



Overview of Kansas Public Education Issues 2020

Every seat in the Kansas Senate and House of Representatives and half of the 10 positions on the Kansas State Board of Education are on the ballot in 2020. As always, education will be a major topic. KASB has prepared this overview of major education issues.

For candidates: we encourage you to learn more about these issues and share your views with voters. We welcome your questions.

For school leaders: we encourage you to share information how these issues affect your local community with candidates and voters, as individuals and as a district.

For voters: we encourage you to educate yourself about these issues and candidate positions as you participate in the 2020 election.

Returning to School: health and safety, learning and options

The COVID pandemic led to closed school buildings and skipped assessments. Schools provided continuous leaning plans through on-line learning, packets and limited personal interaction. These emergency efforts worked for some students, but others risked falling behind without more direct instruction and services. Schools are working on plans to open and operate safely, provide the best possible alternatives if students cannot or will not attend in person, and assist students who fell behind.

Local perspective: how did your district respond to school closing and continuous learning; how are you planning for the upcoming school year?

Goals and outcomes: Why Kansas must continue improving student success.

Kansas educational attainment – completing high school, technical training, two-year, four-year and advanced degrees – is at an all-time high, which has increased incomes, reduced poverty and improved the state’s quality of life. However, more needs to be done.

The Kansas constitution requires a public school system and other institutions to improve education. Improving educational outcomes equip Kansans to meet local, state and national social and economic needs and to have the opportunity for at least a middle-class life.

The Kansas State Board of Education, Legislature and Supreme Court have adopted multiple goals and outcomes that broadly define educational success as preparing students to be:

Successful as individuals – students are mentally and physically happy, healthy and safe. A new challenge is dealing with the COVID pandemic.

Successful in their communities – students understand political and economic systems, are civically engaged and give back to their communities.

Successful economically – students have the skills and preparation for postsecondary education and employment, to support themselves and their families, and provides the opportunity for Kansas to compete successfully with other states.

Local perspective: what are your district’s educational outcomes, economic and employment needs?

Barriers to student success: deep differences in student needs.

While many Kansas students do very well, many others are not reaching the goals described above. Called “at-risk” students because they are struggling in school, these students are disproportionately affected by factors like poverty, disabilities, and other social and emotional issues. The number of students with these additional challenges is rising faster than overall enrollment.

Many of these factors are more difficult to overcome because they are outside of the school’s direct control. There are similar gaps in student success in both public and private schools, and in other states.

Because these students face additional challenges, they often need additional help, which requires additional resources. These resources allow more individualized attention, more special services, pay for additional staff with specific training and professional development. Examples include special education services, early childhood, extended day and school year, special classes and instructors, and training for research-based programs.

Kansas total funding per pupil is below the national average; however, Kansas is above the U.S. average on most measures of student achievement. Until the Legislature began increasing state aid in 2018, per pupil funding was falling behind inflation and other states’ funding, resulting in cuts in programs, position and salaries. Kansas also declined on some academic measures.

Local perspective: what are the unique needs of your district’s students and families; how do these needs affect costs and funding?

Resources and redesign: how schools must change to improve student success.

With additional funding, districts have added positions, raised salaries and adopted new programs. To use those funds more effectively, the State Board of Education has identified four key principles of school redesign to address current gaps in educational outcomes: focusing on both academic and social/emotional skills; strong partnerships with parents, business and communities; more individualized education plans; and more relevant, “real world” experiences.

Over the past three years, more school districts have become part of the school redesign project. The State Board also adopted a new accreditation system for all districts. Some educational measures have begun to improve.

Local perspective: How has your district used increased state aid and implemented new strategies through school redesign or accreditation?

In this together: shared responsibility for student success.

Under the Kansas constitution, the State Board of Education is responsible for “general supervision” of public schools. Local elected school boards are to “maintain, develop and operate” public schools. The Legislature is to make “suitable provision for finance” of education.

The Kansas Supreme Court has ruled that “suitable” funding must be both equitable (avoid disparities in funding or taxes due to differences in local district wealth) and adequate (allow all students to meet state educational outcomes).

In addition, students, parents, educators, school organizations, community leaders and organizations, higher education, business and the public at large will help determine student success.

Local perspective: how do you involve your community in improving student success?