In the morning of February 11, 2016, the Office of Special Programs, along with the Town Hall Meeting committee, sponsored the event held at the Campus Activities Center Theater on the Wichita State main campus. The USD 259 Board of Education and its elected members were the featured panel speakers at the Town Hall Meeting. More than 200 students, parents, community agency partners, WSU faculty and staff filed into the theater to hear the school board members tackle a host of pressing issues.

Associate Vice President for Student Affairs Deltha Q. Colvin opened the session by welcoming the audience and thanking the school board members for their participation. She also encouraged all the students to take advantage of the Town Hall meeting and become more informed about issues that affect them.

John Allison, superintendent, and Betty Arnold, school board president, headlined the panel which also included school board members Mike Rodee, Barbara Fuller, Sheril Logan, and Lynn Rogers. In recognition of all the students in attendance, Riccardo Harris, executive director of North Wichita GEAR UP, called out various schools provoking a boisterous applause from the students. Some schools represented included East, West, South, Southeast, North, Northeast Magnet, and Valley Center high schools and Mayberry Magnet, Marshall, and Pleasant Valley middle schools.

Erica Conchola, Kansas Kids @ GEAR UP and TRIO Student Support Services program participant introduced the panel. Each board member provided brief comments on their background before fielding questions from the audience. Allison told the audience that he works for the school board and that his duties include budget planning and policy-making for USD 259. The audience was also reminded that the school board members are elected officials charged with the task of operating the largest school district in the state.

The students were provided the first opportunity to ask questions of the panel. When asked why each ran for a spot on the school board, the overwhelming reason was a passion for education. Arnold said “because students and education matter.” Logan said she had a strong commitment to “give back” and not do it for the money. Fuller’s parents influenced her passion for education, while Rogers said his prior volunteering efforts for the district led to his decision to run for the school board.
The students asked very challenging questions throughout the meeting and the school board members answered each question with thoughtful responses. Some questions pertained to school funding which generated vigorous responses from the panel. When asked about the main issues that the school board is currently facing, Arnold said the schools are “having to cut a lot of critical areas” due to budget shortfalls. The budget cuts could result in larger classroom sizes and scaling back on programs like driver’s education. Logan explained that the state’s block grant plans may appear to give more funding for schools, but very little of it will be used for programming. Instead, the school board will be looking at ways to prepare students for postsecondary education by trying to retain good teachers.

One inquisitive student asked why teachers “just pass students” instead of teaching what the student needs to prepare them for college. Superintendent Allison said he hoped that passing students with the proper skills to attend colleges or enter a career is the goal for the district. Rogers, who is the longest standing school board member, indicated the district’s goal is to help students become life-long learners and that students have to assume a larger responsibility in their education that should go beyond a high school diploma. Fuller commented that the students’ attitude toward their educational goals is important for their future while Logan related that the world has changed and that the school board’s challenge is preparing students for that world.

Another key moment during the meeting was when a student asked why students don’t have a say in the board elections. President Arnold said she welcomes the opportunity to hear from students while Logan mentioned that students should get involved and learn about the candidates, then tell others what they think to influence voting. “When you turn 18, make sure you vote,” she emphasized. Rogers talked about attending a school board meeting when he was 16 and the board wanted to hear what he thought of some of the issues at that time.

Following the Town Hall meeting, students were led by their respective program counselors to the Rhatigan Student Center for lunch and for many, a tour of the campus. The overwhelming response to the entire event was mostly positive and many students indicated that they had learned a great deal about the school board and its role. Most students had very few ideas what the school board’s function was and this activity really opened their eyes to its important purpose in USD 259. Even the students who attended from other school districts were impressed by the Town Hall meeting.

TRIO Achiever

Aiysha Henagan is a high school graduate who was seeking a better job through education. She was referred to the Educational Opportunity Centers Program by HUD Housing for help with her educational plan. With the support of EOC, Henagan earned two certifications: home health aide and certified nurse aid. In November 2015, Henagan was honored by the Wichita Sedgwick County Community Action Partnership (Michelle Rucker, director) for five years of progress in the program. As a result, she was provided a new home.