"Little River-Windom USD 444: Building Brighter Futures – Board & District Updates"

Little River-Windom USD 444

Mission

USD 444 is committed to preparing ALL students to make a positive impact in their lives and communities after high school.

Vision

Every Student. Every Opportunity.

Focus	Goals	Objectivies
Recruitment and Retention of Quality Staff	Develop a culture of recruitment and retention of high-quality staff that drives student success.	• Develop a competitive compensation package • Increase housing options • Create a culture of choice with a sense of belonging • Provide professional growth opportunities for all staff • Increase marketing for the school district and educators
Community Engagement and Partnerships	Develop and maintain partnerships with community stakeholders to provide meaningful learning.	• Enhance and grow school-community partnerships • Actively pursuing/receiving grants and outside funding • Develop student-run enterprises • Increase methods for all stakeholders
Student Success	Develop a culture of learning that challenges each student through meaningful opportunities and experiences	• Develop personalized learning with appropriate staff resources/time • Create meaningful learning opportunities • Ensure college and career readiness • Identify ways to best measure student success
World Class Facilities	Maintain and enhance facilities and resources that align with the district's vision.	• Update and maintain facilities • Develop a culture of ownership and pride • Maintain technology innovation

Focus Area #1

Recruitment and Retention of Quality Staff

Goal

Develop a culture of recruitment and retention of high-quality staff that drives student success.

Objectives & Outcomes

1.1 Develop competitive compensation package

1.1.1 Increase base teacher salary to be equal to or greater than all adjacent school districts and increase median teacher salary by 3+% annually to be competitive with surrounding districts.
1.1.2 Evaluate and expand employee benefits annually, ensuring our offerings remain competitive, responsive to staff needs, and aligned with organizational goals.

1.2 Increase housing options

1.2.1 Form a collaborative community housing committee, including school, city, local developers, and others, to develop and implement a strategic housing plan.
1.2.2 Develop and expand a building trades program for student training, career opportunities, and future housing expansion.

1.3 Create a culture of choice with a sense of belonging

1.3.1 Construct one or more representative advisory teams that routinely meet with district and/or BOE leadership.
1.3.2 Construct and use an employee and student survey to assess their sense of belonging and identify areas for improvement each year.

1.4 Provide professional growth opportunities for all staff

1.4.1 Provide annual professional development opportunities for all staff by offering relevant workshops or training sessions and establishing partnerships with peer schools or districts to collaborate and share professional learning resources.
1.4.2 Conduct surveys or evaluations annually to assess the effectiveness of professional development programs and adapt them based on staff feedback.

1.5 Increase marketing for school district and educators

1.5.1 Increase staffing or reassign job duties to prioritize district communication and marketing.
1.5.2 Highlight and celebrate district successes by consistently sharing compelling stories that result in at least one positive feature or mention in regional or state-wide media each month of the school year.

Focus Area #2

Community Engagement and Partnerships

Goal

Develop and maintain partnerships with community stakeholders to provide meaningful learning.

Objectives & Outcomes

2.1 Enhance and grow school-community partnerships.

2.1.1 Establish a School-Community Partnership Committee to collaboratively design and implement a joint educational program that strengthens connections between schools and community stakeholders.

2.2 Actively pursue/receive grants and outside funding.

2.2.1 Establish a system to prioritize, assign, and promote awareness of grant opportunities by developing and maintaining a centralized repository of grants and other funding sources available for school and community use.

2.2.2 Increase external funding by annually submitting 3–5 grant proposals and securing a minimum of $10,000 to support district initiatives and strategic priorities.

2.3 Develop student-run enterprises.

2.3.1 Prioritize work-based learning through the School-Community Partnership Committee by creating a dedicated sub-committee to lead the initiative and launching at least two student-run enterprises by 2030 to provide authentic, career-connected learning experiences.

2.3.2 Track the financial sustainability and profitability of student-run enterprises, demonstrating their viability each year.

2.4 Increase methods of communication for all stakeholders.

2.4.1 Strengthen district communication by improving or implementing at least one new stakeholder communication channel annually through 2027, and improving school communication open rates each school year.

2.4.2 Conduct surveys or focus groups to annually assess stakeholder satisfaction with communication methods and identify areas for improvement within.

Focus Area #3

Student Success

Goal

Develop a culture of learning that challenges each student through meaningful opportunities and experiences

Objectives & Outcomes

3.1 Develop personalized learning with appropriate staff resources/time.

3.1.1 Enhance personalized learning by establishing a baseline from fall 2025 student survey data, developing clear targets and metrics, and increasing the percentage of students who feel their learning is tailored to their needs and interests by 10% annually through ongoing data collection, analysis, and strategic adjustments.
3.1.2 Increase work-based learning opportunities annually.

3.2 Create meaningful learning opportunities.

3.2.1 Increase student engagement and motivation by 10% annually through the implementation of high-impact, standards-aligned teaching strategies supported by biannual professional learning opportunities.
3.2.2 Enhance personalized learning across all classrooms by expanding the effective use of technology to create more dynamic, student-centered learning experiences.

3.3 Ensure college and career readiness.

3.3.1 Raise student MAP scores by 5% from Fall to Spring and reduce the percentage of students in the bottom 40% annually.
3.3.2 Cohort ACT scores will exceed the Kansas state average ACT scores in all categories.
3.3.3 Regularly track and report the participation rate in college and career exploration activities.

3.4 Identify ways to best measure student success.

3.4.1 Engage key stakeholders through surveys and focus groups to gather diverse perspectives on success measurement, while tracking the variety and frequency of assessment methods used to measure student progress across the academic year.
3.4.2 Monitor and enhance the use of data analysis tools to evaluate student success beyond standardized tests, and track the frequency and effectiveness of data-driven decision-making in curriculum development, instructional strategies, and student support services.

Focus Area #4

World Class Facilities

Goal

Maintain and enhance facilities and resources that align with the district's vision.

Objectives & Outcomes

4.1 Update and maintain facilities.

4.1.1 Complete all planned maintenance projects on existing facilities, each as outlined in the Five-Year Capital Outlay Plan. 4.1.2 Conduct satisfaction surveys with students, staff, and parents to assess the overall condition and functionality of school facilities annually.

4.2 Develop a culture of ownership and pride.

4.2.1 Foster a stronger sense of ownership and pride in the school community by conducting surveys or focus groups with students, staff, and parents annually, and using the insights to guide engagement efforts.

4.2.2 Strengthen school spirit and community involvement by increasing staff and student participation in beautification or volunteer projects annually and launching two new student-led initiatives that promote engagement by 2030.

4.3 Maintain technology innovation.

4.3.1 Upgrade 20% of classroom technology equipment with newer models each year to ensure adequate functionality and support for learning activities.

4.3.2 Implement at least one new teacher-led technology initiative or program that enhances teaching and learning each year.

4.3.3 Train all teachers on effectively integrating technology into their lesson plans and instructional practices annually.

Board Briefs

Written reports were submitted to the board by the principals and Mr. Crump. Mr. Hendrickson and Mr. Paden shared some informational items to the board in comments.

Preliminary Enrollment information was shared with the board. All indications are that the district will have a decrease in enrollment for next fiscal year. This will present some budget challenges in the near future. The expected decrease in operating budget could be significant for fiscal year 2027-2028. The main decrease is due to smaller class sizes enrolling in the system,, as well as larger classes graduating.

Representatives from Freedom Claims shared a proposal for board consideration. Freedom Claims will administer the district's Medical Expense Reimbursement Plan (MERP), helping lower healthcare costs by reimbursing eligible employee expenses while allowing the district to build reserves that can help offset future healthcare costs and provide greater long-term stability.

The board reviewed the proposed 2026-2027 budget. Please see the budget section for a more detailed description of the school budget. The proposed budget will keep USD 444 Revenue Neutral. The proposed budget will levy a total mill levy of 59.127, which is less than last year's total mill levy. USD 444 is a small minority of districts in the state that were able to remain revenue neutral. USD 444 is expected to collect slightly fewer tax dollars locally than last year with the current proposal. The board of education will need to approve the final budget at the September meeting.

The 2024-2025 CPA Audit was approved without any discrepancies or corrections needed. It is not normal for districts to have ZERO corrective actions needed. A huge credit goes out to the secretarial staff in both buildings as well as the district office staff. Our district is a shining example for other districts to strive for the same excellence. I am proud of the staff and can not thank everyone enough for your part in making this audit a success.

The board approved 3% raises for all staff. The raise also included an increase in the health insurance defined benefit of nearly $60 per month. The total package, including the benefit for staff, was a 4.5% to 5% increase. The entire package is expected to cost the district an additional $125,000 for the 2026-2027 fiscal year budget.

The following staff members were approved for hire:

Coonnie Carlton, assistant cook at Windom Elementary
Loretta Jensen, assistant cook at Little River Jr./Sr. High School
Jamie Zimmerman, head cook at Little River Jr./Sr. High School
Copper Collins, Vocal Music Teacher at Little River Jr./Sr. High School

The board approved the late resignation of Dan Spears.

USD 444 to Remain Revenue Neutral

The proposed 2026-2027 budget is expected to levy 59.127 mills, which is less than last year's total mill levy. USD 444 is a small minority of districts in the state that were able to remain Revenue Neutral. USD 444 is expected to collect slightly fewer tax dollars locally than last year. The district is very proud of this accomplishment. The board has cut costs over the years in an effort to operate efficiently. This presents some challenges for the future with the continued costs of services. It is impossible to operate a business without experiencing increased costs due to raises, utility increases, other bills, etc. Eventually, these costs add up, and businesses or organizations must increase income or make cuts. The district will face challenges in the future, but we stand poised to continue providing the best possible education for all of our students. Our students are everything, and they always deserve our best effort and the resources we can provide

USD 444 Board of Education has been working through the district's budget for the 2026-2027 school year. This process is not one that the board or administration takes lightly. Conversations have been taking place for the past two months. The board will vote on a budget at the September board meeting. I thought it might be helpful to step back and explain one of the key drivers behind nearly every budget discussion we will have: assessed valuation. Many people hear terms like "valuation," "mill levy," or "tax base" and understandably find school finance confusing. The goal of this document is not to turn everyone into school finance experts overnight, but rather to provide a foundational understanding of how these concepts work together and why they matter.

What Is Assessed Valuation?

In simple terms, assessed valuation represents the taxable wealth within our school district boundaries. It is the amount of property value upon which property taxes can be levied. Valuation is not determined by the school district. County appraisers determine property values according to state law and guidelines established by the Kansas Department of Revenue. Those values are then compiled into the district's assessed valuation. Assessed valuation includes a variety of property types, including: Residential real estate, Commercial and Industrial property, Agricultural land, Personal property, utilities, and pipelines that are state-assessed. The larger the assessed valuation, the larger the tax base available to generate local revenue. The smaller the assessed valuation, the smaller the tax base.

How Kansas Determines Taxable Value

One of the more confusing aspects of Kansas property taxes is that property is not taxed based on its full market value. Instead, each class of property is assigned an assessment rate.

For example:

Residential property is assessed at 11.5% of appraised value.

Commercial and Industrial property is assessed at 25% of appraised value.

Agricultural land is valued using a productivity formula established by the State of Kansas rather than market value.

Certain utilities and other properties are assessed directly by the state.

For General Fund taxes only, Kansas law also provides a residential exemption. The first $75,000 of residential appraised value is exempt from the statewide 20-mill General Fund levy.

What Is a Mill?

A mill is simply a unit used to calculate property taxes.
One mill equals one dollar of tax for every $1,000 of assessed valuation.

For example, if a property has an assessed value of $20,000:

1 mill generates $20 in taxes,
10 mills generate $200,
20 mills generate $400.

While the math itself is straightforward, the impact depends entirely on the size of the district's valuation.

UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL FINANCE: VALUATION, TAXES, AND THE HISTORY OF USD 444

Why Valuation Matters

The easiest way to understand valuation is to think of it as the size of the community's tax bucket. If the bucket grows, the district can generate the same revenue with fewer mills.

If the bucket gets smaller, the district must either increase the number of mills or collect less revenue.

For example, if a district needs to generate $2 million locally:

A larger valuation requires fewer mills to produce that amount.

A smaller valuation requires more mills to produce the same amount.

This is why valuation drives so many of our budget conversations.

The Four Primary School Mill Levies

Kansas school districts primarily generate local property tax revenue through four mill levies.

General Fund

The General Fund supports the district's basic educational program and is primarily driven by student enrollment under the Kansas school finance formula. The levy for the General Fund is set by state statute at 20.000 mills and cannot be changed by local Boards of Education. The amount generated locally becomes part of the state's equalization process to fund public education.

Supplemental General Fund (Local Option Budget)

Often referred to as the LOB, this fund supports district operations beyond what is provided through the General Fund. LOB dollars help fund many of the day-to-day costs of operating a school district, including areas such as: Additional staffing, Student programs and services, Utilities, Transportation costs, Instructional supplies, Technology needs, and other operational expenses that support the educational program.

Unlike the General Fund, the Board of Education determines how much of its available LOB authority to utilize. However, that authority is not unlimited. Kansas law currently limits the Local Option Budget to 33% of the district's General Fund authority. In other words, the district cannot simply levy whatever amount it wishes. State statute establishes a ceiling based upon the amount of General Fund revenue generated through the Kansas school finance formula.

Within that 33% limit, the Board must decide how much local operational revenue is necessary to meet the needs of students and the community. Choosing to utilize less than the maximum authority may help keep mill rates lower, but it also reduces the operational dollars available to support district programs and services. Utilizing more of the available authority increases operational capacity but may require a higher local tax effort.

Capital Outlay

Capital Outlay funds are restricted to specific purposes related to facilities and equipment.

These funds may be used for items such as:

Building improvements,
Maintenance projects,
Technology infrastructure,
Vehicles, Equipment purchases.

Kansas law currently caps Capital Outlay at 8.000 mills.

Bond and Interest

Bond and Interest funds are used solely to repay voter-approved bonds. These dollars cannot be redirected to support general operations.

Enrollment and Valuation: Two Different Drivers

One of the most important concepts to understand is that enrollment and valuation impact our finances in different ways. Student enrollment largely determines how much General Fund authority the district receives through the state school finance formula. Valuation determines how easily the district can generate local revenue to support that educational program.

Put another way:

Enrollment determines how much education Kansas expects us to provide.

Valuation determines how difficult it is for our community to help pay for it.

For the upcoming 2026-2027 school year, USD 444 assessed valuation was a slight increase in overall valuation. This is good news when trying to keep mill levies steady and a welcome change from the past few years. USD 444 over the years has been blessed with a somewhat steady overall assessed valuation. However, over the past 3 years, we have seen a slight decline that has affected our mill levy and caused some budget challenges. If the valuation decreases, the only way to raise the same amount of funds is to increase the mill levy.

Redskins, Ready to Roll!



Welcome back to school, USD 444 Little River! We hope everyone had a wonderful and relaxing summer and is ready for an exciting new school year! We're looking forward to a year filled with learning, growth, friendships, and plenty of Little River pride. A special welcome to our students, families, teachers, staff, and everyone who makes our school community so special.
Here's to a fantastic year ahead!
Welcome back, Little River!

🎉 STUCO Kicked Off the Year Right!



A BIG thank you to our STUCO for putting together an awesome Back-to-School Bash! 🎒🎉
From the games and activities to the food, laughs, and fun, you gave everyone a great way to kick off the new school year!
We appreciate all the time and effort you put into making this night happen.
Thank you, STUCO, for starting the year off with a bang! 👏🔥
Let's make it a great year, Little River! 📚🏫

A New Look for Little River Athletics 🏀

There's a lot of school pride packed into the walls of our gym! Our Little River Athletics spaces have gotten a fresh look, with the newly finished basketball court and updated displays showcasing the tradition and history of our athletes.

The court looks incredible, and the athletics display is a great reminder of all the teams, athletes, and memories that have helped make Little River what it is today. Tradition. Pride. Little River.

Senior Parking Spots 🎨

Our seniors got the chance to make their parking spots their own, and they definitely got creative! From school colors and personal designs to some pretty fun ideas, every spot is a little different.

It’s been fun seeing the parking lot fill up with their personalities. We think they did a pretty great job!

6th Graders Start the Year Strong

Nineteen incoming 6th graders gathered at Windom School for a morning of teamwork, service, and getting to know one another. Students helped with several school projects before learning more about leadership and Tiger Ambush Pride (TAP). It was a great way to start the school year, and we look forward to seeing these students take on new opportunities throughout the year!