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SCHOOLnews

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From the Board

Jeremy Wiltz, Board of Education President

It is an incredible honor to serve as President of the Auburn-Washburn Board of Education during this pivotal time in our district's history. With Dr. McWilliams' retirement set for summer 2026, we are tasked with the important work of selecting our next Superintendent of Schools. Auburn-Washburn has long benefited from steady-visionary leadership, with our past three superintendents having served a combined 44 years. This legacy underscores just how significant this next selection will be for our future.

To ensure a thorough and comprehensive process, the Board has chosen to partner with an executive search firm. Some elements of the process are being managed internally, while others are supported by the firm. This hybrid approach allows us to combine the expertise and insight of our internal team with the broader reach and specialized experience of a professional search partner.

After interviewing three highly qualified executive search firms, the Board selected Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates (HYA). Their expertise, national reach, and strong track record with comparable districts set them apart as an ideal partner. We have worked closely with HYA over the past

several weeks, and I am pleased to share that recruitment and screening are well underway.

Stakeholder input and feedback is critically important to all of us. There will be a series of staff and community focus groups in mid-January. Staff, students, families, and community members will also have the opportunity to meet with finalists in person in early March. We anticipate announcing the next Superintendent later that month.

It is important to note that two newly-elected Board members – K.C. Johnson and Jamie Stafford – will join in on this decision-making process. We are grateful for the experience and perspectives they bring.

We are committed to selecting a leader who reflects our district's values and champions our mission of *inspiring, challenging, and preparing every child, every day*. On behalf of the entire Board, thank you for your continued partnership and trust.



From the Superintendent

Dr. Scott McWilliams, Superintendent of Schools

With the first semester at a close, I am filled with gratitude and pride for the progress our district has made – progress made possible by the steadfast support of our community through recent bond initiatives. These projects represent far more than new and renovated spaces; they symbolize expanded opportunities, stronger connections, and a shared commitment to the success of every student.

At the early childhood level, opening our second Early Childhood Center has already made a remarkable impact. This new facility allows us to welcome more of our youngest learners into a highly sought-after program that builds a strong foundation for future learning. The additional space and structured experiences are transforming how we support students in those crucial early years.

Our elementary schools are also benefiting from the transition of sixth grade to the middle level. With more classroom space available, schools have been able to create collaborative learning environments, expand specialized education spaces, and provide more individualized instruction. By reducing enrollment at each elementary site, we are better positioned to meet the needs of every child.

The opening of Washburn Rural North Middle School and the full renovation of Washburn Rural Middle School (WRMS) mark significant milestones. WRMS is no longer the largest middle school in Kansas, allowing both campuses to create more connected learning communities with expanded extracurricular opportunities, leadership roles, and personalized support for academic and social growth.

Finally, the new 50,000-square-foot Innovation Center at Washburn Rural High School is a true game changer. This state-of-the-art facility provides industry-standard, hands-on learning experiences that connect students with real-world innovation, technology, and career pathways.

Every new space reflects our shared belief that education is the greatest investment we can make in our community's future. Thank you for your continued support and partnership as we work to ensure every student can learn, grow, and thrive.



WASHBURN RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL EARNS SILVER GLOBE AWARD FOR ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP



Washburn Rural Middle School (WRMS) has been recognized as a Kansas Green School and awarded the Silver Globe Award by the Kansas Association for Conservation & Environmental Education (KACEE). The award honors schools that move beyond awareness and take measurable, hands-on steps to make a lasting environmental impact. At WRMS, that has meant turning ideas into action through a variety of student-led initiatives focused on improving both the school and the broader community.

Green Club advisor and ESTEEM program facilitator Kathryn Louderback shared highlights of the school's accomplishments during a presentation to the Board of Education earlier this fall. "This recognition is a direct result of the work of our students and school community," she said. "They led recycling drives, collected over 1,000 pounds of plastic film, conducted environmental investigations, completed citizen science projects like monarch tagging, and achieved positive outcomes in our school learning community."

Louderback emphasized collaboration as key to the school's success, with partnerships with Student Council (StuCo), cafeteria staff, custodians, and classroom teachers helping to make these sustainability projects possible. "These efforts not only helped our school become more sustainable," Louderback shared, "but also empowered our students to become leaders and problem-solvers." Through their collective work, WRMS students demonstrated that small, consistent actions can lead to big results. ★

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On the cover:

Students at Pauline South Intermediate School test the wind-powered sail cars they constructed as part of Energy Day.

WASHBURN RURAL HIGH SCHOOL CELEBRATES DUAL STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS

It was an unforgettable fall for Washburn Rural High School (WRHS), as the Junior Blues captured not one, but two, Class 6A state championships within a period of eight days. Standout performances by both the boys cross country team and the boys soccer team had WRHS shining on the state's biggest stage.



The boys cross country team claimed the 6A state title at Rim Rock Farm in Lawrence on Saturday, November 1. By focusing on pack-running – the top four runners from WRHS crossed the finish line within seven seconds of one another – the team proved its strength outweighs the accomplishments of any one individual. The championship marks Rural's first state title since 2019 and the fifth in the program's proud history.



One week later, on Saturday, November 8, the boys soccer team captured the 6A state title at Stryker Sports Complex in Wichita. They won an overtime thriller against the defending state champions in a penalty shoot-out. The win capped off an incredible 19-1-1 season, during which the team showed remarkable strength and perseverance. The championship marks the fourth boys soccer title in WRHS history, and the first since 2012. ★



School counselor Hanna Mick and seventh grade student Wani Mulegwa demonstrate to Kansas Education Commissioner Dr. Randy Watson and Kansas State Department of Education program consultant Kent Reed how artificial intelligence is being used by students for learning and problem-solving.

GROWTH IN EVERY DIMENSION

HOW ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS SUPPORTING TEACHING AND LEARNING

Regardless of one's stance on artificial intelligence (AI), its presence in our daily lives is undeniable. From data analytics to digital design, nearly every industry is being reshaped by rapid advances in AI technology. As these tools evolve, Auburn-Washburn schools are exploring meaningful ways to use AI to enhance learning while ensuring the appropriate measures are in place to keep students safe and on topic.

STRENGTHENING DIGITAL LITERACY

Adam Schmitz, environmental science and biology instructor at Washburn Rural High School, is taking an innovative approach to AI in the classroom. In his advanced placement environmental science course, students are tasked with using AI to create an essay about biological changes across generations and the mechanisms that drive species variation.

Students begin with a teacher-provided prompt. They must then craft a series of follow-up prompts until the AI program produces an essay that meets project objectives

and satisfies the standards outlined in the rubric. While AI generates the initial draft, it is the students' responsibility to determine whether the content accurately reflects scientific principles.

That's where part two of the assignment begins.

Students shift from being passive receivers of information to active evaluators, analyzing the AI-generated essay for accuracy and quality. The evaluation process requires students to compare AI with what they have learned in the classroom, reiterating key concepts while strengthening their ability to detect inaccuracies, misconceptions, and gaps in reasoning. In that way, the assignment does far more than simply reinforce a foundational scientific principal.

"The assignment has worked very well in two ways," shared Schmitz. "It demonstrates student understanding through their ability to accurately grade and comment on the essay, and it highlights the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges

of using AI in the classroom.” By requiring students to question, critique, and refine AI-generated work, the project transforms a traditional writing task into a deeper learning experience that prepares students for a future with an ever-increasing presence of AI.

DISCOVERING FUTURE PATHWAYS

At Indian Hills Elementary, school counselor Hanna Mick is using AI to support a unit on career exploration. She has found that AI broadens students’ sense of possibility by introducing them to careers they may have never considered or even knew existed.

The process starts with student reflection. “Instead of jumping to a job title, they explore what they enjoy and why,” shared Mick. By responding to a series of questions related to their hobbies and interests, students often uncover new fields and pathways. “This has sparked exciting discoveries, like a sixth grader who loved travel and was introduced to cultural journalism, a career she immediately connected with.”

Once students identify a potential career, they create career trading cards featuring job descriptions, salary information, required skills, and relevant school subjects. The project helps students make meaningful connections between what they are learning now and their long-term goals.

Mick actively supervises student use of AI with protections in place to ensure they remain safe and on task.

A PARTNER IN PRODUCTIVITY AND PRACTICE

In his book *Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI*, author Ethan Mollick reflects on the role of AI in education: “It may force us to change models, but it will be in a way that ultimately enhances learning and reduces busywork.” One of the clearest examples of this is the way AI can reduce routine tasks for educators. Using AI to draft lesson plans, brainstorm new instructional strategies, and build rubrics

allows teachers to spend more time on the art of teaching and to create more meaningful engagement with students.

Mollick continues, “AI provides the chance to generate new approaches to pedagogy that push

“AI provides the chance to generate new approaches to pedagogy that push students in ambitious ways.”

-Ethan Mollick, Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI

students in ambitious ways.” In practice, this means simple, teacher-directed supports that enrich traditional instruction in manageable, low-stakes ways.

These tools don’t change what students learn or how teachers lead their classrooms, but they do make it easier

to provide additional resources, vary the types of practice students receive, and adjust materials to different learning needs.

THE FUTURE OF AI

The future is already here. Those with a keen eye may have noticed that the front cover image of this magazine was extended using an AI-powered tool. What once required hours of manual editing took less than five minutes with a single click. It isn’t perfect, but it is a worthwhile tradeoff. The same is true for this article itself, which was edited by ChatGPT, freeing up valuable time for other important responsibilities.

When routine tasks can be completed more efficiently, without altering meaning or intent, that time can be redirected toward mission-critical work that matters most.



Students showcase the trading cards developed in their career exploration unit

INNOVATION WITH INTENTION

The possibilities of AI are endless, but with those possibilities comes tremendous responsibility, particularly around ethics, safety, and appropriate use.

Mick is helping lead this important conversation. She believes counselors are uniquely positioned to help students navigate emerging technologies because they understand the whole child – their well-being, personal growth, and emotional needs. Mental health professionals, she notes, play a critical role in ensuring innovation remains grounded in empathy, ethics, and equity.

By approaching AI integration through a human-centered lens, Mick and others are helping to ensure that technology enhances learning rather than replacing the relationships at the core of student success.

As Auburn-Washburn continues exploring the opportunities AI presents, rest assured that the district’s guiding principles have not changed. The health and well-being of students and staff will always come first, informing every decision made as new tools emerge.

AUBURN ELEMENTARY

Building bonds across generations

Students in two different classrooms at Auburn Elementary have started a new intergenerational pen pal program to connect with residents of a local care facility. The project began with simple exchanges – short handwritten notes, sometimes accompanied by drawings or artwork – and it has already proven uplifting for both the young writers and their new friends. The goal is to continue correspondence monthly, giving students opportunities to practice their handwriting and writing skills while building meaningful connections beyond the classroom. Looking ahead, staff hope to arrange an in-person visit before the end of the school year, offering residents and students the chance to meet, share stories, and complete an activity together. “I’ve been fortunate to witness a real and beautiful connection between the school and Homestead of Auburn,” shared substitute teacher Jennifer Hardesty, whose parents reside at the facility. “The project highlights how two people, despite their differences in age, can find common ground and connection.” ★

FARLEY ELEMENTARY

Building community through dens

Farley kicked off the year with a new tradition designed to bring students closer than ever – Fox Dens! Each student has been assigned a small, mixed-grade “family” led by a Farley staff member. Once a month, the dens gather for character lessons, hands-on activities, and meaningful experiences that build knowledge, strengthen relationships, and foster a strong sense of connection. Younger students benefit from older role models who guide, encourage, and model positive behavior, while older students have a chance to shine as leaders, helpers, and mentors. The groups are already growing into supportive, close-knit communities where students feel a sense of belonging beyond their individual classrooms. The dens have been a well-received way to celebrate what it means to be part of the Farley Fox family. ★

INDIAN HILLS ELEMENTARY

Junior Coaches serve as positive role models

Now in its third year, the Junior Coaches program at Indian Hills is empowering fifth-grade students to lead with confidence and purpose. The leadership and conflict-resolution program is designed to create a positive, safe, and fun environment for all students during recess. Junior Coaches learn to guide younger students in resolving small conflicts respectfully using simple restorative questions. They also teach and model a variety of playground games, promoting teamwork, kindness, and fair play. As positive

role models and problem-solvers, they demonstrate what it looks like to treat others with respect. Perhaps most importantly, they help include students who may feel left out, ensuring every child has the chance to join in and feel connected. Together, these young leaders are making recess a better experience for everyone. ★

JAY SHIDELER ELEMENTARY

Integrated learning reinforces character traits

Cross-curricular learning projects are giving Jay Shideler students new ways to explore and embody the school’s monthly character traits, with specials teachers weaving the classroom themes into their own lessons as well. A recent example is the schoolwide spirit week centered on gratitude. Students collected items for a food drive, explored books on gratitude and community, and contributed individual pieces to a collaborative art project. Books such as *Saturday at the Food Pantry*, *Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen*, and *Thank You, Omu!* helped students recognize how small acts of kindness can make a big difference. In art class, students created “gratitude leaves” to add to a tree display in the library. The collaboration not only deepened students’ understanding of gratitude, but also strengthened the sense of community throughout the building. ★



PAULINE CENTRAL

Early literacy kits support student success

A newly funded grant is putting high-quality learning tools into the hands of Auburn-Washburn’s youngest students. With support from the Auburn-Washburn Public Schools Foundation, dozens of early literacy kits are being developed for shared use among Pauline Central’s early childhood teachers and related service providers. Each kit includes books, hands-on manipulatives, adaptive tools to ensure accessibility for all learners, and a teacher guide aligned to the Kansas Early Learning Standards. “Use of the kits fosters early literacy, fine motor skills, vocabulary, and story comprehension,” shared speech pathologist Lana Seibel, who is carrying out the project alongside school psychologist Briana Wilkerson and speech pathologist Courtney Brackey. “The project promotes sustained early literacy growth, classroom engagement, and long-term positive outcomes for all children.” ★

PAULINE SOUTH

Partnerships power Energy Day

Fourth-grade students across Kansas study a wide range of energy forms as part of their science curriculum. Lessons on hydro, thermal, wind, chemical, and solar energy are all taught, but opportunities for hands-on exploration can be limited. To help bring those concepts to life, teachers at Pauline South organized an interactive Energy Day earlier this fall. During the event, third- and fourth-grade students rotated through nine interactive presentations led by experts from Evergy, the Kansas Corporation Commission, Kansas State University, and the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library. Each station offered demonstrations in areas such as wind energy, soundwaves, robotics, drones, and network fiber services, helping students better understand how energy powers our world. Building on the excitement of Energy Day, the school plans to launch a KidWind competitive team, giving students the opportunity to design and build a wind turbine for regional competition. ★

WANAMAKER ELEMENTARY

Renovations lead to modernized learning spaces

Construction has begun on the south side of Wanamaker Elementary to expand the school's early childhood program from one classroom to two. The project is part of a districtwide initiative to meet growing community needs by increasing access to early childhood education. In addition to the early childhood expansion, several other upgrades are taking shape throughout the building. New collaboration spaces will provide flexible areas for group work, creativity, and hands-on learning, while updated special education areas will offer improved accessibility and enhanced learning environments for students who benefit from specialized support. These projects are part of a multi-year renovation plan to refresh and modernize the building. All improvements were made possible by the school community's generous support in passing the April 2022 bond election. ★

WASHBURN RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

Interactive robots bring coding to life

Students in Matthew Barrett's coding class have been using small programmable robots called Spheros to bring computer science to life. In addition to learning coding concepts on a screen, students are now gaining hands-on experience writing programs for interactive robots. In one example, students worked together to build obstacles and pathways around the classroom. They then coded their Spheros to successfully navigate through the mazes. This activity helped students practice problem-solving, critical thinking, and teamwork while applying real coding skills.

Students also enjoyed a friendly game of Sphero soccer, where they manually controlled their robots to compete in a class-designed arena. This particular activity reinforced precise control, strategy, and collaboration, while keeping learning fun and engaging. Through these projects and others like them, students are gaining valuable experience in coding, engineering thinking, and real-world problem solving – skills that will benefit them well beyond the walls of a classroom. ★

WASHBURN RURAL NORTH MIDDLE SCHOOL

Community partnership adds splash of color

Blank space has become a canvas for new creative opportunities at Washburn Rural North Middle School. This fall, the newly-opened building partnered with local artist and former Washburn Rural High School art teacher Michael Mize on a large-scale window mural featuring the school's mascot. Over the course of several days, students worked side by side with Mize, painting the mural and witnessing firsthand how an artistic idea evolves from concept to completion. The finished piece is now prominently displayed in the school's Forest Walk. Gifted facilitator Lindsey Dowell coordinated the project, transforming what could have been an ordinary task into an active learning experience that highlights creativity, community partnership, and student collaboration. Funding for the mural was provided by the Auburn-Washburn Public Schools Foundation through its annual classroom grant distribution program. ★



SCHOOL HIGHLIGHTS

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WASHBURN RURAL HIGH SCHOOL

Student broadcasters bring home athletic events to life with play-by-play action

Through the newly launched Rural Broadcast initiative, Washburn Rural High School (WRHS) students are bringing varsity athletics to life with live, student-produced play-by-play coverage. The program began last year with then-senior Calvin Manthe and then-junior Peyton Goehring, whose determination and enthusiasm sparked a new era of student-led sports media at WRHS. Rural Broadcast is continuing to grow this year with an expanded team of students and an even broader vision. In addition to covering varsity basketball, the program is working toward the possibility of adding live play-by-play coverage of both varsity softball and varsity baseball this spring. The expansion will give more students valuable opportunities to develop on-air presence, technical skills, and production experience. The initiative is just one example of the real-world, hands-on learning opportunities the district strives to provide students in various fields and pathways. There are several upcoming opportunities to catch Rural Broadcast in action, including nearly a dozen home varsity basketball games in the months of January and February. Tune in and support student broadcasters on the livestream at <http://wrhs.net/live>. ★



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

New classrooms expand opportunities for young learners

Five years ago, Auburn-Washburn launched a comprehensive strategic planning process to help shape the district's long-term vision. One of the key priorities that emerged from that work was the desire to expand access to early childhood education. To meet this need, the district developed a plan to increase capacity by establishing dedicated early childhood centers in every elementary attendance area. This expansion is being carried out in phases and will nearly double the number of childhood spots available. Two new classrooms opened this year at Pauline Central. Next year, three more classrooms will open – one each at Indian Hills, Jay Shideler, and Pauline Central. Additional classrooms will continue to open over the next several years, growing capacity to nearly 500 young learners districtwide. ★

KEY SPRING SEMESTER DATES

Jan. 5	First day of second semester
Jan. 19	No school
Feb. 19-20	No school
Mar. 13-20	No school
Apr. 3	No school
Apr. 6	No school (<i>unless snow make-up day</i>)
May 21	Last day of school

The complete 2025-2026 student calendar is available online at www.usd437.net/calendars.