The Kansas Learning First Alliance met on Thursday, October 17, 2020 at KNEA. Attendees were welcomed by KLFA Chair Dr. Laurie Curtis. They heard presentations on supporting public schools, Kansas teacher retention, safety in an electronic environment, and efforts to fight vaping. The KLFA Member Spotlight featured the Jones Institute for Educational Excellence and the Kansas Association for Gifted, Talented and Creative. KLFA members also discussed the importance of voter turnout in 2019 and 2020 and how to increase student engagement in elections.

Learning Forward Kansas Executive Director, Dayna Richardson, briefed attendees on the numerous online resources available to celebrate Public Schools Week, Feb. 24-28, 2020. The resources include sample social media content and suggested legislative resolutions honoring public schools. KASB Advocacy and Outreach Specialist, Leah Fliter, asked the group to consider creating a substantial and visible Public Schools Week event in the Kansas Statehouse in 2020 and attendees agreed.

The Dean of Kansas State University’s College of Education, Dr. Debbie Mercer, presented on retaining Kansas teachers in the profession. “Recruitment alone will not work,” Mercer said; state and school district leaders must also provide support to keep teachers in the profession and in Kansas. Mercer said research shows that quality preparation through teacher preparation coursework and professional feedback lead to higher teacher retention rates. She noted teacher turnover is greater in smaller, rural, economically disadvantaged school districts. That “revolving door” in turn leads to teacher shortages, harms student achievement and costs time and money to rectify, Mercer said. Mercer’s presentation is also available on the KLFA website.

Dr. Roger Caswell, NBCT, updated attendees on the numerous resources and supports available to educators through the Jones Institute for Educational Excellence at Emporia State University. His presentation is available on the KLFA website.

Robyn Aeschliman spotlighted the work of the Kansas Association for Gifted, Talented and Creative. See the KLFA website for more information.

A panel discussion on Safety in an Electronic Age featured Dr. Mike Ribble of the Mid-America Association for Computers in Education (MACE). Dr. Kent Reed of the Kansas Department of Education; and Kansas Association of School Boards attorney Angie Stallbaumer.

Dr. Ribble emphasized the importance of educating students and society about digital citizenship and how to use technology responsibly and effectively. “It’s not just handing a student a device,” Ribble said. “It’s what they do with it.” Ribble’s presentation is posted on the KLFA website. MACE became a KLFA member at the October 17 meeting.

Dr. Reed reviewed for attendees the work of the state’s Blue Ribbon Task Force on Bullying, which will make policy or legislative recommendations to the State Board of Education in January. The task force met across the state throughout the spring and summer to gather public testimony and receive the latest research and information about the impact of bullying on students and their education. The review may be found on the KLFA website.
Ms. Stallbaumer’s remarks focused on the legal and emotional impacts of unwise social media posts; sexting, bullying, and cyber bullying; free speech rights of students and staff; and school districts’ rights and responsibilities around student and staff speech in a digital age.

Mark Thompson (Kansas State Department of Education), then updated KLFA members on the state’s efforts to fight vaping, particularly in schools. The State Board of Education established a task force that makes monthly recommendations the board. Resources include a Vape-Free Schools toolkit available here. Thompson said the State Board is considering requiring schools to have “vape-free” policies in order to achieve accreditation. He said the Board is generally reluctant to impose mandates on local school districts but considers vaping a public health crisis.

Terry Forsyth (KNEA) and Leah Fliter (KASB) led a discussion on the importance of voting and civic engagement in 2019 and 2020. School board and city commission elections are in 2019 and the 2020 elections will feature numerous state and federal races.

KASB, KNEA, USA-Kansas and the Kansas High School Activities Association are working with Kansas Secretary of State Scott Schwab to promote the “Students Serve” initiative that encourages high school students to work at polling places. “Students Serve” details are available on the KLFA website.

For more information about KLFA, visit the KLFA Website and/or look for “Kansas Learning First Alliance” on Facebook.

Future KLFA meetings scheduled for the 2019-2020 academic year are:
Tuesday, January 23, 2020 9:30 am, at KNEA Building, 715 SW 10th St., Topeka
Thursday, April 9, 2020, 9:30 am, at KNEA Building, 715 SW 10th St., Topeka