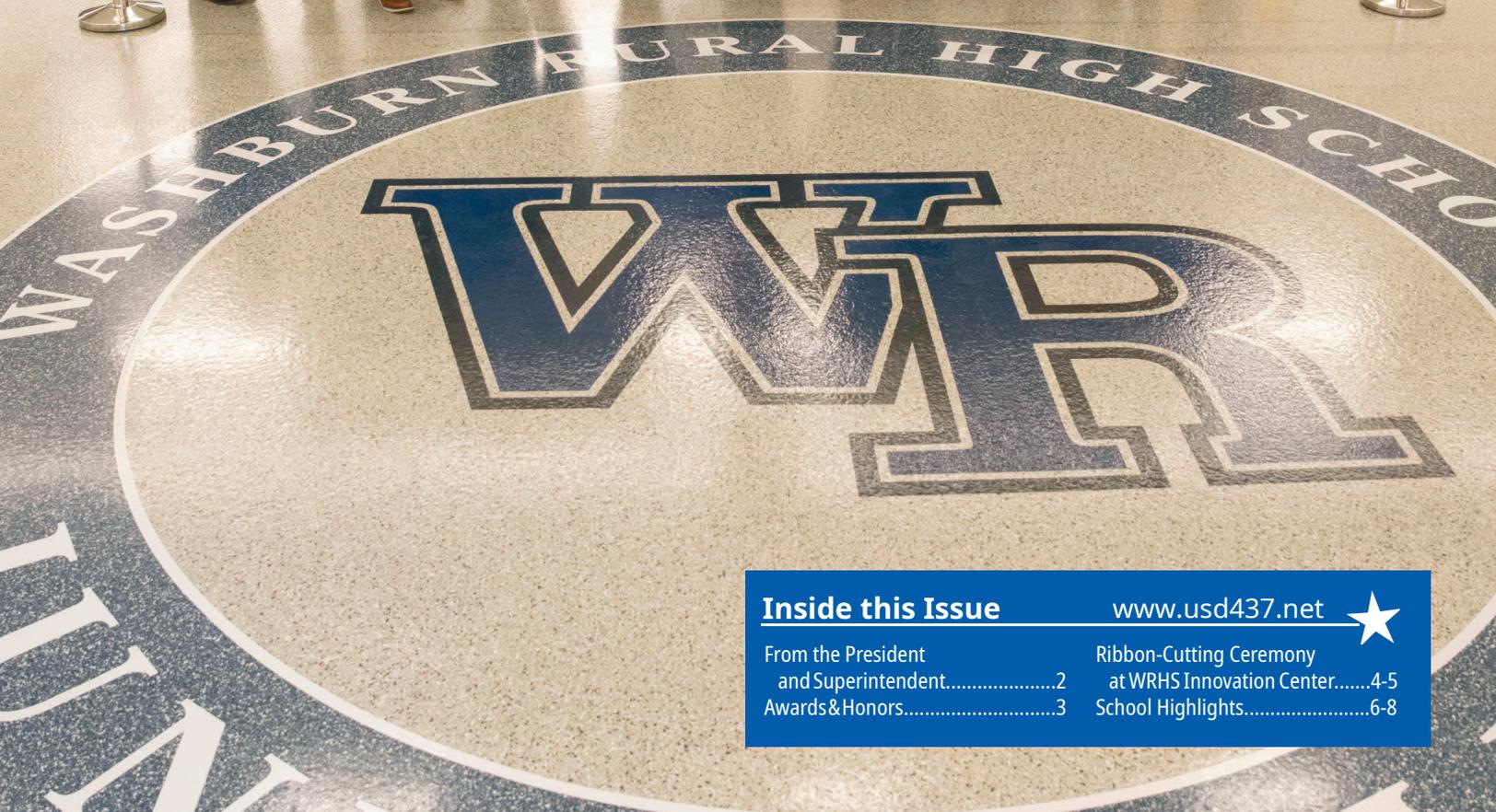


AN AUBURN-WASHBURN UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT 437 PUBLICATION



SCHOOLnews

Winter 2024-2025



Inside this Issue

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From the President
and Superintendent.....2
Awards&Honors.....3

Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony
at WRHS Innovation Center.....4-5
School Highlights.....6-8

From the Board

Bryan Smith, Board of Education President

In the pages that follow, you will discover some of the extraordinary progress and achievements shaping our district. From staff members going above and beyond – earning recognition at the local, state, and national levels – to transformational construction projects that are enhancing our teaching and learning environments, to innovative projects and initiatives happening every day in our classrooms, there is so much to celebrate.

None of this would be possible without the unwavering support of our community. On behalf of the entire Board of Education, thank you for placing your trust in us and sharing our commitment to serving the Auburn-Washburn community with excellence.

When the Board of Education approved the April 2022 bond election, we were guided by a bold vision: **Innovation. Opportunity. Excellence.** Today, that vision is taking shape in remarkable ways, including the newly opened Innovation Center at Washburn Rural High School, which you can read more about on page four.

Of course, the Innovation Center is just one piece of a larger

puzzle. School reconfigurations are also underway.

When Washburn Rural North Middle School opens for the 2025-2026 school year, the district will have two middle schools serving students in grades 6-8. The transition of sixth-graders to middle school allows for space to be repurposed at each elementary school to better meet today's needs. Those needs include more collaborative spaces and early childhood centers.

With construction at Pauline Central now complete, work is beginning at Indian Hills and Jay Shideler. Both buildings are undergoing extensive renovations, which are scheduled for completion by the end of 2025. The remaining schools will soon be entering the design phase, with construction to follow.

Together, we are building a brighter future for our students and our community – one filled with innovation, opportunity, and excellence.



From the Superintendent

Dr. Scott McWilliams, Superintendent of Schools

As we continue to work towards providing the best educational experiences for our students, we are excited to begin developing the next five-year strategic plan for our district. This plan will guide our efforts from August 2026 through May 2031, helping us align our focus, set clear priorities, establish ambitious goals for students, and make informed decisions to drive progress.

Your input is vital to this process. As valued parents and community members, your perspectives will play a key role in shaping a plan that truly reflects the needs and aspirations of all our students. We want to hear from you!

We invite you to participate in a brief, confidential online survey to share your thoughts, ideas, and priorities for the district's future. The survey is easy to complete and can be done at your convenience, any time before January 15, 2025. Simply visit www.usd437.net/plan or use the QR code to the right to access the survey.



As we work toward exceeding expectations in our current five-year strategic plan, which concludes in May 2026, we look forward to the exciting new opportunities the next five years will bring.

Thank you for your ongoing engagement and support. Together with our dedicated staff and nearly 6,000 amazing students, Auburn-Washburn continues to be a special place for learning and growth.



School News is published by the
Auburn-Washburn Unified School District
5928 SW 53rd Street, Topeka, KS 66610
www.usd437.net
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On the cover:
Ribbon-cutting ceremony marks the official opening of the
Innovation Center at Washburn Rural High School
Photo credit: Melissa Kasprzyk, Centerpiece Photography

HANNA KEMBLE-MICK NAMED TOP 5 FINALIST FOR NATIONAL AWARD



Hanna Kemble-Mick, counselor at Indian Hills Elementary School, was named one of five national finalists for the 2025 School Counselor of the Year awards program by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). The program honors exemplary school counseling professionals who devote their careers to serving as student advocates, helping them achieve success in school and in life.

“ASCA’s School Counselor of the Year program shines a valuable spotlight on the school counseling profession, bringing attention to exceptional school counselors who are supporting K–12 students every day,” said Jill Cook, ASCA executive director. “School counselors are vital to students’ academic achievement, social-emotional development and plans for life after graduation. The 2025 finalists have demonstrated their commitment to the values and mission of the profession to help all students succeed.”

Kemble-Mick was previously named the 2023-2024 Kansas School Counselor of the Year by the Kansas School Counselor Association. She is the first counselor from the state of Kansas to be named a top five national finalist. ★

PARENTS AS TEACHERS PROGRAM RECEIVES BLUE RIBBON ENDORSEMENT

The Auburn-Washburn Parents as Teachers (PAT) program has achieved Blue Ribbon endorsement from the Parents as Teachers National Center, distinguishing it as one of the top-performing affiliates within the international network. This honor represents the program’s commitment to excellence and its standing as a leader in service to children and families.



Achieving Blue Ribbon endorsement requires a rigorous 18-month review process to ensure the program meets the highest standards of fidelity and quality. Programs that receive this designation are celebrated as models of excellence that deliver exceptional services to their communities.

Through services such as home visits, group connections, child screenings, and referrals to community resources, PAT empowers parents with the knowledge and tools they need to support their children’s early development and prepare them for long-term success in school. ★

WASHBURN RURAL NAMED UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOL

Washburn Rural High School was recently selected as a Unified Champion School with Banner distinction. This recognition celebrates schools that excel in fostering intentional and inclusive social interaction through sports, leadership, and whole-school engagement. Through the Unified Sports program, individuals with and without intellectual disabilities come together to create a unified environment of teamwork and respect.

To earn Banner status, a school must meet 10 national standards of excellence. Washburn Rural is the only school in the state of Kansas to earn Banner status this year. This marks the second time the school has been awarded a Champion School Banner. ★

AUBURN-WASHBURN RECEIVES GLOBAL CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE AWARD

Auburn-Washburn is ranked no. 14 on the list of companies recognized for candidate experience excellence as winners of the 2024 Global Candidate Experience (CandE) Awards. According to a press release issued by ERE Media, the CandE Benchmark Research Program has evaluated over 2,000 global employers and more than 1.8 million job seekers since 2011.

This year, 125 companies participated in the CandE Benchmark Research Program, which gathered insights from more than 230,000 job candidates. Award winners were selected through comprehensive data analysis based on job candidate satisfaction surveys.



This marks the sixth consecutive year Auburn-Washburn has earned a Global CandE Award! ★



Auburn-Washburn Board of Education President Bryan Smith provides remarks at the ribbon-cutting ceremony

RIBBON-CUTTING CEREMONY

MARKS OFFICIAL OPENING OF INNOVATION CENTER

Five years ago, Auburn-Washburn underwent a comprehensive strategic planning process designed to help set its future direction. This effort culminated in the creation of **Strategic Plan 2026**, which identified three priority areas – expanding career and technical education (CTE) opportunities, conducting a comprehensive assessment of K-12 facilities and configurations, and increasing access to early childhood education.

Over the past several years, tremendous progress has been made to advance these priorities, including the addition of a new 50,000-square-foot Innovation Center at Washburn Rural High School (WRHS). Designed to provide students with state-of-the-art resources and opportunities, the center emphasizes hands-on learning, early exposure to various career pathways, and career readiness.

A bond election was held in April 2022, and the community made their voices heard – they voted in favor of **Innovation. Opportunity. Excellence.** The successful passing of the bond led to the district breaking ground on the Innovation Center in May 2023. Just over a year later, in September 2024, a ribbon-cutting ceremony was held to celebrate its opening.

While addressing those gathered at the ceremony, Auburn-Washburn Superintendent of Schools Dr. Scott McWilliams shared, “This facility is more than just a structure filled with cutting-edge equipment; it represents a bold vision for the future of education. It is a commitment to nurturing creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving in our students. The Innovation Center will serve as

a dynamic hub for exploration and discovery, equipping our students with the skills and resources they need to thrive in an ever-evolving world.”

CAREER-FOCUSED PATHWAY PROGRAMS

According to the Georgetown Workforce Study, 70 percent of jobs will require specialized skills by 2031, but only 35 percent of those jobs will require a four-year degree. “It is clear that the future demands new ways of thinking and learning, and that is precisely what this Innovation Center will provide,” said WRHS Principal Ed Raines. By empowering students with cutting-edge resources and hands-on learning experiences, the Innovation Center is not



CTE educators and staff celebrate the opening of the Innovation Center



just meeting today's needs—it's preparing students for the challenges and opportunities of tomorrow.

With an eye to the future, WRHS offers 18 career-focused Pathway programs approved by the Kansas Department of Education. A remarkable 75 percent of students will take at least one Pathway course during their time at the high

“The Media Productions suite offers more space and a green screen room. It provides the opportunity to explore new projects like podcasting and live newcasts.”

-Molly Worley, Senior

school. Nine of the Pathway programs – Animal Science; Comprehensive Agriculture; Biomedical & Forensic Science; Construction; Design; Digital Media; Power, Structural & Technical Systems; Programming &

Software; and Restaurant & Event Management – are now housed in the Innovation Center.

WHAT STUDENTS ARE SAYING

Since its opening, the Innovation Center has garnered widespread enthusiasm from staff, parents, local business leaders, and community members. The most enthusiastic responses, however, have come from the students themselves.

Take senior Sara Diaz Buezo, for example. Aspiring to major in microbiology and pursue a career in pharmaceutical research and development, Diaz Buezo jumped at the chance to enroll in Mike Steinert's Biomedical Research Lab Workplace Experience course. "Having this space has granted me the opportunity to explore my passion for working in a lab," she shared. "The level of opportunity, learning, and growth facilitated here wouldn't be possible without this building. I'm grateful for the investment in our future and for the opportunity to learn in this environment."



A culinary student serves ceremony guests

Junior Anthony Manrose is equally enthusiastic. He plans to take full advantage of the opportunities the center provides, having enrolled in both agricultural welding and drafting/computer-aided drawing this past semester. He aspires to be an architect, and knows the skills he learns in high school will help him on that journey. "The Innovation Center offers better equipment,



Ceremony guests tour the Construction Science suite

larger, dedicated workspaces, and a safer environment to work in," he shared. "I will be better prepared because of that."

Senior Aleisha Lester has discovered her passion for carpentry. Enrolled in both woodworking principles and residential carpentry, she intends to continue her education at Washburn Tech next year, with a goal of pursuing a career in the field. "The Innovation Center has improved my learning through updated facilities and resources, like the new additions to the woodworking classroom," she shared. "The new space allows students like me to build many different projects, including a house, and provides a more engaging environment with more dynamic lessons." Lester is referring to the updated facilities that now enable year-round indoor work. Previously, woodworking students were limited to outdoor construction, which, given the unpredictable Kansas weather, restricted their opportunities to just a few months each year.

GRATITUDE TO OUR SUPPORTERS

Three different students. Three different career aspirations. One resounding theme of gratitude.

These personal stories underscore the profound impact the Innovation Center has on student learning, growth, and career readiness. Its dynamic spaces and advanced resources are empowering students to pursue their passions and better prepare for their futures.

None of this would have been possible without the generous support of district patrons, who passed the bond election in April 2022. In remarks at the ceremony, Auburn-Washburn Board of Education President Bryan Smith recognized the invaluable role of our school community. "Your input, enthusiasm, and unwavering support have been instrumental in bringing this vision to life," he remarked. "Thank you for your belief in the power of innovation and education."

AUBURN ELEMENTARY

Monarch Waystation



Auburn Elementary is taking a step toward enhanced conservation education with the creation of its own Monarch Waystation. Thanks to a special partnership with the Topeka Zoo, the school is now home to an 800-square-foot conservation space where students can observe first-hand the growth of plants and pollinators. The garden,

which is maintained by Student Council members and other students across the school, has become a source of great pride and learning. "The initiative has been instrumental in teaching students about life cycles and the vital role pollinators play in our ecosystem," shared Aubree Riepl, one of three dedicated staff members overseeing the project. A trellis, arbor, additional flowers, and stepping stones to create a pathway are welcome additions made possible by the Auburn Lions Club. These enhancements ensure students can explore and enjoy the garden without disturbing its delicate inhabitants. As with so many initiatives at Auburn Elementary, the Waystation serves as a testament to the power of community collaboration. ★

FARLEY ELEMENTARY

Compassion in action

Inspired by Linda Sue Park's nonfiction novel, "A Long Walk to Water," a group of sixth-grade students at Farley Elementary are developing and implementing business plans with a powerful goal in mind – raising \$1,000 for the nonprofit organization, Water for South Sudan. The organization was founded by Salva Dut, the main character in the book, who escaped southern Sudan during the civil war and overcame many unimaginable challenges before achieving his education and establishing the charity. Under the guidance of gifted facilitator Jennifer Hayden, the students organized and completed their first fundraiser – a snack stand during the annual book fair that raised an impressive \$200. To prepare for the fundraiser, they created marketing and promotional materials, planned sales times based on traffic and school schedules, purchased inventory, determined price points, and even wrote and delivered school announcements to promote their cause. Energized by their success, the students are already planning their next event, determined to reach their goal and provide even more support to Water for South Sudan. ★

INDIAN HILLS ELEMENTARY

Block-based programming

Fifth- and sixth-grade students in Mr. Flax's STEAM class are diving into hands-on learning experiences that ignite curiosity and creativity. At the start of the year, they tackled a desk-leveling project, using wrenches, levels, and measuring tools to adjust the heights of their desks. Those same students are now building and powering innovative Lego creations using the Lego Education SPIKE platform. Students are learning to build and program Legos equipped with electric motors and sensors. Their creations so far include dancing robots, wheeled machines, and even a cable car. "I give them the tools and teach them block-based programming along the way," said Flax. "I try not to make it too restrictive so they can be creative." This approach, rooted in his philosophy of sparking student curiosity,



extends beyond classroom assignments. Throughout the year, Flax introduces rotating displays featuring items like computer hardware, pulley systems, and even a

telescope, encouraging students to think big and explore the possibilities of STEAM learning. ★

JAY SHIDELER ELEMENTARY

The Blue Jay Brain Lab

Jay Shideler is launching a new initiative to help students improve their focus in fun and engaging ways. The Blue Jay Brain Lab, developed by school counselor Glynis Kickhaefer and instructional facilitator Amy Schneider, is designed to expand students' working memory using tools like BlazePod technologies. "We are creating The Blue Jay Brain Lab as a resource for students in need of improving their memory, attention, and executive functioning skills," explained Kickhaefer. "Our goal is to provide targeted interventions that make a real difference in their learning experiences." Some students face challenges with working memory, which can hinder their ability to retain and recall information. Through cognitive training, the lab aims to help these students build the skills they need to thrive in the classroom and beyond. The Blue Jay Brain Lab will be a place where students can grow their confidence, develop new strategies, and strengthen their minds. ★

PAULINE CENTRAL

Parents as Teachers community room

The newly constructed Parents as Teachers community room at Pauline Central is now open, expanding the district's ability to serve even more families. Rooted in the belief that parents are a child's first and most influential teachers, the Parents as Teachers program provides personalized family visits with trained support specialists, group connections, child developmental screenings, and referrals to valuable community resources. The program is offered free of charge to parents of children up to three years of age who reside within the district, empowering families with the knowledge and tools they need to support early development and lay a strong foundation for long-term success in school and beyond. In addition to Parents as Teachers programming, the community room serves as a hub for family outreach activities, including parenting workshops and food and nutrition classes. In the short time since its opening, it has already proven to be a valuable space for learning, growth, and connection for families in the district. ★

PAULINE SOUTH

Virtual reality

Students at Pauline South are exploring the world like never before with the use of virtual reality headsets. "Virtual reality has become a valuable teaching tool," said sixth-grade teacher Joe Taylor. "It offers students immersive, multi-sensory learning experiences and allows them to travel to places they could never visit in real life." So far, those places have included ancient civilizations that complement their Ancient World History lessons, the International Space Station, and the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam. Beyond history and geography, the headsets are being used to enhance math skills and create art in a virtual environment. By bringing abstract concepts to life, it is transforming how students learn, understand, and interact with the world around them. The possibilities are endless. ★



WANAMAKER ELEMENTARY

Snap circuits

A grant from the Auburn-Washburn Public Schools Foundation is helping fourth-graders at Wanamaker Elementary expand their understanding of electricity and circuits through the use of Snap Circuits. "The students love trying new combinations of the circuits and components to create projects," said teacher Kristin Hauser-Kromminga. So far, students have experimented with building circuits that illuminate light bulbs, produce sound from a speaker, blow a whistle, and transform a fan blade into a spinning propeller. "They are now challenging each other to create longer, more complex circuits that incorporate multiple elements," shared Hauser-Kromminga. "The added challenge of avoiding short circuits has made the process even more fun." ★



WASHBURN RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

Drone technology

Industrial technology teacher Alex Willis recognizes both the rising importance of drones in the modern workforce and the value of hands-on, real-world learning. With a vision to inspire and empower his students, Willis applied for a grant through the Auburn-Washburn Public Schools Foundation. His proposal was successfully funded, ensuring his students access to drones and a full range of accessories. They are now programming drones for flight, troubleshooting challenges, and problem-solving through trial and error. Beyond developing technical skills, they are deeply engaged in the learning process, building valuable competencies that will serve them well in the future. "Drone technology is opening their minds to innovation and imagination," said Willis. "My students eagerly look forward to these lessons. It's inspiring to see their excitement turn challenges into opportunities and dreams into flight." ★

SCHOOL HIGHLIGHTS

<<<continued from page 7

WASHBURN RURAL HIGH SCHOOL Gaming tablets

A grant from the Auburn-Washburn Public Schools Foundation is bringing digital art tools into the classroom. The VEIKK Creator A30 pen tablets allow students to explore their creativity by drawing and creating characters, backgrounds, and animations for video games. As the video game industry continues to grow and the demand for skilled designers increases, these tools provide invaluable opportunities for students to develop high-demand skills. "Early exposure to various career pathways is important," said Haley Schmitz, Computer Science teacher. "These tablets offer students a chance to succeed by learning new skills or building on those they have already mastered." In addition to high school classroom instruction, the tablets will be used to introduce small game design elements at coding camps and the annual STEAM Carnival. These efforts aim to spark creativity and broaden students' horizons in an ever-evolving tech world. ★

SPRING SEMESTER DATES

Jan. 6	First day of second semester
Jan. 20	No school
Feb. 13-14	No school
Mar. 14-21	No school
Apr. 18	No school
Apr. 21	No school (<i>unless snow make-up day</i>)
May 22	Last day of school

The complete 2024-2025 student calendar is available online at www.usd437.net/calendars.

RIBBON-CUTTING

<<<continued from page 5

SERVING THE ENTIRE DISTRICT

Beyond high school courses, the Innovation Center provides space for district events, such as the annual STEAM Carnival, which brings together hundreds of elementary and middle school students for hands-on exploration of science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics.

Hosted by the Washburn Rural High School Computer Science Honor Society (CSHS) in celebration of Computer Science Education Week, this year's event featured 25 interactive stations, including cubelet coding, robot programming, Sphero bowling, structural building challenges, and tectonic plate movement. The event exemplifies the power of innovation and collaboration, inspiring young minds to explore the many possibilities of STEAM. ★

