



Our Great 308

Superintendent's Newsletter

May 21

2015

Dear staff,

It can not possibly be summer time already, but I'm so glad that it is! It's been a long year, everyone has worked incredibly hard, and you've earned some time to rest, relax, and rejuvenate. Of course, many dedicated teachers will come back for a few days to partake of the professional learning we have planned.

Thanks to all our dedicated employees who work year-round to get things ready for the teachers and students to return. I hope you are able to take a few days off to relax as well.

Warmest regards,

Dr. K.

District Moves Forward with Elementary Reconfiguration

After months of study and discussion, the board of education voted to move forward with not only the most popular choice of the committee, but also the one having no opposition from committee members. The district will reduce one section each of kindergarten through 6th grade at McCandless Elementary beginning with the 2016-17 school year.

The second most popular option, creating a 6th grade center, offered some advantages but raised several concerns: inability to add another complete K-5 track elsewhere if the district grew and transportation issues for families with students at multiple buildings.

The reduction of sections will save the district

approximately \$350,000 per year in operations annually. The district is planning for declining enrollment and stagnant or declining funding from the state. This savings is derived by eliminating seven teaching positions, which will be done through attrition. This figure includes the cost of seven teachers' salaries, health and dental benefits, FICA taxes, unemployment insurance, and worker's compensation insurance paid by the district.

The district plans to contract with RSP to study the population of students and where they are living. This information will be used to draw new boundaries for each of our elementary schools, excluding the Magnet School at Allen. A boundary study committee

will be formed with two parents from each elementary school and a handful of district employees. The first committee meeting will likely take place the last week of August. Boundaries should be finalized by Thanksgiving, giving parents time to prepare for the changes coming 2016-17 if they are impacted by the new boundaries.

Once the K-6 track is eliminated, the average class size at the elementary level will increase by one student per classroom. However, the schools experiencing the highest enrollment currently will see a decrease in class size and those buildings with very small class sizes will see an increase in class size as the boundaries are redrawn to evenly distribute students.

First Year of ELA Implementation Is Off to a Good Start

As the school year comes to a close, teachers can celebrate a successful implementation of the new ELA curriculum. While there have been struggles, many of the wrinkles have been ironed out. Notably, in classrooms where the new ELA curriculum has been implemented with fidelity, students increased skills in

close reading and the ability to site evidence in text, and engaged in more writing.

The majority of teachers embraced Foundations, the new phonics curriculum wholeheartedly. I lost track of how many primary teachers I heard say that they've never seen their students decoding and reading at this level before.

If my observations are correct, many kindergarteners exited kindergarten reading! This is highly exciting and sets the stage for tremendous growth in student achievement in the years ahead. The teachers and students should be very proud of their work, and I have a feeling next year will be even more successful!

School Finance Still Up In The Air

I wish I had a dollar for each time I've been asked how the school finance situation or the state budget crisis was going to be resolved. Right now, anyone's guess is as good as mine. But I'll attempt to fill you in on what could happen.

The block grant formula has basically cut school funding by about half of a percent in only the low-wealth districts; the affluent districts weren't really impacted. Basically, the block grant reduced equalization aid and makes it impossible for us to receive equalization aid on future increases to our Local Option Budget and Capital Outlay. We were planning to use both of these over the next few years to keep up with inflation and fund salary increases.

The inequity of the block grants caused the Schools for Fair Funding group to ask the District Court to reopen the Equity portion of the Ganon case. I testified in Topeka in Shawnee County District Court regarding this issue on May 7 and 8. We are expecting a decision soon.

What happens if the court rules in our favor? The court would rule the block formula is not constitutional, order the state to pay schools in the state the equalization aid they were shorted mid-year, and we would go back to the old formula or something new the courts approve of. Of course, the state would immediately appeal to the Supreme Court, and then

things get interesting.

If the Supreme Court says it needs time to look at the equity portion of the case, the Supreme Court would again have the equity and adequacy portion of the lawsuit back at the same time. In the long run, this is not a bad thing. This would likely mean we operate next year under the block grants, giving the courts more time to study the issue.

If the Kansas Supreme Court says they've had enough of the legislature's games, they may refuse to stay the lower court's decision. This would cause a serious issue because the state of Kansas has no money to fund the old formula. Legislators will have to severely cut the base (which will further impact the adequacy portion of the lawsuit still pending) or try to change the formula again.

If the block grants can't be implemented, the old formula really doesn't exist any more, so legislators will have to vote to reinstate it, or try to come up with something new that meets Constitutional muster.

What happens then if legislators couldn't work it out? It could mean the schools shut down on whatever deadline the courts establish. What would that mean? It basically means it becomes illegal for schools to disperse or spend any money, similar to a federal government shut down. Basically everyone goes home—I can't work, custodians can't work, we can't have professional development,

and the business office closes up shop. The worst part would be that during that time, no bills would be paid, including our payroll.

Now this would be pretty extreme, and it has never happened in Kansas before, but it has happened in other states. Kansas has come close to this a couple of times during my career, but legislators have never let it get to that point. What will happen this year is anyone's guess.

It is likely there will be legal developments throughout the summer. When there is news, I will send e-mail and post information on our district Facebook page and website. In these ways, you can stay informed of what is going on. If we begin to see a situation unfolding where school districts really might be shut down, I will give you all the advanced warning that I can. Without a doubt, this would be an incredible hardship on all of us for many reasons. But don't panic; it hasn't happened in our state's history up to this point. We'll have to trust that our courts and legislators will be able to find common ground and avoid the scenario described above.

