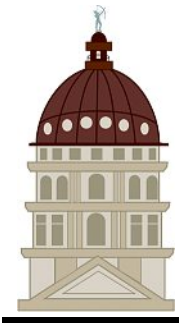




Teams who could benefit after '26 schedule release

SPORTS, 1B



THE TOPEKA CAPITAL-JOURNAL

SUNDAY, MAY 24, 2026 | CJONLINE.COM

WEEKEND

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

TAKING HIS FINAL BOW



Scott Kickhaefer has been around theaters most of his life and for more than three decades has taught students the importance of the artform. PHOTOS BY EVERT NELSON/THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL

Note to readers

We will not be printing a paper on Monday, May 25, but will be providing it to you via the eNewspaper. You can always find the latest news on our website, mobile app, newsletters and social media. Subscribers can access the eNewspaper by going to our website and clicking on eNewspaper in the black navigation bar.

Parents object to possible move

Survey referenced holding graduations on football field

Stacey Saldanha-Olson

Topeka Capital-Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

A Highland Park High School parent and coach is pushing back at the possibility of moving future graduation ceremonies to the school's football field.

Lashad Buffett said the suggestion was broached in a survey emailed to parents on May 19, three days after this year's commencement at the Stormont Vail Event Center.

A fight broke out in the parking lot after the ceremony. Some parents said they believe the idea to move future graduations was triggered by the fight, a charge denied by Topeka USD 501 officials.

Highland Park coach is encouraging parents to address school board

Buffett, who is the school's softball coach, posted his thoughts on Facebook on May 19.

"They are trying to have our graduates have their celebration at the Highland Park football stadium where currently there is no upgrades being made to the field nor the stadium seating," Buffett wrote. "I myself refuse to allow my child to be treated like this."

He encouraged parents to attend district's May 21 school board meeting to speak about the issue. Buffett won't be able to attend the meeting because of a personal tragedy and will have

See GRADUATION, Page 8A

Theater teacher shaped stages and lives for decades



Scott Kickhaefer talks with graduating senior Mark Gregory, middle, and Karma Silvea as they sign their names on the stairwell wall on May 11. Seniors signing the wall was a tradition Kickhaefer started when he first came to Topeka West and brought from his previous schools.

Keishera Lately
Topeka Capital-Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Be generous. Be fearless. Whether you're performing on a stage or living your life day by day.

That's the advice Scott Kickhaefer shared with the hundreds of students he taught in his years of teaching.

Kickhaefer spent 10 years at Topeka High School, 17 years at Highland Park High School and the past seven at Topeka West.

Kickhaefer left Topeka High in 1998 to serve as artistic director at the Columbian Theatre in Wamego, then returned to the classroom in 2001, teaching one year at Jardine Middle School before beginning his long run at Highland Park.

Before he began his career as an educator, he said his faculty mentor told him: "It's time to put on your big-boy pants. You're getting married. Go. Just get out of here."

"So I took the job," he said. "And five years later, I kept thinking: 'If I'm still teaching in 10 years, I'm going to be really upset with myself. I should go off and be an actor — that's what I want to do.' My dad had said, 'I could see you being a teacher one day.' And I was like, 'Are you kidding?' He said 'I'd be a good coach. I asked him why.'"

"It turned out later he was right," said Kickhaefer.

Teaching the knowledge of theater over the years

Initially hired as a dedicated technical theater and stagecraft teacher, he described how his early role balanced performance, design and construction in a district that uniquely supported performance and technical specialists.

He reflected on his time at Topeka High and Highland Park, noting that each school had their own identity. He highlighted Topeka High's mix of city students and Highland Park's long-standing integrated, family-like community identity.

Darren Canady — a Topeka High School class of 2000 graduate, playwright and college professor — said Kickhaefer's ability to reach students and make them feel seen is unmatched.

Kickhaefer cast him early, including in "Our Town" in 1996 and later August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson" in 1998 — a turning point for Canady. It was the first time Canady saw Black characters onstage who sounded like his own family, he said, and it affirmed the importance of students experiencing their own stories rather than relying solely on colorblind casting.

"Scott is really in my theater origin story," Canady said. "I'd been performing for a while, but the characters never reminded me of my family or the world I

See THEATER, Page 4A

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