



**Kearney R-I School District  
2010 Online Patron Survey  
Final Report – February 18, 2010**

In February 2010, a confidential online survey was made available to the patrons of the Kearney R-I School District, seeking their evaluation of the district's performance, their thoughts on potential changes necessitated by the current financial challenges, and their acknowledgement of where they turn for district news and information.

The survey was placed on the district's Web site for a 10-day period, and its availability was promoted actively through various channels. Paper copies of the survey were also made available to individuals who either had limited access to the internet, or who simply preferred to participate via this method.

By the time the survey closed, 1,568 individuals had taken part, with solid representation from all demographic and geographic segments of the district.

Generally speaking, the respondents expressed strong support for the people, programs, facilities and district/patron relationship efforts of the Kearney R-I School District. They had some clear thoughts on the subject of which alternatives the district should pursue first in its budget cutting/revenue enhancement efforts. And, they reported a number of sources that they consult for district news, suggesting a very active, engaged patron population.

This report presents the findings by topic area, with commentary about the results and all the questions, answers and appropriate cross-tabulations included.

## Topic: Rating of district people

The survey opened with a series of questions in which respondents were asked to “grade” the district’s performance – either A, B, C, D or F – and then explain their reasons, if they chose to give a specific area a grade of “C” or lower.

To make the presentation of this set of questions seem less intimidating to the survey participant looking at the questions on a computer screen, they were divided into logical categories, the first of which was “people.” Specifically, respondents were asked to grade the performance of the district’s teachers, principals, Superintendent and School Board.

To simplify the analysis of the results, a five-point weighted scale is used, in which each grade of “A” is worth 5 points, down to each grade of “F” being worth 1 point. The points are totaled and divided by the number of respondents who offered a grade, rather than saying “don’t know” or simply skipping the question.

With this approach, it is important to remember that a grade of 5.00 (or an “A”) would require all survey participants who offered a grade to choose “A.” Given the near impossibility of such a feat, a grade of 4.00 (or a “B”) is seen as the dividing line between those areas of strength, and those which may need attention. (Actually, a score as low as 3.80 is still the statistical equivalent of “B,” meaning that scores below this mark may merit action.)

Under this scoring system, all the “people” areas of the district are rated at a “B” (again, or its statistical equivalent) or better, with teachers leading the way at 4.34.

A total of 422 respondents who gave at least one of these areas a “C” or lower chose to answer the following question – which asked what the district could do to improve in these areas. The most prevalent themes had to do with the performance of some of the district’s principals and assistant principals, the district’s spending too much time, energy and resources on athletics, and the need for the Superintendent to be more visible in the community.

*Note: The graded items are displayed in the order in which they appeared in the survey.*

- 1. As you know, students in school are graded based on the quality of their work. Thinking now about the Kearney R-I School District, what grade would you give the following PEOPLE in the district? Results on the grading questions are shown on a 5-point scale, in which 5 points are given for an “A,” down to 1 point given for an “F.”**

Item	5-point scale rating
Performance of the teachers	4.34
Performance of school principals	4.16
Performance of the Superintendent	4.11
Performance of the School Board	3.94

2. **If you gave any of the above areas a C, D or F, what can the district do to improve in these areas? (Please be as specific as possible.)** *A total of 898 “C,” “D” and “F” grades were given, and 422 respondents chose to answer this question. The most frequent comments were:*

- The district has too many assistant principals (many of whom are not responsive to parents)
- The district doesn’t listen to patrons
- Too much focus on athletics
- The Superintendent needs to be more visible
- The district inconsistently applies its policies (homework, discipline, etc.)

**Topic: Rating of programs and facilities**

Following the same approach, respondents were then asked to grade a variety of program and facility areas, including extracurricular activities, class sizes, and quality of school facilities.

Once again, all the areas scored above a “B” (or its statistical equivalent). “The variety and quality of extracurricular activities” led the way at 4.27, followed by “quality of school facilities” at 4.21.

The slightly more modest grades for vo-tech programming and the quality of technology available to students carried over into the follow-up question. Those who gave the district a “C” or lower on at least one of these areas highlighted perceived shortcomings in technology, class sizes, poor maintenance/cleanliness, and the district’s vo-tech programming as areas which need improvement.

3. **What grade would you give the following PROGRAMS or FACILITIES in the district?**

<b>Item</b>	<b>5-point scale rating</b>
Quality of school facilities	4.21
Upkeep and maintenance of school facilities	4.12
Quality of technology available to students	3.84
Quality of vocational and/or technical programming for students	3.90
The variety and quality of extracurricular activities	4.27
Class sizes, meaning the number of students in each classroom	4.12

4. If you gave any of the above areas a “C,” “D” or “F,” what can the school district do to improve in these areas? (Please be as specific as possible.) A total of 1,579 “C,” “D” or “F” grades were given, and 595 respondents chose to answer this question. The most frequent comments were:

- The district’s technology is out of date
- Class sizes are too big
- Maintenance is subpar; facilities are not clean
- Need to improve the vo-tech program

**Topic: Rating of the district’s performance**

The final set of grading questions focused on topics that could loosely be grouped under the category of “performance,” including safety of students, preparation of students for college, vocational training or employment, and value for the tax dollars spent.

It was in this section where the district received its lowest grades – although they were not particularly low.

Specifically, “the district’s efforts to report its plans and progress to patrons” was rated at 3.78, while “the district’s responsiveness to patrons concerns” was rated at 3.77. Again, while these were below the statistical equivalent of a “B” (3.80), they were so close to that mark that they would best be described as meriting monitoring – not a cause for alarm.

Those who gave one of these seven areas a grade of “C” or lower primarily said that too much money was spent on sports, that the school district does not prepare students adequately for college, that not enough money is spent on the arts programs, and that the district “need to listen to patrons.”

5. What grade would you give the district on its PERFORMANCE in the following areas?

Item	5-point scale rating
Safety of students	4.47
Preparation of students for college, vocational training or employment	4.06
Value for the tax dollars spent	3.98
The district’s efforts to report its plans and progress to patrons	3.78
The district’s efforts to involve the community in decision-making	3.89
The district’s record on making and fulfilling promises	3.87
The district’s responsiveness to patron concerns	3.77

**6. If you gave any of the above areas a “C,” “D” or “F,” what can the district do to improve in these areas? (Please be as specific as possible.)** *A total of 2,410 “C,” “D” or “F” grades were given, and 616 respondents chose to answer this question. The most frequent comments were:*

- Too much money is spent on sports
- Students who graduate from Kearney are not ready for college
- Not enough money is spent on the arts programs
- Need to listen more to patrons

### **Topic: District strengths and weaknesses**

To transition out of the grading section and into the questions dealing with the financial choices the district is evaluating, the survey asked respondents to provide their thoughts on the district’s strengths and weaknesses.

The most frequently mentioned strengths were the district’s teachers, followed by its athletics programming, its small class sizes and its parent/community involvement. Areas needing improvement included technology for students, a greater focus on academics, better facilities, hiring and retaining good teachers, and better pay for teachers.

**7. What’s the greatest strength of the Kearney R-I School District?** *A total of 1,044 respondents answered this question. The most frequent comments were:*

- Teachers (very frequent)
- Athletics/sports programs
- Small class sizes
- Parent/community involvement

**8. What one area needs the most improvement in the school district?** *A total of 974 respondents answered this question. The most frequent comments were:*

- Need better technology/computers for students
- Need more focus on academics/support and acknowledgement of academic accomplishments
- Need better facilities
- Need to hire/retain good teachers
- Need better pay for teachers

## **Topic: Rank order of potential financial steps**

The heart of the survey introduced information about the current financial challenges facing all school districts in the state of Missouri, and then shared a list of 11 potential steps that the Kearney R-I School District could take to reduce costs or increase revenue. After reading the list, respondents were asked to rate their first, second and third choices.

To simplify the analysis of the results from this set of questions, a three-point weighted scale was used, in which each “first choice” received three points, each “second choice” received two points, and each “third choice” received one point. The points were totaled, in an effort to better understand the comprehensive views of the respondents.

In the case of the Kearney R-I School District, five options clearly separated themselves from the rest:

- Institute a “Pay to Play” system, where students would need to pay a fee to participate in sports, band or other extracurricular activities – 1,691 points
- Reduce non-instructional staff, such as support staff and Administration – 1,360 points
- Eliminate any renovation of school facilities – 1,168 points
- Increase taxes – 1,083 points
- Eliminate field trips – 1,023 points
- The remaining six items ranged from 595 points down to 185 points, suggesting that they aren’t seen by many respondents as a preferred option

To understand the differences by demographic characteristics and where the respondent lived in the district, the three-point weighted scale analysis was also conducted for these individual subgroups. Rather than display the specific point values (which vary significantly, based on the number of respondents in the subgroup), the charts below display the rank order.

In reviewing these charts, it is interesting to note that older residents (55 years or older), those who had never had a child in the Kearney R-I School District, and relatively new residents (up to five years) varied most significantly in their rank order. However, there was no disagreement on the first choice among any groups, and very little differences of opinion on items two through four within the subgroups.

Additionally, respondents were offered the opportunity to add their ideas beyond the provided list. These results were fairly unremarkable, and focused on cutting frills, instituting a wage freeze and eliminating items that didn’t benefit the classroom.

**9-11** As you may know, school districts across Missouri are facing challenges, due to the state’s budget crisis and to the decreases in the assessed value of property, which impacts the amount of revenue that is collected locally. School districts across the state are working right now to make decisions about how to address this challenge by finding ways to reduce expenses and increase revenue by finding new sources. Below is a list of ideas that some districts are either considering, or have already implemented. None of these are very appealing, because they mean a change. But, some of them may be necessary. As Kearney R-I looks to its future and the changes it might have to make, which of the following do you think should be the first step the district should consider taking, if it had to? What is the second step that you would recommend the district consider taking, if it had to? What is the third step that you would recommend the district consider taking, if it had to? *Results below are point values on a 3-point scale, in which each “first step” received three points, each “second step” received two points, and each “third step” received one point.*

<b>Item</b>	<b>3-point weighted scale points</b>
Institute a “Pay to Play” system, where students would need to pay a fee to participate in sports, band or other extracurricular activities	1,691
Reduce non-instructional staff, such as support staff and administration	1,360
Eliminate any renovation of school facilities	1,168
Increase taxes	1,083
Eliminate field trips	1,023
Eliminate any upgrading of technology for staff	595
Institute transportation costs for families whose children ride the bus to school	549
Eliminate school clubs	414
Reduce arts programs	307
Increase class sizes (by having fewer teachers)	230
Eliminate any upgrading of technology for students	185

**Cross-tabulation: Rank order of choices by three-point weighted scale points by elementary school drawing area and length of time living in the school district. Note: n>equals the number of respondents in each group.**

Item	Overall	Dogwood (n=377)	Southview (n=357)	Hawthorne (n=283)	Kearney (n=245)		Up to 5 years (n=328)	More than 5 years to 15 years (n=617)	More than 15 years (n=479)
Institute a “Pay to Play” system, where students would need to pay a fee to participate in sports, band or other extracurricular activities	1,691	1	1	1	1		1	1	1
Reduce non-instructional staff, such as support staff and Administration	1,360	2	2	2	2		3	2	2
Eliminate any renovation of school facilities	1,168	3	3	4	4		4	3	3
Increase taxes	1,083	4	5	3	3		2	4	5
Eliminate field trips	1,023	5	4	5	5		5	5	4
Eliminate any upgrading of technology for staff	595	6	6	7	6		6	6	7
Institute transportation costs for families whose children ride the bus to school	549	7	7	6	7		7	7	6
Eliminate school clubs	414	8	8	8	8		8	9	8
Reduce arts programs	307	9	9	9	9		9	8	10
Increase class sizes (by having fewer teachers)	230	10	10	10	10		10*	10	9
Eliminate any upgrading of technology for students	185	11	11	11	11		10*	11	11

*\*Point values were equal*

**Cross-tabulation: Rank order of choices by three-point weighted scale points by age and by presence of current district student in the household (“student, yes”), past district student, but no current student (“student, past”), or no district student ever in the household (“student, never”). Note: n=equals the number of respondents in each group.**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Overall</b>	<b>18 to 34 years old (n=289)</b>	<b>35 to 54 years old (n=1,006)</b>	<b>55 years old and older (n=141)</b>	<b>Student, yes (n=1,094)</b>	<b>Student, past (n=175)</b>	<b>Student, never (n=168)</b>
Institute a “Pay to Play” system, where students would need to pay a fee to participate in sports, band or other extracurricular activities	1,691	1	1	1	1	1	1
Reduce non-instructional staff, such as support staff and Administration	1,360	2	2	2	2	2	4
Eliminate any renovation of school facilities	1,168	4	3	4	3	5	6
Increase taxes	1,083	3	4	5	4	4	3
Eliminate field trips	1,023	5	5	3	5	3	5
Eliminate any upgrading of technology for staff	595	6	7	7	6	8	2
Institute transportation costs for families whose children ride the bus to school	549	7	6	8	7	7	7*
Eliminate school clubs	414	9	8	6	8	6	7*
Reduce arts programs	307	8	9	11	9	11	10
Increase class sizes (by having fewer teachers)	230	11	10	9	10	9	9
Eliminate any upgrading of technology for students	185	10	11	10	11	10	11

*\*Point values were equal*

**12. What other steps would you recommend that the district consider taking, if it had to, to address any budget challenges? (These could be additional ones from the list above that were not among your top three choices, or they could be other ideas.) A total of 586 respondents chose to answer this question. The main comments expressed were:**

- Cut extracurricular frills (banquets, unnecessarily long trips for games, etc.)
- Trim expenses that don't benefit the classroom
- Increase fees and ticket prices to events
- Institute a wage freeze
- Have fewer administrators
- Get volunteers from the community to help

**Topic: The “worst step” the school district could take**

To close this section, respondents were presented with the same list and asked to identify the “worst step” the district could take to address its budget challenges.

The overwhelming choice (identified by 57% of survey participants) was “increase class sizes (by having fewer teachers)”. The item in second place – “eliminate any upgrading of technology for students” – was selected by only 12%.

**13. Which of the following items from this same list is the WORST STEP the district could take to address any budget challenges?**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Increase class sizes (by having fewer teachers)	57%
Eliminate any upgrading of technology for students	12%
Increase taxes	8%
Institute transportation costs for families whose children ride the bus to school	7%
Reduce arts programs	6%
Institute a “Pay to Play” system, where students would need to pay a fee to participate in sports, band or other extracurricular activities	4%
Reduce non-instructional staff, such as support staff and administration	2%
Eliminate any renovation of school facilities	2%
Eliminate any upgrading of technology for staff	1%
Eliminate field trips	1%
Eliminate school clubs	1%

## Topic: Sources of school district news

The substantive portion of the survey closed by asking respondents to identify how often they consult each of 13 different potential sources for district news – frequently, sometimes, rarely or never. Sources that are consulted “frequently” by at least 25% of survey respondents are those which should be the focus of ongoing communications efforts by the district. In the case of the Kearney R-I School District, seven sources qualified. Specifically:

- School newsletters – 52% (which is unusually high for a general survey, but not surprising for a survey whose respondents were dominated by current district parents)
- Teachers – 44%
- *The Kearney Courier* newspaper – 43%
- The school district’s Web site – 40%
- Friends and neighbors – 40%
- TextCaster – 30%
- Power School e-newsletter – 27%

**14. The school district wants to know where you look most frequently for school news, or who you talk to when you want to find out what’s going on with the district. For each of the following sources, please mark whether you consult that source for school district news frequently, sometimes, rarely, or never. (This would be for news OTHER THAN such things as weather-related school closings.) Percentage of respondents saying “frequently” displayed below.**

News source	Percentage
School newsletters	52%
Teachers	44%
<i>The Kearney Courier</i> newspaper	43%
The school district’s Web site	40%
Friends and neighbors	40%
TextCaster	30%
Power School e-newsletter	27%
Parents groups at the schools (PTO/PTA)	19%
School principals	17%
Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter	11%
Administration, either in person, or when a member of administration is quoted in the news media	11%
The School Board, either in person, or when a member of the School Board is quoted in the news media	6%
The Senior Center	1%

## Topic: Demographics

The survey group was dominated (1,094 respondents) by current student families, but had a good distribution of ages of respondents, and length of time living in the district. Also, it was encouraging to see that at least 245 respondents from each elementary school drawing area took part, meaning that all geographic quadrants of the district were well-represented.

- 15. To help us divide our survey participants into groups, please tell us a little bit about yourself. First of all, which of the following is most accurate? Numbers, rather than percentages, displayed below; 131 respondents did not answer this question.**

Response	Number
I have a child (or children) currently attending school in the Kearney R-I School District	1,094
I had a child (or children) who attended school in the Kearney R-I School District in the past, but I currently have no children attending school in the district	175
I have never had a child (or children) attend school in the Kearney R-I School District	168

- 16. Which of the following ranges includes your current age? Numbers, rather than percentages, displayed below; 152 respondents did not answer this question.**

Response	Number
18 to 24	55
25 to 34	234
35 to 44	628
45 to 54	378
55 to 64	99
65 or older	45

- 17. How long have you lived in the Kearney R-I School District? Numbers, rather than percentages, shown below; 144 respondents did not answer this question.**

Response	Number
Less than 2 years	94
2 years to 5 years	234
More than 5 years to 10 years	346
More than 10 years to 15 years	271
More than 15 years	332
I've lived here all my life	147

- 18. Which elementary school do the children in your neighborhood normally attend?** *Numbers, rather than percentages, displayed below; 158 respondents did not answer this question.*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number</b>
Dogwood Elementary	377
Southview Elementary	357
Hawthorne Elementary	283
Kearney Elementary	245
Don't know	148

- 19. Are you...** *Numbers, rather than percentages, displayed below; 133 respondents did not answer this question.*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number</b>
Female	1,051
Male	384

## Summary

The February 2010 online survey of patrons of the Kearney R-I School District revealed a generally satisfied patron population that finds its teachers to be the district's strong suit and seems to be a bit conflicted about the district's athletic programming – finding favor with its success, but also being concerned about the balance of attention between academics and athletics.

In terms of steps that the district should consider taking to address its budget challenges, the overwhelming first choice was to implement a “Pay to Play” system, followed by looking at ways to reduce non-instructional staff. The top choices were all items that would have limited direct impact on the classroom; interestingly, seemingly easy choices such as eliminating school clubs and reducing arts programs were in the bottom half, in terms of preference.

Even more interesting was the fact that the fourth choice was “increase taxes.” This would suggest the presence of a patron population that seems to understand that there may be a need to propose an increase in the operating levy at some point, because cutting here and there may not free up enough funding to make up for the shortfall.

Balance the place on the list for “increase taxes” with patrons saying that increasing class sizes would be the “worst thing” the district could do, and it's clear that this is a population that cares and that covets involvement in the process of making these important decisions.