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WEDNESDAY, JUNE 17, 2026

Vol. 141 No. 33

LEADER TIMES



Chicks dig it when it's **Squeaky Clean!**



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Educators from around the state listen to one of the breakout session speakers at the recent 55th annual Uniting Leaders Conference in Wichita sponsored by USA Kansas. Among those in attendance was Fowler USD 225 Superintendent Amy Ricks, a longtime area educator. Courtesy photo

As school year ends, area educator looking for ways to better her work

ROBERT PIERCE
• Leader & Times

Amy Ricks's career in education began as a para in the 1990s at the former Garfield Elementary School in Liberal.

In the early part of the 21st century, Ricks went to work as a classroom teacher at what is now Cottonwood Elementary School. She continued to work her way up through the USD 480 district through 2007, and following the death of her husband in a

vehicle accident, she would take a break from education for about a year.

Following that break, Ricks continued to work for USD 480 until 2014, and she would later work for the Moscow school district. She would later work from 2016 to 2023 in Garden City, where she added district and building leadership endorsements to her license.

After that, Ricks was hired as superintendent in the Bucklin school district, and this past year, she became the superin-

tendent for Fowler USD 225, where she now works in that capacity as well as principal.

Having worked in education for more than three decades, Ricks has accumulated much in the way of knowledge in academics, and recently, she added to that knowledge by attending the United School Administrators of Kansas's (USA Kansas) 55th Uniting Leaders Conference in May in Wichita.

Ricks said the conference was absolutely

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Early Risers Kiwanis selling peaches

• L&T staff report

Liberal's Early Risers Kiwanis Club raises money each year for programs that benefit the community including Coats for Kids and \$5,000 in scholarships. They raise funds by selling quality peaches each June.

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Ricks ...

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fantastic. "The theme this year was 'Growing Your Culture: Cultivating Leadership,'" she said. "They had some great breakout sessions, and they had a couple of wonderful general assembly keynote speakers. The conference covered things from closing the caring gap in state assessments to things like 'Sticks and Stones: Using Your Low Risk Words to Navigate Difficult Conversations.'" Ricks said conference leaders introduced educators to several new things as well.

"There's a new Light on Leadership Web site that helps district leaders, building leaders," she said. "It can help you all kinds of issues you may be facing."

One of the conference's keynote speaker was Deputy Executive Director for Professional Learning at the Texas Association of School Administrators Dr. Jill Siler, and Ricks said Siler talked about using failures to help grow in leadership and to help grow a whole community.

"It was amazing," Ricks said.

Conference goers also heard from multi-E Emmy Award winning broadcaster, leadership speaker and Minnesota Speaker Hall of Fame inductee Joe Schmit, author of the book, "The Right Thing to Do."

The conference took place May 27, 28 and 29 in Wichita, and Ricks called it a great three days.

"They had so much information, and we were able to network with people - principals, special ed directors, other superintendents," she said.

Ricks said one thing in

particular she liked about the conference was talking to superintendents from districts of similar size to Fowler's and hearing how superintendents and principals in those districts are facing some of the same issues as her district.

"I can talk to others who are the superintendent/principal to get ideas about how are you managing your time, how are you doing this," she said. "You also get to hear things the large districts like Garden City, Wichita are facing."

Ricks said she is amazed about the scope of what the title of principal or superintendent can mean depending on a district's locations and its needs.

The conference also featured 88 breakout sessions from leaders, teachers and others from all over the Sunflower State, and Ricks said she particularly enjoyed Dr. Siler's presentation.

"She has a book out called 'Thrive Through the Five,'" Ricks said. "Five percent of the time, there's some really difficult things where you don't know what to do. You don't know how to go forward, and she talked about you have to take things. Even if that certain specific item is a failure, it's not a total complete wash so to speak because you still learn something from it, and if you learned something from it, it's a good thing because you know you won't make that mistake again."

Having gone from the classroom to assistant principal to principal and now superintendent, Ricks said Siler's talk resonated with her.

"I have made some mistakes and had some things I thought were failures at the time," Ricks said. "Looking back, I learned from them. I've grown so much in my

leadership capacities. It's important to make sure you keep your eye where you need to be. As long as you're doing what's best for kids, that's going to be the right thing to do, and that was a great thing from the conference."

Attorneys from several firms were likewise on hand for the USA Kansas conference, and Ricks said the lawyers talked to attendees about meeting state mandates, keeping up with revisions from the state legislature and new statutes.

"It was just a nice review of some things you don't hear about every single day," she said. "That helped. I just loved the positivity of the whole conference. You may have setbacks, you may have issues, but in the end, there's going to be an overall win, so we just keep going forward. It was just amazing."

One breakout session Ricks attended was called "Closing the Caring Gap on the State Assessment," centering on the seemingly constant administering of tests in Kansas.

"They have beginning, middle, end of the year tests," she said. "They have state assessments. They have unit tests. As the kids get older, they get bored with it, and they don't realize how impactful those results are for school districts and teachers."

In this particular session,

Ricks said the focus was having conversations with students, explaining why tests are important and things to do to help students realize how important state assessments can be.

She said an administrator from another district came up with the idea of taking high school kids on a field trip to allow junior high students to take tests without distractions and disturbances.

"Even though I don't have that high of a grade level, it brought forth to me the importance of making sure the kids know we value them and we value the effort they put in to the tests," she said. "Maybe we can do something like that."

Still another session, "Finding Little Wins," talked about taking the staff temperature with a survey, Ricks said, where respondents would use words rather than merely numbers to rate how their days was going.

"They talked about how if you use words like, 'It's been a great day,' 'It's been a not so great day' and if you put some actual meaning into things, you can find where people are struggling and where they're having success, and you can help those who need it," she said.

Ricks said the conference packed much into three days, and while it took a little time to

digest all she had experienced, she said what she learned most of all is educators are not alone in their work.

"There are others out there," she said. "We can get help if we ask for it, and there are many different ways to go about trying to solve an issue."

Ricks said she definitely wants to take what she learned from the "Finding Little Wins" session back to her district to take the temperature of staff.

"I'm going to use the use your words kind of survey and see what kind of difference that makes to check in with folks and make sure everybody is having a positive experience," she said.

Ricks said the ideas from "Closing the Caring Gap" to keep students motivated about the importance of state testing is something any district of any size would find helpful.

"Even with a district the size of Liberal, they could do the survey," she said. "Each building could do a use your words survey to see how the building's feeling, or the superintendent could use it with his principals and directors

to see how things are going."

Overall, Ricks said she liked what was presented at the conference, as well as its positive message.

"It was a very good conference," she said. "I recommend it for anybody in education. It was impactful. It really was. This is the fourth year I've gone. I really enjoy the USA Kansas conferences. They put on a good show."

The Uniting Leaders Conference not only invites superintendents, but also teachers and any other education professionals, and Ricks said she would absolutely recommend anyone take part in future conferences.

"There's so much learning you can get from it," she said. "You choose the sessions that are important to you and talk to the people who are in like situations. It's very beneficial because sometimes when you just stay in your district, you can get in cased in your own little cocoon and you don't realize there are others out there. It was really a good experience."

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