

# Kan education commissioner works for student success in political realm

**By Tim Carpenter**  
Kansas Reflector

TOPEKA — Kansas State Department of Education commissioner Randy Watson has an unobstructed view of financial, political and social battles about how best to educate nearly 500,000 school children in Kansas.

In addition to regular collaboration with members of the Kansas State Board of Education, he routinely visits classrooms to absorb perspectives on everything from the basics of reading and math to human sexuality, special education, summer school and the training of current and future teachers. He wades into issues of access to computer technology and cellphones in schools. He’s there for debates on appropriation of state and federal tax dollars to public education, as well as how that funding was deployed in more than 280 local school districts across Kansas.

“What makes me want to get up in the morning is trying to help young people and the people that serve those young people do their job well. There’s rarely a week that I’m not in schools,” Watson said on the Kansas Reflector podcast. “I not a politician, but I deal in a political environment all the time. At the end of the day, again, what gets me up is: How can we help people that educate kids have a great environment to do so?”

The state Board of Education has a constitutional responsibility for public education in Kansas and the duty to hire a state education commissioner to assist with crafting policy, rules and regulations aimed at fulfilling the promise of education in preschool to high school classrooms.

Watson, a former teacher and superintendent, recently recommended the state Board of Education and local school boards consider working together on a special summer school program to help the students in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and grades 1 and 2 gain some academic ground in the subjects of reading and math. The COVID-19 pan-

dem set children back at all levels, he said, but recovery has been influenced by separate decisions to reduce the number of school days while maintaining the required total of annual hours of instruction.

“A lot of research says if you’re not at that grade level by the time you hit third grade, it’s really hard to catch up, and most do not,” he said. “In fact, more fall further behind.”

He said a summer program would be voluntary for students and could involve 90 minutes of instruction daily. Students could come together for four-day weeks and gain about 50 hours of instruction time, he said.

“If that was with one of our many great teachers in Kansas, what could we do? We could stop the summer slide for sure,” he said.

### Public and private

Of course, the Kansas Legislature and the state’s governor have large roles in terms of funding and policy of public education. That involves politics and, at times, controversy.

Members of the 2025 Legislature attempted, but failed, to gain traction with a bill providing as much as \$125 million in annual state funding in the form of state income tax breaks to families of students in private schools. Similar proposals to ease the financial burden of enrolling 26,000 students to accredited and unaccredited private schools have surfaced in Kansas, but those also met the fate of Senate Bill 75. The bill introduced by Republican Sen. Renee Erickson, a former middle school principal in Wichita, didn’t advance in the House or Senate.

“Some states have gone full force into that,” Watson said. “Other states have pulled back. Some states have put that up to a vote. I can tell you currently where the state board is on that. They believe that public funds should go to public education.”

Watson, too, observed as the Legislature placed in state law, despite Democratic

Gov. Laura Kelly’s veto, contents of a bill that dealt on two objectives. Part of the bill granted the state Board of Education authority to set compensation of elected board members, while the balance mandated public schools that teach anything about human development to also present students with a computer-generated animation or high-definition ultrasound video of fetal development. The law says the presentation must last at least 3 minutes.

A battle between Kansans for Life and Planned Parenthood illustrated the core of the bill was about influencing opinions of school children on abortion rights, which were affirmed by the Kansas Supreme Court and by Kansas voters. Statehouse debate on the fetal development curriculum bill touched on the state Board of Education’s constitutional role in establishing educational standards and the responsibility of local school boards to determine precise curriculum.

“The state board was opposed to that bill. It had nothing to do with the content,” Watson said. “What is shown in a video is a local board decision, and the state board said, while we may or may not like the contents, that is a local decision, and we don’t think the Kansas Legislature should weigh in on it.”

In terms of compensation, the Legislature maneuvered to nearly double their own salaries on Jan. 1. The decision was made to decouple the state Board of Education from the Legislature in terms of daily compensation for travel costs and expenses tied to work for the state. Toward the end of the 2025 session, a bill surfaced with the human development curriculum mandate and a provision directing the state Board of Education to set its own compensation rate. It didn’t include funding to the state Board of Education to address any costs. The state Board of Education plans to take up the issue during a meeting in May.

“They’ll certainly have to do something with it, because the new law says you shall

set your rate. So even if they set it where it is now, they’re going to have to take some action to do that,” Watson said.

### Governor, president

In January, the governor proposed the Legislature pay the cost of meals for children enrolled in the state’s reduced-price school meal program. She suggested lawmakers allocate \$5.5 million to provide free rather than subsidized meals to about 36,000 students statewide. With federal assistance, Kansas currently provides free meals to about 40% of students in public schools or approximately 200,000 youths.

Kelly’s idea was for the state to cover the reduced-meal cost for each child at 30 cents for breakfast and 40 cents for lunch.

“We can reduce childhood hunger, we can reduce the stigma our low-income students face in our school cafeterias, and we can increase academic success,” Kelly said.

Watson said the Republican-led Legislature didn’t buy into the governor’s idea for supplementing the cost of school meals for children in lower-income families.

“What Governor Kelly was proposing is putting some state money into that, but that was not adopted in this legislative session,” he said.

Watson also reflected on lessons learned through former President George W. Bush’s ambitious No Child Left Behind program from 2002 to 2015. It was designed to hold schools accountable for learning among all students, including subgroups of low-income students, students with disabilities and students of color. The objective was to have every student reach proficient levels in math and reading.

NCLB became controversial because it penalized schools that didn’t show annual improvement on standardized student tests. State assessments should be viewed as a measure of how students were

doing academically instead of the lone metric of success or failure, Watson said. “President Bush was thinking, we want kids to learn how to read and do math. It’s a great goal. It’s a noble goal. And I would applaud that,” Watson said. “When we put that into law, I don’t think he could have foreseen what the consequences were going to be if you were going to require that. What happened is that, at least in Kansas, I won’t speak to other states,

but I think it’s pretty typical teachers said, ‘Well, then we won’t teach science. We won’t teach social studies. Oh, we’ll cut recess out. We teach to that test because it became so high stakes.’”

He said NCLB affirmed chasing student test scores just to obtain a mark acceptable to politicians shouldn’t be the primary focus of a classroom teacher, school principal, district superintendent or school board member.

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### LEGAL S

(First published in the Abilene Reflector-Chronicle, Tuesday, April 22nd, 2025)  
**IN THE DISTRICT COURT OF DICKINSON COUNTY, KANSAS NOTICE OF HEARING AND NOTICE TO CREDITORS THE STATE OF KANSAS TO ALL PERSONS CONCERNED:**

**IN THE MATTER OF THE ESTATE of BRUCE LEON TAYLOR, Deceased.**  
Case No. DK-2025-PR-000027

You are hereby notified that on April 16th, 2025. A Petition for Probate of Will and Issuance of Letters Testamentary, under the Kansas Simplified Estates Act, was been filed in this court by Joan Taylor as named alternate Executrix in the Last Will and Testament of Bruce Leon Taylor, deceased, dated November 12, 2008, requesting that the instrument attached thereto be admitted to probate and record as the Last Will and Testament of the decedent and that Letters Testamentary, under the Kansas Simplified Estates Act, be issued to her as Executrix, to serve without bond. You are further advised that under the provisions of the Kansas Simplified Estates Act, the court need not supervise administration of the estate, and no notice of any action of the Executrix, or other proceedings in the administration of the estate will be given, except for notice of final settlement of the

decedent's estate. You are further advised if written objection to simplified administration are filed with the court, the court may order that supervised administration ensue. You are required to file your written defenses to the Petition on or before May 22nd, 2025 at 11:00 A.M. in the District Court, in Abilene, Dickinson County Kansas, at which time and place the cause will be heard. Should you fail to file your written defenses, judgment and decree will be entered in due course upon the Petition. All creditors are notified to exhibit their demands against the estate within four (4) months from the date of the first publication of this notice, as provided by law, or if the identity of the creditor is !nown or reasonable ascertainable, thirty (30) days after actual notice was given as provided by law, and if their demands are not thus exhibited, they shall be forever barred.

Joan Taylor, Petitioner

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If you are anywhere in your journey with substance use disorder,

I want you to stop, look around and open your heart.

Revel in the abundance of your existence. See how small substance use disorder can be when sat next to all that you are or ever could be.

Fill your existence with beauty, purpose and a life of service.


And your substance use disorder—your history of addiction, the things you may have done that you are not proud of—will one day be small enough to deal with while allowing you space to live this life of joy.

Hold on.

We are not the sum of our scars but rather a beautiful mosaic of the life they hold together.

—Joseph  
Washington, DC  
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