



# Kansas State Department of Education Insight Podcast Transcript

## Episode 8 – Graduation in Kansas

### **Intro:**

You're listening to the Kansas State Department of Education Insight podcast, where we bring you conversations and information on our vision to lead the world in the success of each student.

### **Host Dr. Randy Watson:**

Welcome back to the April version of the cast Insight podcast. I'm Randy Watson, commissioner of Education. We're so glad you come and hang out with us every month as we talk about the board's priorities and outcomes and and really focus on the great work going on in schools and how we're going to accomplish is really big goals in front of us throughout the state.

Thanks for tuning in every month. And we're excited as always. This month, no exception. Be talking about graduation and what's going on with the graduation task force and the possibility of maybe making some changes and graduation requirements, which we only do maybe once in a generation or so. So, it's really important work. So soon we're going to be talking to Dr. David Fernkopf, assistant director of curricular standards, virtual schools and all things graduation and Dr. Robyn Kelso, education program consultant here at KSDE, also around curriculum standards and graduation.

But before we get to that, let's celebrate some things. It's April, and other than everyone's doing their taxes, let's really talk about the important stuff of celebrating librarians. If I were a media specialist and staff and we want to thank you for all that you do in Kansas, what you know, I think about jobs just off the top of my head that really changed in the last 20 years.

I would put library media specialists and journalists probably in those two categories. Their worlds have just changed dramatically from the Dewey Decimal System. Of a card catalog system to the Internet and then all the changes that we've seen in journalism. So, thank you. Because that's a lot of learning. Almost a whole new trade for a librarian, a media specialist, and we appreciate your work and everything from not only helping kids choose great literary works and books to training kids.

How to differentiate between social media events and things that they read and just all the great work and research that that you helped students do etc. Also, we've been we're recognizing in April. Assistant Principal. Wow. I remember. I remember that was my first move into administration assistant principal. What were you know, you get to do a little bit of everything, but a lot of student management on a master schedules, a lot of activity work, a lot of nights.

And so, we just want to thank those assistant principals and shout out to all of those across Kansas and thank you for the work that you do. And finally, in our recognition in April, we want to shout out and not forget the paraprofessionals that work every day mostly with special needs students. But in some schools, we broaden that into regular education, too.

They are just remarkable people and really heroes every day with students and unsung heroes. We want to thank them for all of their work. And you can find a special story about Ricky Prado. We're proud of Ricky's work and the representation of the paraprofessionals. Go to our website, KSTP Dot org Doolittle. Search for that story that we did on him.

And we want to we want to really thank again those people that are doing that great work. Finally, kind of announcement, if you've been following and many of you know that Kansas has a state where I think most of us, we know it's sunflower. Most of us know the tree that cottonwood. And if you have one or lived next to one, you certainly know it every year when it sheds it's great cotton.

But did you know we're thinking about getting a state fruit and if you think about Kansas, that would really baffle you and well, that throws the banana out right there. Think about state fruit. But the efforts that are going on about what the state effort should be. We're getting a ton of credit to the Bertha Elementary School, Prairie Hills Unified School District 113.

They start a work on some civics engagement to go over a year ago. And they are proposing that the Sand Hill Plum become the state fruit. We're getting behind them just because we love civic engagement. Even if we don't love plums, we love civic engagement. So, we're all behind these students because by their work, they're very close and having a state designated fruit.

So, we want to say congratulations to all the hard work. They know that you just don't come up with an idea. And 30 days later becomes law that it takes a lot of effort and we'll see what happens. But we're going to encourage them through the rest of this session until the final gavel and hopefully they get that accomplished.

So great civic engagement going on up. It's about that elementary school in the Prairie Hill School District. We really appreciate your work, but a lot of celebration. Well, a lot of good work, a lot of great work. In April, we sat here doing the podcast today. It's one of the cooler days we probably are going to have in April.

So, we're still trying to get spring here as you're listening to this and may be already well into in the spring and great weather, but we're really happy as I mentioned earlier, to have Dr. David Fern cough. Dr. Robyn Kelso with us today to talk about graduation and specifically graduation task force. It's going to be reporting to the state board maybe as early as May.

That's kind of the tentative time frame, but certainly here late in the spring or early in the summer about their work. We're going to talk a lot about that. But first, David, let's just talk about why is graduation from high school important? And then we'll talk about the requirements with you and Robyn about what's going on with the test.

**Dr. David Fernkopf:**

We know that one of the important things for students to be successful after high school is that graduation at high school diploma can really help students be more successful once they leave high school. And so that's one of the big areas that we focus on with students is making sure they get all the requirements that are necessary so that they can get a high school diploma, so they can be more successful once they do leave high school.

**Host Dr. Randy Watson:**

Yeah, it's that basic education from ever since the forties or fifties, you go back far enough. It was in eighth grade education, and then you only went to high school if you're planning to go to college. But I don't know of many kids that come across eighth grade recognition that go, I'm done. No, no, we need you to finish high school and then we have to talk about those skill sets.

Right. Because there may be those have changed over the years. And as employers are saying, oh, well, let's look at people that don't have a college degree or a technical degree, what are the skill sets that are needed in the decade of the 2020s that will help students be successful? And I'm going to guess, David and Robyn, that we're not all in agreement across the state of Kansas, across the nation on what those should be, which is a good thing right we're discussing those.

So, we have a graduation task force made up of principals and teachers and just a lot of people and you guys are doing great work on that and helping coordinate that and giving them great insight. Robyn, let's just ask you, what are the areas in general that that task force is looking at and then will delve into some of the details because we want we want people, the listeners, to give us some feedback.

So, can you go over some of those areas?

**Dr. Robyn Kelso:**

After the task force was initially convened and we had some background information, it was kind of devolved into three subgroups or subcommittees, if you will. The first group was looking at credits, whether they need to add courses or delete courses. What is high school and all of that look like in the 21st century.

The second group was dealing with the question of market value assets. That's like your high school diploma, plus a trade certification, plus some college credits. However, that's defined by a local district and the last group was looking at competency based education, which is a departure from what we've normally done here in Kansas. It's looking at how a student achieves mastery of a competency with no specific time set for that student.

It's just when they reach that mastery, they move on.

**Host Dr. Randy Watson:**

Yeah, excellent. So, three big buckets. If I think of them, which is what courses do we need or not need? Can we move at a pace and show you that we know something without spending all day and in a class or all year and a course? And then are there other things that we ought to add on community service or an active score in conjunction?

Many, many things with high school diploma So, David and Robert, let's now dig a little deeper. David, let's start kind of the courses. Sure. So, let's just talk about within that little subgroup Well, these are none of these are little. What are some of the things that are being considered and talked about? Nothing's been final because as I mentioned earlier, where I'm going to mention several times, we need your feedback and we're going to give that out to you at the end of this. How do you give feedback to the committee?

What courses? What's the discussion that's going on around what to add or what to do?

**Dr. David Fernkopf:**

Sure. So there's been lots of conversations, and currently 21 credits is what is required for graduation. But at the state minimum, here in Kansas and with all the conversations going on, they're still leaning at that 21 credits just changing a little bit what those 21 credits are to get to that state minimum, recognizing that high schools can most definitely add more to that requirements before the students eligible to graduate at their local high school. One area that's been looked at is fine arts, and there's been conversations rather the current requirement of the one for credit of fine arts is going to stay, or rather they may drop that down to a point five credit. Definitely some conversations going on about that.

Another area that's been looked at is the issue says requirements. I believe it's three right now, and they're looking at perhaps lowering that so that they can utilize a few. The other courses that haven't been required in the past to be required And Robyn, I think you might have a little bit more insight.

**Dr. Robyn Kelso:**

Yeah, the research is bearing out, as you both know, that we've got some students who don't need that four-year degree necessarily. They want to be a cosmetologist. And so, what does that look like for them? And how do they get that licensure and how do they get that training? And so, looking at courses that not only encompass the student who's going to college, to be a doctor, to be an engineer, to be a lawyer, but also those courses that may help a student go from a CNA to a CMA to an R.N. and how can we facilitate that process starting in high school, along with the traditional core courses and the fine arts and humanities?

**Host Dr. Randy Watson:**

I think any adult that that's gone through a high school in the last 40 years would say, well, there are just some courses I question whether I needed. And that would vary, I think, you know, across. But you hear that a lot maybe about math, and I don't know if I needed that that high-level math don't know.

You know, if I went into a humanities. If you're in an engineering, you're probably saying, I don't know if I needed that Shakespeare unit. And so, we hear that all the time. Some of the things I hear, I'm just a composer to both of you. Can't they just balance or checkbook and don't they know about loans, just personal financial literacy?

I hear some about computer science coming up? Of course, I'm like you guys, as it were, discussing fine arts. We need more fine arts. You know, an appreciation, the culture of the arts. Can you talk about a little bit, either one of you about the changing society? We certainly wouldn't have been talking about coding or computer science back when as old as I am, you'd go to college and they were on you brought in your your cards to run into the mainframe because the personal computer had yet to be really a mainstream thing.

Can you talk about those kinds of things we hear from the public?

**Dr. Robyn Kelso:**

And that's what our survey has really shown some fruit around that idea of some kind of personal finance or financial literacy, however you'd like to frame it or title it. Just that idea of, you know, or even just adulting one or one. Can students change attire?

Can they balance a checkbook or do they know how to advocate for themselves, you know, whether that's in a bank loan situation or in a car loan situation so that you don't necessarily maybe get taken advantage of? The survey that's out there is really showing that the public feels that that is something that's needed. And so that is something we are looking at and having conversations around adding that however, it ends up being titled Personal Finance Financial Literacy as a Requirement for Graduation.

**Dr. David Fernkopf:**

I've seen comments on the survey everything from, you know, winning the well-rounded student that can be successful, especially if they change their mind after they're out of high school, that they still have some skill sets. They can fall back on what they've learned from high school, but also that, you know, we're preparing these students for jobs that may not even be created yet.

So trying to make sure they have some skills that they can draw upon that maybe they didn't think they needed at first when they're graduating but even a few years down the road, they could draw upon those skills to use them.

**Host Dr. Randy Watson:**

One of those, you know, one of the fastest growing fields in Kansas across the United States cybersecurity we weren't thinking much about that.

And I think even with the Russian invasion in Ukraine, there was early talk about cybersecurity at a national level. And certainly, we've all probably experience that, you know, with a debit card or a credit card from time to time. Lots of discussions and everyone's got an opinion. And as Robyn said, when we get to the end, we'll specifically tell you how to give your opinion.

But, we do have looking at are there courses that should be diminished? Should there be courses increased? And then, of course, local districts will have flexibility of adding their own flavor to this. So we just have a base requirement. David, the second part of that, though, is this mastery of competencies or can I show you that I know this stuff without setting through a whole year or a whole day of a course and that's a very simple generalization. Delve into that. Let's talk about what does that look like? What does that mean?

**Dr. David Fernkopf:**

Absolutely. Well, the first thing that we discovered as a task force is we're looking into things that schools are already allowed to, but they may not be well aware. And through back in the time with QPA is the principal can have the ability to sign off on a student credit without that credit going through the traditional credits through the high school.

So, for example, a student might be in the local drama program in the community and performing if he plays well, you could give student credit for that. That could be their fine arts credit and things of that nature that students are doing odd things outside of the school day that could count towards the student's requirements to graduate so they can use their time at school to use and other credits help them be even more prepared for college and after high school.

**Dr. Robyn Kelso:**

It really gets away from this idea of seat time, don't you think that?

**Dr. David Fernkopf:**

Oh, absolutely.

**Host Dr. Randy Watson:**

And see, time could still be an option, you know, for I like the idea, the traditional education, but what if I don't? I have two examples that I just, I think, illustrate this very well. These are these now are old.

Both of these young people are well into adulthood and successful. But I remember a few years ago, the Olympics were getting close, Summer Olympics. And we had a young lady who was in upper middle school and was very good gymnast. And she was, in fact, very close to making the United States Olympic team. I mean, she was going to be close either an alternate or on it in going to the Summer Olympics.

To do that, she needed to drive a fair ways every day for practice, which was 4 and 5 hours a day. And she said to her school Can I just not take P.E.? Can we move here to the last hour of the day? I get out of that, not happy because of gymnastics and then go and do that and count as my credit.

And that would also get me home a little earlier. I have a lot of homework. And of course, the answer was, no, we can't do that because, you know, everyone's got to take B, but in this case, school could easily and can do it now. But we really want to emphasize that. Or I know someone else that got a recording contract in Nashville issued a CD, I mean, you know, an album and had to miss some school and had to make up time.

And here we have a recording contract so trading out those competencies, we want to make sure schools understand, parents understand. Maybe that's an option. Maybe it's part of an option. As you also look at seat time, maybe it's in the entire option for any of you students are that are parents that have had students in alternative schools. No, they do that really well.

This is just bringing that a little bit more mainstream Now, Robyn and David, let's take a look at that last area market value assets, which even for most educators are going scratching their head, going, what in the heck does that mean? Maybe a simple as I have a high school graduation plus something else. So, Robyn, can you start as Dave and then jump in?

What does that really mean? Give us some examples of what schools could add that really when we say market value, it's what the world of business or industry work would want to see. Right?

**Dr. Robyn Kelso:**

Right.

So, Casey, KCKPS is probably the district that does this the best. And they've got several, as I understand it, they have several different options You get your diploma, plus you leave close to your associates, plus you join JROTC for years and you leave with your boot camp taken care of and you're ready to move in to your next stage of training for the military. Plus, you know, you're on your path to your credential industry recognized credential whether that's plumbing, cosmetology, electricity, it gets you. And often times in that industry peers, the school has a partnership with a nearby community college that has a similar pathway. So, the transition should be fairly seamless. And like I said, Casey, KPS is one that's really out in front on this just doing a phenomenal job.

And I don't know if my colleague David wants to add to that.

**Host Dr. Randy Watson:**

Yeah. Yeah, they've been doing it for quite a while.

**Dr. David Fernkopf:**

Absolutely. At the last board meeting, we were able to have Valley Falls come and speak about the work that they're doing in their district, and they have numerous different things that their students were doing outside of just the regular credits required for the student to graduate and I think that would be a great resource to go back and to listen to is what's going on at Valley Falls.

**Host Dr. Randy Watson:**

Excellent. Now, David, Robyn just gave some great examples and certainly the diploma plus programing in Casey Kay is a great example. Okay. But I think people are going to hear that and go, Well, so I have to have an associate degree. No, we're talking about individualizing that, right? Individualized that.

**Dr. David Fernkopf:**

So, you have your individual plans, a study.

Each student should have that working through their high school years. And that helps the district know what the students wanting to do and also helps the student explore and really find a path that they might be interested in and helping them maybe even have a certificate. And that area says it's welding. Maybe they're able to take some classes on welding so that when they get out of high school, they aren't starting completely from scratch on trying to get a job in welding. They'll have some certificates they can fall back on do.

**Host Dr. Randy Watson:**

Yeah. Lots of variety tailored to the individual needs of students. So three big buckets. We're looking at courses to add or delete. We're looking at how can students maybe show that I know they have the knowledge or the skills in this course without attending it or attending all of it.

And then what are those other skills or things I can show that will enhance me beyond the high school education?

Now, people are listening and go on. I got some ideas. I got some ideas what we should be doing. How do they do that? How do they give input? And they need to be doing it now. In the month of April, because the recommendations may come as soon as the state board meeting in May.

So, David, tell us how we do that.

**Dr. David Fernkopf:**

Absolutely. So, there's a web link that will you should be able to provide and it's a very quick survey just to give some feedback. It's an open answer in question. So, you can definitely put your opinions on what you think would be best for our students here in Kansas. So, we'd love to hear from you.



So please, but make sure to do it quickly because that survey will be closing sooner than later and we will make sure to hear from as many people as possible.

**Host Dr. Randy Watson:**

And it doesn't matter whether you're an educator or parent, we're asking everyone so if you're an educator, you're going to church, give it out there. You know, hey, get to feel you're at bunko.

Let's go. Let's get this going. It doesn't matter. You're Kansan. We want your input, so you simply go to KSDE.org. You can link up right there. You also can be checking out our website, our social media on Twitter, and on Facebook. And you can clearly see those links. And if nothing else works and you say, listen, this podcast, I can't find anything. You give us a call here at the agency and we'll get you linked up to that because we want your input.

David Robyn, anything I've left out around the graduation task force or the importance of graduation that we ought to leave our listeners with today.

**Dr. Robyn Kelso:**

The only thing I can think of, and this is, of course, just some very limited research, but I came across a study several weeks, months ago.

The student who has that high school diploma over the course of their lifetime is going to earn \$1,000,000 more than the student who does not complete their high school education. So just from a dollars and cents perspective, student sometimes say, well, they're not paying me to be here. Well, here's the payoff. You know, you get that high school diploma your lifetime earnings are going to go up substantially.

**Host Dr. Randy Watson:**

Yes, very, very good. Dr. Robyn Kelso, Dr. David Fernkopf, thank you for being with us and talking all things graduation and graduation task force. We thank you for always coming to our podcast for the great source of information about what's going on in education in Kansas. I look forward to being with you in the month of May as we continue our discussion around the State Board goals and outcomes and how the people in Kansas are transforming education for our students and families in Kansas so that they have a really great life ahead of them.

Thanks, and we look forward to talking with you in May.