPherson USD 418 is in the unique position of having launched its C3 initiative (Citizenship, College and Career Readiness) several years ago, leading to a national waiver on testing; being one of seven districts approved as an Innovative District; and being the only Innovative District also participating in the State Board’s Mercury Seven school redesign project this year.

Superintendent Gordon Mohn said, “We know the goal, but we still don’t know everything about how to get there.” The district’s focus is on the five outcomes defined by the State Board of Education’s Kansans Can vision: kindergarten readiness, social and emotional support; individual plans of study; increasing graduation rates and increasing postsecondary participation.

To improve kindergarten readiness, the first big area of focus is preschool. “The local board’s long-term goal is to someday allow every parent with a three or four-year-old to attend preschool free of charge, at their choice, not as a requirement,” said Mohn.

The district already enrolls an estimated 65 percent of preschool-aged students, through Head Start, the Kansas Preschool Program and special education.

For the second area of focus, the district is seeking to improve its support for social and emotional issues facing students.

The impact of childhood stress can be seen in graduation rates, the third area of focus. McPherson’s graduation rate is about 85 percent, the same as the overall state rate. “The means about 30 students leave each year without a diploma,” says Mohn. “It’s usually because they fall behind in high school and can’t catch up.”

Reasons for falling behind are varied. “If we look at students we lose in high school, going to back in kindergarten there are usually things that predict if a student will struggle,” said Mohn. “That means we have a chance to identify early and intervene.”

However, it’s clear that many issues facing students arise from poverty or mental health issues. “Mental health problems seem to have gotten worse because of the economy, and it has become harder to hide,” said Mohn.

“Some people say it’s not the school’s problem to fix these issues,” said Mohn. “That’s right; it’s a community problem to fix, and the school is part of the community.” He is big champion of the Circles anti-poverty program in McPherson County, and is intrigued by a mental health partnership between Blue Valley USD 229 and local health care providers.

Although the district has been focused on improved college and career readiness for many years, there remain many questions. A key strategy is moving toward more project-based learning. “Many parents see traditional education methods as the route to success, and for some students it is,” said Mohn.

“We will need to show that project-based learning prepares students just as well for college, and offer programs like AP courses. PBL will have to prove itself.”
Smoky Valley looks to transform high school student experience

Smoky Valley USD 400 superintendent Glen Suppes is blunt about the future of school: it’s going to be a lot different, especially at high school.

The best description of the vision is school will look much more like the jobs most people have -- organized around goals, tasks to be accomplished and personal responsibility for managing time, rather than class periods defined by ringing bells and stand-alone subjects.

Students will have more ability to work at their own pace, with extended time if needed, while learning to stay on task to complete expectations. Much more emphasis will be placed on learning by doing, rather than studying from books and lectors. “Growing up on a farm, the way I learned to drive a tractor was to drive a tractor,” said Suppes. There will be more emphasis on the “soft skills” employers are seeking in addition to academics and technical training.

He also expects most students will spend a lot more of their senior year away from the school, in job shadowing, work study and internships, providing more real depth to career exploration.

Smoky Valley, a pioneer in one-to-one student technology, already works to help students explore postsecondary options, with trips to areas colleges and technical schools beginning in seventh grade.

All of this requires a more personalized and individualized approach to students.

So far, the results have been popular with parents and supported by staff, although Suppes acknowledges that each next step in change becomes harder to implement.

Like many districts, Smoky Valley struggles with the challenges of poverty and student mental health issues. “The toughest kids to deal with are now our youngest students,” said Suppes. “One issue is when students go off their medication because their parents can’t afford to refill when needed, or have to cut back and spread it among several kids,” he said. “That can lead to a big change in behavior until it gets corrected.”

The school district has also been involved in the “Circles” anti-poverty program, which includes training and support for people living in poverty, with “allies” to provide relationships and resources, and connections to community organizations. Suppes said the district has seen positive change from students of families in the program.

Suppes also compliments community support, from churches to businesses to individual contributions that support a growing number of scholarships for vocational programs and help meet social needs like food, clothing and even haircuts.

Suppes is worried about the supply of teachers and other educators. “We would like to have more teachers and counselors,” he said, “but even if we have the money to pay them, will we be able find them?”

Smoky Valley High School journalism students and their teacher make a presentation in October to the district’s board of education.
Fresh off passage of the first successful bond issue in decades, Fairfield USD 310 is focusing on strengthening relationships with students, families and communities to boost the number of students seeking postsecondary education.

Serving six small communities in southwest Reno county and slightly more than 300 students in one building, Fairfield has the advantages — and some unexpected disadvantages — of small, rural communities, says superintendent Nathan Reed.

When Reed distributed to staff the district’s new postsecondary success and effective rates, calculated for the first time this year by the Kansas State Department of Education, he said “you could have heard a pin drop.” Like many districts, Fairfield had rarely focused on what students did after graduation from high school.

Although the district has a five-year average graduation rate of 95 percent, the postsecondary effective rate for the past five years is 43 percent. That is the average percent of students in the “graduating class” (including those who do not graduate) who have completed a postsecondary certification or degree or are still enrolled in a postsecondary program two years after graduation. Although higher than the “predicted” rate based on district’s risk factors, it was still disappointing.

“We find that most of our students who go on to college do well, but many never even enroll in a program after high school,” said Reed. He says that is because for many in the community, education beyond high school had not been seen as expected or desirable.

To address this, the district has picked “relationships” and “relevance” as its two areas of focus on the new Kansas Education Systems Accreditation model. Staff has launched a major focus to work with parents on understanding why students will need more skills and how to be more involved in education planning. They are working with students on how to be better prepare for the very different work they will face on a college campus — including college visits. They also want to maintain a strong service component in senior projects and group activities.

High school principal Jason Briar said improving school success rates will require getting more students and families to “buy in.” The district stresses meeting with parents and helping students deal with social and emotional issues, as well as academics.

USD 310 has a high percent of low-income students, student mobility and absentees, all “risk factors.” Reed is extremely enthusiastic about the district’s participation in the Reading Roadmap program, which provide grants to assist low performing students in high poverty schools. After implementing the program, the district went from 40 to 94 percent of K-3 students on grade level.

Reed complimented the support from his community. He conducts regular “Soup with the Supe” events in each town, and noted that in the town of Plevna, population 50, about 30 people came to talk about the school district.
When Kansas Education Commissioner Randy Watson announced the “Mercury 7” school redesign project, Wellington USD 353 was already building the launch pad.

The board and district had composed a strategic plan that were echoed in the student outcomes of the State Board of Education’s Kansans Can vision of leading the world in the success of each student.

“We had a lot of this in the works,” said Wellington Superintendent Mark Whitener who is in his second year in the job at the south-central Kansas district.

Whitener said when he interviewed for the Wellington job, school board members informed him that they wanted Wellington to become education leaders.

The district has strengthened partnerships with local industries to enhance career opportunities for its graduates and is preparing for degree and technical programs that will be offered by Cowley Community College, which will open a Wellington campus next year.

The district sought input throughout the community to create a shared vision, Whitener said.

Then when Commissioner Watson unveiled the proposal to pick seven school districts for the redesign project, Wellington was ready, willing and able.

This time next year, Wellington High School and Kennedy Elementary will be redesigned to improve early childhood learning, high school graduation rates, social and emotional growth, individual plans of study and post-secondary achievement.

On early childhood education, the local Head Start installed a preschool at Kennedy Elementary that already has approximately 30 students. The district also is planning an early childhood summit to build relationships throughout the community.

Whitener says schools must change the way they prepare students because the future economy is in such flux. Traditional low skill jobs are quickly disappearing and nearly all new jobs require some sort of post-secondary education, whether that is a degree or specific industry training.

“It’s time to do things differently,” Whitener said. “It’s all about meeting the students’ needs where they are.”

Above: Wellington Middle School Leadership Team members shop for Christmas gifts for underprivileged children. Right: Elementary school students learn about carpentry.
El Dorado USD 490 faces the challenge of a growing number of students in poverty with an unflagging commitment to equity, and building strong community support through high visibility of district leadership.

Superintendent Sue Givens, recently honored as Kansas Superintendent of the year by her peers, said that too often, students and families in poverty fail to focus on improving their lives through postsecondary education because it seems beyond their reach.

To help students raise their sights, the district works to make sure family circumstances never get in the way of opportunities. The district started paying for all musical instruments, and saw band participation increase from 40 students in 2007 to 165 today. The district pays for most travel costs for national and international competition in DECA, debate and forensics. The choir has robes not just for aesthetics but because many members don’t have “nice” clothes to wear for performance.

There is evidence the work is paying off. In recent years, the district has closed the gap between low income and non-low income students in remediation and college preparation for the two colleges most commonly attended by El Dorado students; Butler County Community College and Emporia State University.

While ACT scores and postsecondary success rates are climbing, the district is still behind the state averages. That’s not surprising for a district with higher-than-average student poverty, chronic absenteeism and student mobility. “Each year, about 300 of 1,900 district students will have a new address,” said Givens.

To address these issues, the district has revamped its high school parents-teacher conferences into career conferences. Small groups of parents are invited to school, and provided a meal, to work on student’s career plan. The district is using some of its new funding from the state to provide scholarships to low-income students to cover the costs of dual enrollment in postsecondary programs. It is using funding from a Rural and Small Schools grant to teacher training in career counseling.

The district has also transformed its computer labs into STEM labs and part of Project Lead the Way, a program that focuses on computer science, engineering and biomedical science.

Givens says the El Dorado community has shown strong support for its public school system, which she credits to leadership from the school board and high visibility by administrators, building leaders and teachers.

Voters approved a $100 million bond issue, and school district, community college, city and private fundraising in the community partnered to build and operate a new football stadium.

A current project is transforming an outdated middle school building into a district performing arts center and home for the alternative high school.
The new superintendent of Wichita USD 259 says the district is proud of the opportunities it offers its students through academic offerings and community partnerships. With a new superintendent and several new board members, USD 259 is now beginning work on a strategic plan that will build upon existing successes.

Dr. Alicia Thompson became Wichita’s newest superintendent this summer, but she is a lifelong product of USD 259, from kindergarten through graduation from Heights High School. On the first day of the 2017-18 school year, Thompson visited her former Chisholm Trail Elementary 5th grade classroom, where the teacher had a desk with Thompson’s name on it. Thompson visited with the new 5th graders and with the many teachers who remembered her student days.

“It was a proud moment for me, and for those teachers who are still there” to see one of their students now leading the district, Thompson said.

Thompson and her board’s three priorities for Wichita USD 259 are academic rigor; social, emotional and character development; and strategic partnerships.

Thompson, who has worked in the district for 25 years, said there’s a sense of hopefulness in the district as a result of the new school finance plan enacted by the Kansas Legislature. USD 259 used new funding from SB 19 to add staff to address students’ increasing social and emotional needs, recruit and retain teachers through increased pay and reinstate credit recovery and alternative programs to increase high school graduation rates.

Although the Kansas Supreme Court recently ruled the new formula didn’t do enough to address either the adequacy or equity concerns, Thompson is hopeful lawmakers will find a way to best serve Kansas.

“Education is the economic driver,” she notes. “If you want cities and the state to be economically sound, you have to invest in human capital, our kids. If we invest now, we’ll have the quality workforce we need. We’ll have students able to fill jobs and attract business.”

While she’s proud of USD 259’s academic offerings, Thompson says the district’s strong community partnerships also offer opportunities for students to excel. One of the newest partnerships is with the United Way through the Read to Succeed program. Wichita business employees spend time in third-grade classrooms across the district to listen to students read, which improves fluency. Thompson said the employees often come back to the schools to participate in additional events and programs, which increases the community bonds with the students and schools.

Thompson is also enthusiastic about a fledgling “grow your own” teacher program to address the “huge” teacher shortage in Wichita. USD 259 is working with local universities on initiatives to enable the district’s paraprofessionals to receive reduced tuition for college classes that will lead them to becoming fully-qualified, licensed Kansas teachers.

“If you don’t have quality teachers, what do you do?” Thompson asks. “We’re not standing around [just] hoping.”
**Beloit wants to be state leader**

In the Beloit USD 273 school district, leaders say they want to lead the state in redesigning education.

Superintendent Jeff Travis, elementary principal Brady Dean and junior/senior high principal Casey Seyfert say Beloit was working on improving kindergarten readiness, high school graduation rates and postsecondary success before those became State Board of Education outcomes.

Beloit has had an early learning center for more than 10 years and has a high school graduation rate that’s typically 100 percent. And last year’s senior class was offered more than $1 million in scholarships to postsecondary institutions. With those successes in hand, why did USD 273 decide to apply to be a Kansas school redesign project district?

“We’re not satisfied; we want to be leaders across the state,” Beloit Elementary Principal Dean said.

Dean is proud that Beloit “takes care of kids from birth to career.” The district has partnered with Mitchell County to secure a Children’s Cabinet early childhood block grant that provides two early childhood social workers in its birth-pre kindergarten center along with a school readiness specialist.

Beloit offers elementary-level orchestra, band, art, and choral music classes and a strong robotics program that’s twice brought home the state elementary robotics trophy. There’s a 1:1 Chromebook initiative for 4-6 graders and the elementary school has a full-time technology assistant.

Strong programs take significant financial investment and with years of state budget cuts to absorb, the district’s teachers have become “incredible” grant writers, Seyfert says.

Seyfert says the district’s investment in elementary education continues into the junior and senior high schools. The school offers three sections of STEM, has a junior high robotics team and a dedicated robotics class.

At Beloit High School, students must complete 40 hours of service learning in order to graduate. Travis says the graduation rate is 100 percent, and 53 of 59 students in the 2017 senior class went on to postsecondary school. He attributes that success to Individual Plans of Study, weekly highlights on academic and life skills and student-led conferences that focus on career interests.

Travis said Beloit continues to use strategies that have worked in the past, but the district’s Gemini project will center around the State Board’s social/emotional success outcome because that’s where the need is greatest.

Administrators say the Beloit community is an important asset for the school district. The booster club, PTOs and other parent groups “have really stepped up to fill in the budget cuts,” and offer other support, Seyfert noted.

The district also has “incredible” relationships with North Central Kansas Technical College and Cloud County Community College to offer CTE training and dual and concurrent enrollment classes that allow many students to graduate with career certifications and up to two years of postsecondary credit.
Twin Valley works to bring all on board for redesign project

As one of the State Board of Education’s seven Mercury school redesign districts, Twin Valley USD 240 is working to design the rocket, build and launch it within one year, while trying to get everyone on board.

“For too long we have been focused on the system, not on the students,” said Superintendent Fred Van Ranken. “That has left too many students behind. It’s not because teachers aren’t trying. It’s because it is so hard to change from what we know.”

Van Ranken suggests the redesign effort will mean a radical re-thinking of how students learn and how that learning is measured.

Along with his high school principals, Van Ranken was talking to students from Twin Valley’s two high schools about what motivates them and their peers.

The answer from most students: getting a grade of 90 percent.

But a principal pointed out that research shows many students quickly forget information they have studied to pass a test.

“What if I made you a different deal?” asked Van Ranken. “What if I said, I’ll guarantee you a 90 percent, but you have to demonstrate to me that you have mastered the subject?”

Would that help students take subjects more seriously?

A lot of students nodded vigorously, but there were a few questions. “Won’t that let some students do less work for the same grade?” asked one young woman. “Can I ONLY get a 90 percent?” asked another.

The hypothetical questions made it clear there are far more questions than answers, but equally clear that students had been deeply engaged in the discussion.

The walls were hung with sheets of paper lined with topics and responses. More family involvement? Great. Getting rid of bells and class periods? Ask your peers about the idea. Start the high school day later? What about after-school activities? Move practice to mornings?

The conversation is just one part of the Twin Valley district’s efforts to get the community involved.

Van Ranken acknowledges the need to bring everyone along in the process: students, teachers, parents, patrons. Van Ranken stresses nothing has been determined about what the system will look finally like.

Some elements do seem likely. Closer work with individual students and their families on their needs and interests. Less lockstep assignment to grade levels by age. Letting students move at a more individual pace. More time spent on projects that apply and demonstrate what students are learning. More emphasis on civic engagement and social skills. More attention to social and emotional needs of students.

“We have a big problem when students can do great on standardized tests, then fall apart in college or the workforce because of anxiety disorders or other problems,” Van Ranken said.
Pratt USD 382’s motto is “small schools, big opportunities,” Superintendent Suzan Patton says. The Pratt USD 382 Greenbacks are proud, Patton says, to incorporate postsecondary planning across the school district.

The district recently held its popular “GO (Greenback Opportunity) Day,” an event that exposes Pratt High School students to numerous post-high school opportunities and challenges.

One of the most popular features of GO Day is “Reality U,” in which students role-play life and career experiences. As the students move through Reality U, they meet with advisors from the Pratt business community who walk them through the challenges of pursuing college, careers and raising families. Students learn about applying for a mortgage, paying for childcare, buying insurance and other real-world responsibilities while juggling personal challenges.

College and career preparation isn’t limited to high school in Pratt. USD 382’s “Lily Pad Village” preschool program features toddler-sized “businesses” including a doctor’s office, library, and a store. The tiny businesses are stocked with toys and supplies that mimic grownup job settings. As the children learn through play, teachers talk with them about what they might want to be when they grow up.

The Kansas State Board of Education’s vision for student success includes a stronger focus on career planning and post-secondary success through individual plans of study based on career interest and K-12 accountability for the first two years of post-high school achievement.
Despite receiving no additional money from the new school funding formula, Colby USD 315 is planning for the future and student success.

Colby Superintendent Katina Brenn said her district benefited from the block grant funding enacted in 2015 because that law held funding steady at 2014-15 levels as USD 315 saw an enrollment decline.

When the Legislature enacted SB 19, the district knew it would lose funding because the new law calculates aid on a district’s 2016 enrollment or an average of the last three years’ numbers. USD 315 lost state funding as its enrollment declined to 850 students. Colby, like many western Kansas communities, faces population declines.

“We knew this was going to be a tough year,” Brenn said, so the district planned ahead. Teachers got about a three percent raise last year to cushion this year’s anticipated shortfall. The 2017-18 compensation package increased a little over one percent. Administrators didn’t take raises, and the central office reduced overall administrative costs. “We’re down to two K-12 counselors for the whole district, and two principals and one assistant principal,” Brenn said, “and our curriculum director is down to four days per week.”

While funding decreased, operating costs increased, and the district is planning to tackle maintenance costs it can no longer put off.

In addition to taking care of needed repairs, the district is committed to supporting the State Board of Education’s Kansans Can vision for student success in spite of reductions in the number of teachers and support staff.

“We’re doing the planning, it’s wonderful; but it’s going to take money,” Brenn said. “With the reduction in staff we haven’t been able to offer the opportunities kids will need under the new system but we know more money is coming.”

The Kansas Supreme Court has ruled SB 19 underfunded public schools and ordered the Legislature to fix the problem.

Brenn hopes state leaders will also shore up an under-performing social and correctional safety net that ultimately impacts K-12 public education.

Brenn, who formerly worked extensively in special education and alternative/juvenile justice in the Junction City school district, said budget cuts to social services agencies and other supports mean students who formerly would get mental health or other treatment for 30 days or more before returning to the classroom are now back in school within a couple of days after a crisis or incident.

“We’re trying to teach English and math, and we don’t know about the trauma kids are experiencing, and we’ve cut our staff that can handle those issues,” Brenn said. “We need to go back to taking care of the social needs.”

Colby elementary students enjoy lessons that involve hands-on learning and problem solving.
“If high school isn’t different in five years,” said Goodland USD 352 superintendent Bill Biermann, “I will have failed.” By extension, he implied, the public school system will have failed as well.

Biermann’s urgency is based on rapidly changing forces in technology and employment, citing estimates that 80 percent of jobs available today will no longer exist when this year’s kindergarten class graduates.

However, high school in 2017 is little different than a generation ago, or more.

The problem, he says, is that most people in the school system, from teachers to board members, were usually pretty successful in school. “They liked school. They and their students went to college,” he said. But that makes it harder to relate to students who struggle in schools, or families without a college background.

“High schools are built for students who plan to go to a four-year college,” Biermann says, even though most students do not get a four-year degree. More would benefit from technical college, community college and other job preparation programs.

Unfortunately, that means too many students end up in a four-year university without a clear sense of what they want to study, resulting in high student debt without completing a program.

Biermann believes that a stronger system of individualized plans of study, starting in middle school and well developed in high school, will give students a greater sense of purpose, even if they change their mind about career goals along the way.

One area where the future has already arrived in Goodland is its long-established one-to-one IPAD program for all students K-12, one of the early examples in the state. Biermann says this use of technology is no longer new, and draws little if any opposition.

A goal is ensuring technology does not merely replace previous activities, but allows students to do new things, such as adopting peer classrooms around the country. “The other day, I saw a class doing a Google Hangout with a class in Utah,” he said.

Another major commitment of the Goodland district is kindergarten readiness.

The district provided combined space for the local Head Start program, district preschool program and special education preschool into the Sherman County Early Childhood Center. Participation for three- and four-year-old students has increased from around 60 to 80 in recent years, and could approach 100. The goal is to offer preschool to any family who wants it, while also working with private preschool programs.

The greatest challenges to these goals involve personnel and resources.

However, Biermann is grateful to his board and strong community support. He believes community partnerships are vital to maintaining support for public education at a time when some question its effectiveness and cost.
Liberal school investments pay off

Liberal – both the USD 480 school district and the town in far southwest Kansas – is on a roll.

District voters, with a 76 percent majority, approved a major bond issue to transform every school in the district, with one-third of the money coming from a city sales tax increase also approved by voters.

The funding allowed the district to reduce its schools from 12 to nine, with five completely new and four renovated. It allowed all preschool students to be moved into a single building, and permitted all-day kindergarten in one of the last districts in the state to adopt the program because of space limitations, and placed a nurse in every building.

New construction has replaced 18 aging mobile classrooms, and is transforming the high school site into a three-building campus, more like a college facility.

In the midst of that physical change, the district was accepted as one of the Mercury 7 redesign school districts by the Kansas State Department of Education.

These efforts already seem to be having an impact on the whole community. With part of the sales tax increase funding community infrastructure, new businesses are moving in. “Our bond advisors said if you invest in your schools, companies will invest in your town,” said Superintendent Renae Hickert, “That is definitely happening here.”

But there are plenty of problems, too, starting with what Hickert says is not just a teacher shortage, but a crisis.

“We’ve gone from 4-5 unfilled teaching positions to about 40 needed to meet the school board’s class size benchmarks,” she said.

Hickert would love to do more to develop teachers from within the district through “grow your own” efforts, especially with paraprofessional and aides who are Spanish speakers and know the community and its students.

Like virtually every school leader interviewed this fall, Hickert is alarmed by growing numbers of high need special education students and students with mental health issues.

With many of the district’s students coming from immigrant families, there are big challenges in moving students into postsecondary education.

An asset is the district’s close collaboration with the local Seward County Community College. Hickert noted that 29 members of the last year’s graduating class also completed an industry certificate and six completed a two-year college degree when graduating from high school.

To assist students in focusing on college participation, Liberal participates in the national AVID program (Advancement Via Individual Determination), which works to prepare students for success in high school, college and careers, especially underrepresented student groups.

With both exciting new developments and serious challenges, Hickert says the motivation for the district is to help its students succeed.
While grappling with the need to transform schools for a changing future, Ulysses USD 214 faces an immediate problem shared by many schools in southwest Kansas: How to fill teaching positions.

The district didn’t have a single applicant for a middle school physical education teacher, and might have left the position open if Superintendent David Younger hadn’t attended a family wedding in Michigan last July, where a chance conversation turned into a job offer and acceptance. The district continues to struggle to fill even core positions like elementary teachers. It has two transition-to-teaching positions and uses long-term substitutes to cover the shortfall.

Thanks to an influx of state funding, the district was able to give its teachers the best raise in a number of years, and pushed starting salaries over $41,000 – a benchmark for many districts. Ulysses is also using private foundation funding to offer scholarships for teacher education and loan repayment plans for new teachers.

Also, like many districts in the area, Ulysses would like to develop “grow your teacher” programs to encourage local students to earn a teaching degree and license and return to the community – just as districts try to help other local employees fill workforce needs.

However, the community’s high Hispanic population makes that difficult, with many young people reluctant to leave tight-knit families even to attend college.

Coupled with a nationwide decline in college students seeking careers in education and a general sense that the political conversations in Kansas seem to cast teachers and public education in a bad light, Ulysses is worried about the long-term future of its education workforce.

However, the district’s biggest change is simply the challenge of change, said Younger. “We (schools) have to change. Everything else in the world is changing.” Younger said district staff have heard the message of why change is important, but there always is a struggle to implement.

Schools do too many things simply because of tradition, because that is all most people have ever known,
School funding key to Kansas’ future

It has often been noted that Kansas doesn’t have mountains or an ocean coastline, but what Kansas does have are strong public schools. And our quality schools didn’t happen by accident.

Since the founding of our state, generations of Kansans have committed their work and taxes to funding schools, knowing that education was an investment; a crucial factor to help their children lead successful and rewarding lives.

A quality public school education will be even more important in the future as the global economy becomes more competitive. A high school diploma plus post-secondary training will be required for most jobs to earn a middle-class salary. This is why the current debate over school funding is so important.

Over the past several decades, the education level of Kansas students has steadily increased as the investment trend in public school funding in Kansas grew slightly more than the rate of inflation.

But that funding trend stopped in 2009 and so did that trend of improving student achievement. Since 2009, total funding per pupil has fallen more than $700 million behind inflation through 2017.

Between 2010 and 2017, average teacher salaries when adjusted for inflation decreased nearly 8 percent. Kansans are investing a lower percentage of personal income in K-12 education than they have for more than 25 years.

Not surprisingly, Kansas student achievement is struggling. State assessment scores, which had been rising through 2012, are now falling. Reductions have also been seen in national assessments and the ACT. Kansas’ high school graduation rate is better than the national average, but other states are improving faster and catching up to Kansas in the percentage of students going on to higher education.

The Kansas Supreme Court recently concluded the current school finance system isn’t adequate for our students as is required by the Kansas Constitution. The court said we need to do better.

We agree.

Here’s why: Previous cost studies, analyses of Kansas funding trends and comparisons with other states, show that Kansas public schools are underfunded by many hundreds of millions of dollars. By the way, certain groups who oppose public schools say Kansas schools spend too much and achieve too little. Just the opposite is true.

Kansas ranks 10th in the nation across a wide spectrum of student measures and spends 31st in per pupil funding. Every state that ranks ahead of Kansas in achievement, spends more.

By this measure, Kansas public schools are the most efficient in the country.

But aside from that, we know that educational achievement is key to increasing personal income, reducing poverty and reducing the cost of social services. This current situation of underfunding Kansas schools threatens the future of our children, grandchildren and our state.

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We at the Kansas Association of School Boards, which represents schools across the state, have issued a detailed statement about the Kansas Supreme Court decision on school funding and what we think should happen.

We encourage all Kansans to stay abreast of developments on this issue and to seek out information from their local school board members.

Kansas is trying to climb out of a deep hole caused by the Great Recession and tax changes that drastically reduced revenue available for schools, public safety, social services, highways, health care and other functions of government that Kansans need.

During the last legislative session, a majority of legislators made the courageous decision to reverse those harmful tax policies. We applaud them for doing that. More tough policy decisions will be necessary during the 2018 legislative session that started this month.

But Kansans are accustomed to making difficult choices. Just as past generations invested in our education, we owe it to the children currently in school and future generations to adequately fund public schools. It is an investment in ourselves and in Kansas.
Why did the Kansas Supreme Court find Kansas school funding inadequate and what supports that finding?

The Kansas Constitution requires the Legislature to “make suitable provision for financing” education, which includes improving education in the state, ensuring that each school district can raise similar funding with similar tax effort, and enabling all students to meet or exceed certain standards. Those standards can, in part, be measured by test scores, graduation rates and postsecondary attendance. Although overall education attainment has been rising in Kansas for decades, in recent years the percent of Kansas students meeting such standards has either been declining or falling behind improvements in other states.

Why is improving educational attainment so important?

Improving educational attainment is associated with higher earnings, lower unemployment and less poverty. Kansas is expected to require a rising percentage of employers with higher educational levels to meet workforce needs. Although Kansas continues to rank higher than most states in overall educational outcomes, other states have been improving faster on many measures in recent years.

What is the evidence that current levels of K-12 funding are inadequate and that funding makes a difference?

The Supreme Court found evidence that low funding is causing unsatisfactory educational outcomes based on previous cost studies of suitable funding, the request of the State Board of Education, and expert testimony. Other indicators include past Kansas experience in school funding and educational outcomes, examples of other states and evidence from specific programs.

How is additional funding provided by the 2017 Legislature already helping, but still falling short of what is needed to restore achievement levels and compete with other states?

The $300 million two-year increase is the largest in almost a decade, but funding will remain far short of previous funding levels when adjusted for inflation, other states with higher achievement, past staffing levels and inflation-adjusted teacher salaries, and investment of state personal income when achievement was higher.

How will additional funding help students, families, communities and the state economy, as part of a comprehensive plan to meet the goals of Kansas?

KASB supports further increases in K-12 funding as justified by evidence, over a reasonable phase-in period, in addition to inflationary adjustments. This should be part of a plan to address other state needs and allow Kansas to compete with other states for high skill/high wage employment.

Why could amending the Kansas Constitution to reduce school finance litigation harm educational opportunity and achievement?

Changing the Constitution could mean any child or district’s educational opportunity is determined solely by a shifting Legislative majority; or weaken the constitutional requirement to support educational improvement.

You can read the full KASB Statement on the Gannon V Response on the KASB website, kasb.org. The document is posted on the Advocacy Page under “Key Resources.”

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To follow the 2018 session, follow KASB
To stay up to date on what is happening during the 2018 legislative session, which begins Monday, follow KASB on Twitter, Facebook and the KASB website.
Also check out KASB’s Weekly Capitol Calendar, which provides information on legislative committee schedules and agenda items of interest to education advocates.