

EDUCATION

# Kansas City Public Schools finally regains state accreditation. Here’s what that means

BY SARAH RITTER

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Kansas City Public Schools superintendent Mark Bedell talks about what it will take to maintain accreditation Tuesday, Jan. 11, 2022. The

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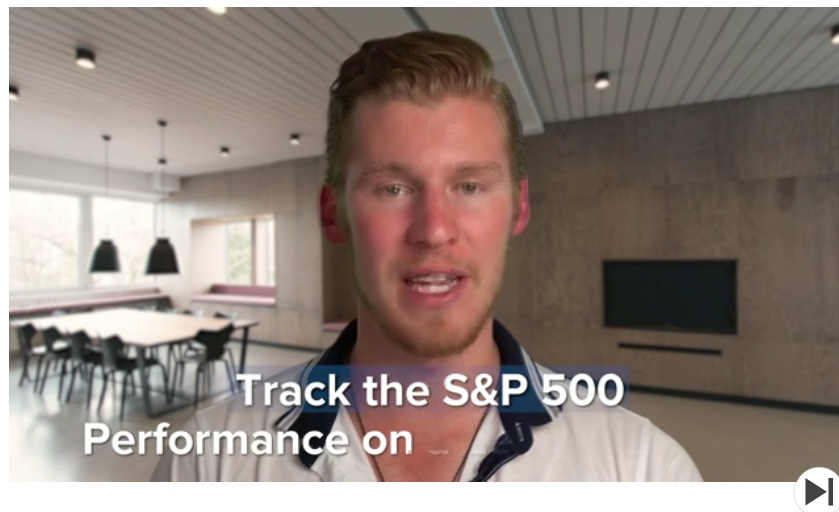
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The Missouri State Board of Education on Tuesday granted Kansas City Public Schools full accreditation, effective immediately — a status the district has been working to achieve for years.

The achievement, officials say, should help the district boost its reputation, in hopes of retaining and attracting more families after seeing enrollment decline over the past couple of decades. In addition, they say, the region as a whole may benefit with economic growth.

KCPS lost accreditation in 2011 and has been only provisionally accredited since 2014. It has been working ever since to improve and meet state standards to regain its full accreditation.

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Under Superintendent Mark Bedell's leadership, the district has accelerated student achievement, improved graduation rates and proved it is better preparing students for life after graduation. That work was acknowledged on Tuesday as education officials celebrated the achievement.

"This is a long time coming," Bedell said after the board vote. "We're going to celebrate today, because we deserve that. But tomorrow we roll up our sleeves. We have a lot of work to do.

"I want us to be at or above state average across every indicator measurable."

The district also has seen continued growth in student achievement. In 2019, the district exceeded the state's expectations for student academic growth in English Language Arts. And last year, students exceeded expectations for math, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, district officials said.

The state requires a district that has lost accreditation to maintain or improve certain performance measures for at least two consecutive years before it considers raising its status. The district has come close to reaching the goal in recent years, meeting the accreditation standard one year and then slipping below it the next.

Last year, [the Council of the Great City Schools](#), the nation's primary coalition of large urban public school systems, assessed KCPS and deemed it worthy of becoming fully accredited.

But at the beginning of the pandemic, students did not take state assessments and the state did not consider attendance data when schools went online. So state education officials did not have a new annual report to measure the district's progress.

Jocelyn Strand, improvement and accountability administrator for the state education department, said that as a result, the agency also considered other factors, such as the district's leadership and governance, its strategic plan and financial status.

Losing accreditation can trigger more interventions from the state. When it lost accreditation in 2011, the district faced serious repercussions, including students being allowed to transfer to neighboring districts, with KCPS picking up the tab. Being unaccredited also meant the risk of a state takeover, where a district could be dissolved and students could be assigned to different districts.

KCPS, though, gained provisional accreditation in 2014 and has continued making progress. Many KCPS schools are individually accredited.

Several officials on Tuesday gave significant credit for the district's improvements to its steady leadership under Bedell.

In his sixth year, Bedell is now the district's longest-serving superintendent since the 1970s.

State Board of Education member Carol Hallquist said that Bedell's "boots on the ground" work to engage the community has been a key factor in the district's success.

"He is the longest tenured superintendent in 53 years. And leadership and tenure make a difference," she said.

“The progress we have made, insufficient progress compared to where it needs to be, but it is such an amazing progress to me that I am delighted,” he said. “And I will also expect better results next year and in the years following.”

While thanking the board and acknowledging the district’s accomplishments, Bedell also highlighted its challenges.

“A school district with 100% (of students on) free and reduced lunch. One of the highest mobilities, not just in the state, but in the country. One of the highest (English language learner) populations in the state, if not the highest. So we get a lot of immigrants that come into our school district, but after one year they are required to take the state assessment in English, whether they acquired a language or not,” Bedell said.

“One of the highest special education populations in the state of Missouri. And then when we think about eviction rates that contribute to mobility, one of the highest in the state. And at the end of the day, these kids show up with significant social and emotional barriers.”

Bedell remained focused on the message that there is more work to be done, to help students grow and exceed state standards.

Many area leaders believe that KCPS earning full accreditation is not only a win for the district, but for the city as a whole. A successful public school system, they say, will benefit the entire region as it works to attract and retain employers and residents.

State board president Charles Shields said that in past decades, with a rotating door of superintendents, “what I heard was that, frankly, the school district, KCPS, was becoming a barrier or a drag on the economic growth potential of the entire region. Not just Kansas City proper.”

“And that attitude started to turn around when (Bedell) came on board. Dr. Bedell began to establish partnerships within the civic community and business community. He built confidence that there was a solution. He had a plan, had a strategic plan. ... He built a team. We ended up with a really high functioning school board. But I think most importantly, he stayed. And he stayed committed.”

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